

# Maid for Man

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MAID FOR MAN

BY

ELYSE M. KELLY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in The Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Thesis Chair: Prof. Susan Hubbard

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a novella highlighting the struggle many religious individuals face to maintain a faith with or without physical props and boundaries, and why some people voluntarily live with pharisaical rules that make it harder to reside in the modern world. *Maid for Man* is the story of Caty, a young woman brought up by the strict conservatism of a combined church and homeschool group, who, after marrying a man and discovering he has no physical interest in her, must decide whether or not to divorce him, even though her family and community believe divorce is an excommunicable sin.

## **DEDICATION**

To my parents who have encouraged and supported me throughout this endeavor, I dedicate this story, with all of its faults and triumphs.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thanks to Professor Susan Hubbard for taking on me and my thesis when she should have been drawn and quartered for the very thought of adding more to her schedule. I appreciate the time she really did not have to spare which she spent helping me become a better writer. Also, I am grateful to Dr. Stella Sung and Dr. Darlin' Neal for taking time out of their busy schedules to be my committee and offer their knowledge and skills to improve my writing. Thanks to Diana Morrison, as well, for providing outside criticism and rigorous grammar standards.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The 1980s

*I didn't look away. He had a cowlick in front that pushed a wave of roiling gold to one side of his forehead and he had just jerked his head toward the stairs. As strange chemicals from regions I'd never been aware of invaded my head, sixteen years of Sunday school lessons dribbled out my ears. God dropped into a pocket I put the final stitch in when I decided to come to this party. Math flunkies, grid-iron gladiators, and valley girl understudies pulsed to LaToya Jackson like a mob of insurgents inciting a skirmish. It was unclear what they were inciting over. Maybe it was the hippie parents who hadn't saved them any of the fun.*

*He turned toward the stairs, his grey eyes swimming in milky haze. Years of snubs heightened his beauty and murmurs to exaggerated proportion. Fat little girls are cute until they reach middle school, then they're alarming. Pot bellies warn the other girls if they get pregnant they'll never make it running from a rapist, and sausage fingers get pinched. A foot and a half later the pinching stopped and I didn't have to sit by the water cooler, my superfluous flesh*

*passed out on a bench, during field day. And he walked down the stairs to the basement with his hand open behind his back waiting for me to give it something to close over.*

*I glanced around. What is it about first times that makes you sure the whole world is watching? Is it the precipice so large sucking you in that makes you sure everyone must have noticed you're standing on the edge? Is it the time you tried to do the monkey bars but your hands were so sweaty, you slipped and got the wind knocked out of you right in front of the girls' basketball team? Maybe it's the conversation you overhear in the bathroom about things you never thought anyone noticed. Diane Fields, the blonde whose parents' house we were partying in, pulled another keg out from somewhere. She had fat lips like sideways butt cheeks and took trumpet lessons, but she downplayed it as much as possible because the trumpet was not a choice instrument. She tapped the keg and the mob of insurgents found a new cause and charged the fountainhead in disorderly fashion. Under the cover of fresh beer, I retreated toward the stairs. He was four steps down and I took them by twos, filling his empty hand when I reached him. We descended and I stared at the plaid of his shirt; it was a grid map, life's possibilities drawn out in right angles. If you were on the yellow road, you had to pass over the red road before the yellow road met another yellow line and made an intersection, and whether you turned right or left, you had to pass over the black road to effect a one-eighty from your original track. Red, black, blood, death—life was etched in those. And it was all set on a background of brown. Waste.*

*The stairs descended into a basement washed out by fluorescent bars suspended from the ceiling on dusty wires. His hand did not let go of mine in the basement, and we did not turn right or left, but went straight through the door punctured in the opposite wall. Behind the door, the*

walls were green with shaggy carpet. It was an unkempt sheep turned inside out that had rolled in the grass by the turnstile. I ran my fingers through the long carpet strands hanging from the wall. A gurgling noise, a lid smacked, and water trickled through the walls. I took my hand away. The upstairs bathroom was occupied. He dropped my hand and grabbed me by the shoulders. I once saw a kiss in a movie: it was tender, it was quiet, it was reticent in a way that sanctioned it. We crashed into a music stand. This must be where Diana Fields practiced her trumpet. No sound was coming out of this room.



“That was righteous,” and he rolled over onto his back. It was winter, but inside the belly of the grass-stained sheep the air was close, warm and prickly. The righteousness escaped me now that it was done. The carpet felt like needles under my body and I wondered if that was dust mites biting. I felt the sweat dry, forming a tight sheath over my skin.

“I have to go now,” I said, scanning the silent upheaval for my underclothes.

“Aw, Renee, what’s there to book for?” He grabbed my bare arm and pulled me down.

“Curfew,” I said, pushing myself back up.

“You’re going to worry about a curfew after that?”

“All the more of a reason to, I’d say. Have you seen my underwear?”

He grinned. It was an absurd question. I laughed and rummaged.

## The 2000s

A CHILL, APRIL wind bent the redbud tree outside the living room window where Caty and her mother sat. Always busy, her mother was methodically turning yellow yarn into a tiny

cap for a newborn at their church. Caty used to love watching her mother knit, the muted click of the needles present throughout her childhood. But just now, she couldn't stand it. Eyes fixed on the growing yellow knit, her mother seemed oblivious to everything but her own world.

"Anyway, the specialist Mrs. Parsons recommended has been practicing for five years, and I'm going to speak to your father about helping with the cost."

"Mom, that's really not necessary."

"Oh, but we want to do it, Sweetie." Her mother reached a hand over to Caty and squeezed her arm. "That's what we're here for." The needles started clacking again.

"No, I mean the specialist. We don't need one. It wouldn't help." Caty ran a finger around and around the lip of her lukewarm cup of coffee.

The needles stopped.

Caty closed her eyes for a second. *If she could just open them and find herself on the iron daybed before the wedding.*

"Honey?"

Caty looked at her mother and her throat began to hurt. "He hasn't touched me. It's like we're not even married."

The needles did not resume.

"What have I done wrong?" Caty gripped the cup. "I've been very attentive, but I haven't pushed him. The book said not to. What else am I supposed to do?"

Caty watched her mother's face. It was blank with a red dawn of growing alarm. The pain in Caty's throat was acute. She let go, and the tears started coming.

After she saw her mother out, Caty pulled fresh sheets from the linen closet and made up the spare bedroom. She had wanted to simply walk out the door with her mother and ride home—the action seemed so simple, but of course it would never do. How would she explain it to her church?

That night Caty was relieved when Lemuel went outside after dinner. She did a slapdash job with the kitchen and closed herself in the spare room before he got in. From the narrow bed, she heard Lemuel banging around in the master bedroom. He was a noisy person. There was nothing in it, he just didn't know how to be quiet. Heels digging into the floor with every step, bathroom door crashing shut, crashing open, faucet slamming down. Caty couldn't detect any peculiar noises that would indicate he noticed her absence and felt it. *What was he thinking?* Sometimes she wondered whether he thought at all. The noise quieted down and she knew he was asleep.

Caty emptied her lungs softly. The sheets were tough and they pricked her skin like a thousand dust-mites biting. The night was so silent she thought she could hear the old rented house decaying around them. *She was too young to be sleeping in a separate bed. What had happened?* She had followed all the rules.

Caty glanced at the engraved placard fixed next to the door. She mouthed the names "Ebol & Whitaker". Glancing down one last time at her ankle-length denim skirt, Caty tucked a wisp of blond hair back into her bun before she gripped the brass knob and twisted. The door swung in silently with a smooth, heavy motion. A draft of cool air enveloped her with the smell

of leather and vanilla air freshener. Across from the door, a young professional woman with thick-rimmed glasses and teeth that were too white smiled at her from behind a mahogany desk.

"Mrs. Mast?" asked the receptionist.

"Yes." Caty gripped the purse hanging at her side. "You can just call me Caty, please."

"Alright, Caty, you can have a seat and Mr. Whitaker will be ready to see you in just a few minutes."

"Wait!" Caty realized the mistake. "I'm supposed to see Marvin Ebol. He's my mother's second cousin and he told us we should go to him if we ever needed. . ."

"Oh, well there must be some minor mistake. I will see if I can't just correct this for you." The woman flashed her smile.

Caty looked around for a seat while the receptionist made a few more clicks with her mouse and then disappeared out the back of the waiting room. Caty could not believe she was sitting in this very office: the office she passed nearly every time she entered Topeka, that she always mentally ridiculed because it advertised divorce as their specialty. *She* would surely never darken their door—yet, here she was.

Just five minutes ago a neighbor had dropped her off outside the building. She had quietly left the house that morning after Lemuel had gone out to the barn. The note she left only explained she was going to Topeka. There was just one vehicle, the Tahoe, and Lemuel might need it so she had solicited the neighbor—the one who didn't go to their church. Besides, her parents' house was on C.R. 21 into Topeka, and they would recognize the green Tahoe. They might ask questions later and try to stop her.

The receptionist reappeared and approached Caty.

"Mr. Ebol will see you, but you'll have to wait longer. Will that be all right, or would you like to go ahead and see Mr. Whitaker?" She parted her lips in another professionally white smile.

"That'll be just fine, thank you. I prefer to see Mr. Ebol." Caty wiped her palms on her skirt and heaved a sigh.

Caty sat on the edge of a capacious leather chair to wait, but kept slipping down into it and had to resituate herself every half minute. Finally, she gave up, letting herself sink into the velvety Italian leather. The chair nearly swallowed her, and Caty was thankful she had long legs. Otherwise they would be sticking straight out.

Thinking about divorce made Caty ruminate on her wedding. Constantly. It was like a video reel that wouldn't turn off. She could see and hear everything in perfect, knife-edged detail.

Caty sat on the edge of her iron daybed in the turn-of-the-century farmhouse she had lived in since she was three. The simple white frock draped around her grazed the hundred-year-old oak floor. She glanced out the second story window at Tecumseh Lake. The trees on the peninsula were resplendent with dying foliage. People, mostly from church, were already gathered out on the peninsula Caty had chosen as the spot for her and Lemuel to take their vows. It was nearly four o' clock and the sun was already on its home stretch. Yellow light sparkled on the water like the sparks that fired up when a pot of beans boiled over and water hit the hot burner.

Suddenly, Lemuel joined the crowd. Even from that distance, Caty knew it was Lemuel because of how much broader he was compared to most of the guests. He was one of the most

muscular men she had ever known. He never worked out, he just did the same kind of outdoor labor most men did in Osage County: farming. Lemuel raked a hand through his blond hair and looked around aimlessly. He stepped up to Reid, her best friend since she was seven. Reid had driven the three hours home from his university for the wedding. The distance was just long enough to make commuting not worth the hassle. Even at twenty-three, Reid was skinny—wiry, he preferred to call it. With a dark shock of hair and thorough eyes, Reid was the night to Lemuel's day. Caty pulled her attention away from the window and stared at her left hand. She rubbed her bare ring finger and frowned slightly. The bedroom door creaked, and Caty's mother appeared dressed in a long lavender dress she had sewn herself.

"Hi, honey," she said. "Do I need to get you some socks?"

"We only courted nine months," Caty said, staring straight ahead.

"Oop, sounds like I do!"

Caty couldn't bring herself to smile at her mother's joke. She pulled the skirt of her dress closer, and the older woman sat down.

"Listen, Caty dear, you've done everything according to the books and the teachings of Pastor Gem—and so has Lemuel. Pastor Gem told me he has never seen a young couple better prepared and ready to enter marriage. Like I told your sisters before you, everyone gets nervous before their wedding. I did. On our tenth anniversary, your father told me he nearly ran away the night before ours, but you see he didn't, and we're happy. Lemuel has always treated you with the utmost respect."

Caty picked at a seam on her bed quilt. "Yes."

"He's never been forward."

"No." Caty thought of the time when she was thirteen, and Reid had tried to hold her hand. It was summer, church had just let out, and the parents were busy dragging heavy wood and metal folding tables onto the grassy area behind the church. The church building was ugly; it hadn't always been a church. Before Pastor Gem spotted the abandoned grey block building with weeds languishing in its cracked cement, it was a veterinary clinic. Caty sometimes wondered if the queerly shaped back rooms used for Sunday school, the rusted, high metal table in one of the unused closets they used to eat stolen refreshments on, and the lingering smell of animal dander that couldn't quite be dispelled had any influence on Reid's professional decision. Hungry after sitting through a three-hour sermon with only the five animal cracker-ration from Sunday school in their stomachs, Caty and Reid had absconded to that back closet with two lemon squares from Reid's mom and a couple of lacto-fermented pickles dexterously extracted from Caty's mother's basket while she was struggling with an armful of chairs. The two sat, legs dangling from the metal table, in the dusty, cluttered closet dividing their haul. Reid felt cheated by Caty's contribution.

"Pickles? Why couldn't you get some of your sister's naughty-naughties?"

"They're nicey-nices—and I couldn't find them." *Of course a boy would prefer chocolate-covered peanut butter squares to a vegetable.*

"Your mom can call them whatever stupid, happy name you want, but they're still naughty-naughties."

Caty rolled her eyes and bit into a pickle. "I like the pickles. They're nice and salty to cut the sweet."

Reid inhaled his lemon bar like a typical boy and began to rummage. They had rummaged the closet many times before, so when Reid said “Hey, look at this!” Caty was not very fast getting down from her spot. Reid left his find and grabbed Caty’s hand, dragging her off the table toward the corner. He stopped over a torn package, a purple glove with an arm almost three feet long straggling out, but Reid kept her hand.

“Wow,” she said flatly.

“No, but I know what this is for.” He was too excited.

“You should let go of my hand now.” Caty looked down at their hands with a wry face, trying to turn the situation comical, attempting to defuse the portentous feeling seeping in.

Reid just shook her hand and kept his grip. “These are for when they shove their arms up the horses rump and check for a foal.”

“That is gross,” Caty said simply to squash his enthusiasm. It didn’t work, he still held her hand. “You’re not supposed to hold hands.” He did not respond so she swatted him and yanked her hand away. She walked with dignity from the closet, telling him it was not proper even for friends, and absorbed herself in the church group milling around the picnic tables.

On the daybed, Caty’s mother put her arm around her daughter. “You used the courting rod and were always careful never to be alone with him.”

“Yes, of course.”

“You don’t love anyone else as much as Lemuel.”

“No, no.”

“You have read *Maid for Man* and prepared your heart for marriage.”

Caty recalled poring over that book. It was *the* rule book for women written by their pastor's wife, Alicia. *A young woman should be demure and modest around young men. Forwardness is a mark of pride and rebellion.* There had never been a time Caty had not followed the rules. She was determined not to be like her sister. Caty had grown up on stories of Renee. Seventeen years older than Caty, Renee had been wild, and then she'd had a child out of wedlock and been miserable. Her parents had moved here and joined this church after their oldest child's disgrace.

"Yes, I read it."

"Then, take heart and go down to your groom with a smile. Look into his face and see his love for you in his eyes. He is your knight, and you are his maiden."

Caty had never understood everyone's fascination with old times. Everybody in her church seemed to think that life was perfect pretty much until women stopped wearing skirts; all men were gentlemen, they all had a code of honor, and all sweet-spirited girls who followed the rules married the man of their dreams. During high school, Caty had checked out many books from the public library and decided otherwise. Some of the men in the books had been real blackguards who ruined several women. Caty had skipped lunch to find out what happened in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* after Alec violated Tess. And she couldn't eat dinner after Angel abandoned Tess because Tess wasn't pure. All of Tess's innocence hadn't protected her. Since then, Caty had wondered if her parents' generation had ever really studied literature.

Caty rose and grabbed the bouquet of goldenrod and sunflowers out of the glass vase. She wore no veil because their church did not believe in veils. This doctrine came from the Old

Testament story of Jacob and Rachel. Jacob was tricked into marrying Rachel's sister because he could not see who was under the veil.

It took less than five minutes for Caty to leave her bedroom and stand at the altar. The October sun slanted from the west, and when Caty tried to look into her husband-to-be's face, only the most prominent features were visible; the rest melted into a dark silhouette. Her eyes found Reid, sitting in the second row. His usually jocular face was sober, almost severe. Caty had noticed his behavior changed when Lemuel started courting her. But if he had wanted to court her, he should have asked. Besides, she wasn't sure she would have said yes anyway. She was scared of him sometimes. His rule-bending made her think of Renee.

When Pastor Gem got to the reasons for marriage, Caty noticed one she hadn't thought on before.

"...to avoid fornication..."

That wasn't a reason for this marriage. That had never even seemed to be a temptation in their courtship. Sure, they were supposed to stay in groups and could never get closer than the two feet allotted by the courting rod, but it didn't *always* work. Caty had seen plenty of couples abandon the two-foot dowel rod and leave the safety of their groups. But Lemuel had always seemed perfectly satisfied with the group arrangement and never interested in pushing any boundaries. Caty appreciated that. He seemed reliable, safe.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Covered bridges and white barns screaming “This is Amish Country” in green paint were unavoidable when driving home. The windows were down in an attempt to freeze the gelatinous feeling in my bones into something more substantial. The biting air only made my skin feel like an exoskeleton.*

*The porch light threw an egg-yolk glow over the crusty grass near our front door. Blue and white flashed behind the curtains. They’d waited up for the crunching of gravel. The front door opened before I could find the right key.*

*Blue robe, needle-point nightie, my mother stood aside. “How’d the meeting go?”*

*I stepped in. “Fine.”*

*“Is the group project gonna work out?”*

*“Yeah, we . . . salvaged it.” It was like improv we practiced in drama. “I’m gonna take a shower now and go to bed.”*

*“You want me to take that for you?” She grabbed for the backpack.*

*“No, I’ll just take it to my room.” I fled.*

*“We have the church picnic tomorrow!” bounced up the stairs after me.*

*Behind my closed door, I shook party clothes out of the backpack and kicked them under the bed. I would drop them one by one into the hamper over the next few days. They would be less likely to attract attention singly.*

AS SHE SANK deeper into the waiting-room chair, Caty absorbed the rich furnishings around her: deep orange-red paint on the walls, two quality silk trees in opposite corners, several pieces of handmade pottery and a lamp to match, an oil reproduction of Monet's *Autumn at Argenteuil*. Caty's gaze settled on the painting. In high school, slouched on a sofa with a history textbook, Caty read that Impressionists arose as a dissent from Victorianism and could not be trusted, but with her eyes resting on the painting before her, Caty was beguiled by the unfocused, brilliant flame colors of the trees reflected in the lake. Blended together to create a landscape, the frenetic strokes reminded her of seeing through tears, and she thought perhaps Monet was crying for the reduction of his chosen profession from memory-keeper to superfluous artist. The sadness in the painting was heavy, but it only added to the weight already intimate with the curve of her shoulders. She tried to think back to when there was no weight, but she got lost between her fourteenth birthday and high school graduation. *When did the heaviness set in?* At the wedding—no, before the wedding, when she realized her mother's incessant chattering about upcoming engagements and weddings was not informational, but promotional.

Graduation was a summer ago and Caty was the last of her siblings still at home. Sylvia, the seventh of eight, hitched herself to Joe Barnes during Caty's last semester and was heavy with child. This was the way it went. Graduation followed by marriage, and nine months later a

baby. Caty had no problem with this order except her own lack of a suitor. Most girls, her sisters included, wrapped a gold band around a relationship they had cultivated during high school. They were strictly friends until graduation, at which time they commenced courting followed by a ceremony led by Pastor Gem.

For a while, Caty thought she was doing all right. Starting in third grade, she did everything there was to do outside the home with Reid—everything like playing fort, kickball, fishing on Tecumseh Lake, and later driving into town with the youth group and bowling. Reid was wiry and cocksure around others, but Caty figured it was because he was so skinny. All the proverbs in the world couldn't protect a skinny boy from being picked on—even in church. He over-compensated in everything. He spent hours with a Red Ryder pumping holes into various flower petals and leaves until he could shoot a daisy off at the stem from thirty yards—farther than a BB gun was accurate, but he learned to compensate for the pull of gravity and aim high. His greatest feat was shooting a wasp out of the air. Caty never got a BB gun, but she used her brother Jon's so she could participate. Because they were homeschooled, kids never talked about grades—because they never got any: they passed or failed. State testing was the only school event that mattered. Caty and Reid would share their scores. Caty did fine, but Reid was brilliant. He worked hard at being brilliant because in homeschool circles, being smart was not nerdy. For all the academic excellence, though, most boys opted not to attend college and farmed instead, or learned carpentry, welding or any number of other trades. That was what everybody did in Osage County, homeschooler or not. In high school, however, Reid overcompensated again and declared he was going to be a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. Caty embraced the idea until its effects started trickling down. Following the best scholarship money,

Reid attended a community college for the first two years. The commute sucked every spare moment Reid had after schoolwork and farm responsibilities were through. By the time he left for the university, Caty could already feel Reid slipping from her grasp.

Reid was home on his first spring break when Caty and Lemuel had their first outing. It was the same evening Lemuel had asked her father's permission to court her. They went bowling with a group of young people from church. During the hour-long drive into Topeka for an alley, Caty sat in the front seat of Lemuel's Tahoe. The remaining five seats were occupied by four girls and Reid. The fading light in the west made the telephone poles that flew by her window appear black. Caty tried to draw Lemuel into conversation. She asked him about reading, hunting, fishing, baseball, football, but he only answered in monosyllables and kept his attention on the road. Eventually, Caty gave up, too excited that someone had finally asked to court her to care that he was silent. Filling the quiet, Reid started a story about his sister trying to teach him to bake bread when he was fourteen. They parked in front of the bowling alley just as Reid pulled a sunken, tough loaf of bread from the oven.

Inside, the lanes were smoky and rank, as usual, and some country singer was whining about somebody being mean. Caty sometimes wondered how it was that they were allowed to go to bowling alleys, but apparently Pastor Gem thought this was one of those places where being "in the world, but not of the world" was acceptable.

Reid and a girl, Becca, made up the four in their game. Lemuel picked up a bowling ball and checked the finger holes for size. It took him a minute to find one with holes large enough to accommodate his well worked hands. The ball he ended up using was an eighteen. Caty was up first. After swinging her orange ball down the lane a second time to complete a spare, Caty

sat down to watch Lemuel. He picked up his ball with one hand, his teal t-shirt pulling a little as his muscles flexed. As Lemuel swung his arm back in preparation for his pitch, Caty could see every sinew in his arm defined like the cords bound together to make the rope swing in her side yard. Caty diverted her focus to the grimy ash tray in their console, uncomfortable with the light sensation in the pit of her stomach—like it was levitating. She looked up. Reid was staring at her, his lips twisted. Uncomfortable with that as well, she turned back to Lemuel.

"Never was much of a bowler," he mumbled. He had rolled a gutter ball. Lemuel waited for his ball and then tried again, this time knocking down half the pins. He sat down as Becca prepared to bowl and glanced at Caty, an uneasy smile bending his mouth.

"Neither am I," Caty said. She looked into his eyes; they were frosty and blue.

After two games, both going to Reid, the group of bowlers decided to go to a nearby ice cream parlor, Billie Ruth's Hand-dipped Heaven. Lemuel ordered a peach cone for himself and a Bear Claw for Caty. There weren't enough seats for their group, so one of the more popular guys, Michael Parsons, led the way back outside to sit on the tailgates of some of the guys' pickup trucks. It was freezing, but nobody seemed to mind. For the most part, the girls sat on one and the guys sat on another, but a few guys known for disruptive behavior coaxed the prettiest girls over to their truck. Caty watched Michael jump lightly down from his truck and cajole Becca into squeezing onto the tailgate of his dually with him, ignoring the two-foot rule. From where she sat next to another girl, Caty looked around for Lemuel but didn't see him. She had seen him follow them outside, but in the shuffle for a seat, she had lost track of him.

Reid leaned up against the side of the truck and stared her down sidelong for a minute.

"What is it, Reid?" Caty bit into her ice cream, crunching on a frozen cashew.

“You’re crazy eating ice cream.”

Caty just laughed a little through her nose. Her tongue was occupied trying to comfort her sensitive bottom teeth.

“You came with Lemuel.” Reid stated, and slipped his pocket knife off his belt.

“Yeah, he asked my dad.”

“Mm.” Reid flicked his knife open and then closed it again. “Where is he now?”

“My dad?”

“No, that Lemuel fella.” He flicked it open again.

“That Lemuel fella’? You’ve been talking to him all night and now you suddenly start calling him ‘that Lemuel fella’?”

“Just because I talked to him doesn’t mean I know the guy.”

“You used to see him in church all the time. And you graduated high school with him.”

“He only moved here his senior year.”

“So?”

Reid closed the knife with a click.

With her free hand, Caty flipped her coat collar up. “Why don’t you find yourself a girl?”

“Maybe I will—and I’ll find your Lemuel while I’m at it.”

“He would never—”

Reid shoved off the truck and strode toward the ice cream parlor. When he was halfway there, Caty saw Lemuel come out with a wad of napkins in his hand. He nodded at Reid, but Reid said, “Caty’s been looking for you so I said I’d go find you and bring you back.”

“Preciate it.” They both approached Caty and Lemuel handed her some napkins.

“Forgot the napkins.”

“Thanks.”

Lemuel stood and ate his cone while Reid resumed his position against the truck.

“You didn’t get a cone?” Lemuel looked at Reid.

“No, I don’t like ice cream. Besides, in this weather . . .” Reid cut himself off with a laugh. “How’s the venison business?”

“Oh, fine, fine. Last count I think we had eighteen does.”

“Still got that fine buck?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Lemuel and Reid continued to chat about farming and animals for another ten minutes until Caty gave Reid an unmistakable look. He excused himself rather abruptly from their little group, wandered over to the next truck and squeezed himself in next to Becca.

In the legal office, her courtship seemed remote. When she compared time, her fifteenth birthday felt more recent than that freezing night eating ice cream. Sometimes she wished she could lose herself and never come back.

Caty glanced at the magazines scattered on the end table next to her. One had a cover story about a famous couple getting divorced. She recognized them from the covers of magazines in the checkout line at A & P. She figured they were from Hollywood, but wasn’t sure. Her family didn’t own a television. Pastor Gem hadn’t absolutely forbidden it, but her

father wanted to be on the safe side. Renee had been glued to the television as a child in Pennsylvania.

Caty picked up the magazine. The woman already had another boyfriend, and they were probably going to get married. It made the divorce look so glamorous—not like Caty thought of divorce at all. Not like anyone she knew thought of divorce. Pastor Gem said it was an abomination. People got excommunicated for that. Cut off from family and friends. In her church, if a man married a divorced woman, he committed adultery, and she with him. That was a verse in the Bible; Pastor Gem had preached from it and he had such a clear way of seeing things. Nothing ever confused their pastor. Caty wished that verse didn't exist, wished Pastor Gem would get confused once in a while.

The receptionist appeared. “Mr. Ebol will see you now.”

Caty was ushered into the office. Mr. Ebol was apparently not quite ready to see her because he wasn't present. Caty sat in one of the chairs meant for clients and used bad posture to comfort herself. She pulled her shoulders forward and hunched over her purse as though it was her lifeblood. She was afraid she would say the wrong thing. Once, after an exhausting day shopping, Caty had announced she was fagged to the grocery cashier, expecting sympathy. The woman stared at her like she'd seen a toad in her mouth when she opened it.

Something rustled outside in the hall and Mr. Ebol appeared. He took Caty's hand and looked down at her. “How's Victoria and her husband?”

“They're just fine.”

Mr. Ebol glanced over her file. “So, you are here to discuss the legal ramifications of getting a divorce, but you haven't made up your mind yet.”

“Yes, sir.” Caty crossed her ankles.

The lawyer sat down. “What concerns you about getting a divorce?”

“My church mostly. You know why you haven’t been invited to a family gathering by my mother. I’ll be cast out as well and cut off from my family for getting a divorce.”

Marvin Ebol took off his glasses. “That’s a tough situation.” He rubbed his creased forehead. “More like something you’d hear of a hundred years ago.”

Caty didn’t reply. The rest of the consultation was spent discussing the legal procedures. She was supposed to come back Monday to look over divorce papers and hear instructions on filling them out.

### CHAPTER THREE

*“Tell me you don’t know what that means!” I dared him.*

*His brown hair hung in a straight curtain over his forehead. He was the third—or fourth, I couldn’t remember. “I don’t know what that means.”*

*When my hand made contact with his cheek, the air pocket under my palm made the slap pop.*

*“All right, all right, how do you know it’s mine?” He rubbed his cheek. “I saw you with Barnes the week after.”*

*“We didn’t do anything.” The improv was really working out. I had a part in the junior/senior talent show. I was a hit. “So, are you going to give me the money?”*

*He pulled his hair between his fingers for a moment. “Nah, man, you’re on your own with this one.” He took a step down the school’s cement stairs.*

*“But I don’t have a job!”*

*“Your problem, baby.”*

WHEN SHE OPENED the front door, Lemuel was sitting at the kitchen table sifting through the mail. Caty always brought in the mail. It was her responsibility at home, and she had naturally assumed it here.

“Are you looking for something?” she asked when he finished the pile and started from the top again.

“Do I snore?” Lemuel flipped a piece of mail with her name on it toward Caty.

Caty picked it up as though any jostling would cause white powder to pour from its folds.

“No.”

“Oh.” Lemuel continued flipping through the envelopes.

Caty stood listening to the envelopes *phwap* against each other until Lemuel tore one open. Every nerve in her body responded to the wracking shred of paper.

Lemuel studied the contents with determination. He glanced up at Caty and smiled before returning to the paper in his hand. Caty was at a loss to understand the smile, or the conversation. She dropped her purse on the table and tip-toed into the kitchen.

She pulled down an apron pegged to the inside of the pantry door. “I’m making shepherd’s pie if that’s all right with you.” Opening the refrigerator, she stared at a pot of leftover mashed potatoes.

“I’m not in a potato mood. What else is there?”

“Nothing. Eggs.”

“The pie was a good idea. What about chicken pot pie?”

Caty glanced at the hexagonal clock with its brass pendulum swinging over the kitchen sink. It was four and she had no chicken thawed. It would have to sit in water. “It’ll take a while.”

Lemuel dropped the stack of mail in the garbage. “That’s fine. I’m not finished outside anyway.”

Three hours of bathing raw chicken, sifting flour and skinning vegetables later, Caty and Lemuel sat down at the table. Lemuel smelled like Palmolive and hay.

“Doesn’t figure. One of the does is showing signs of pneumonia again.” Lemuel wiped his mouth. “Pie’s good.”

“Will you be needing to call Reid again?”

“No. I’ll give it a couple of days or so. See what happens.”

Hearing the deer were coughing again brought back her first week of marriage like a thrashing fawn caught for dosing. Caty and Lemuel spent their wedding night in the rented house he had found for them. They arrived at about ten-thirty. Caty followed Lemuel up the stairs, her heart beating so hard she figured if she looked down at her wrist, her pulse would be visible. She had dreamed of this night for a long time—longer than she privately thought was normal for a young girl. Parents and ladies’ Bible study leaders spent plenty of time addressing questions like *Why do we dress modestly?—To keep our Christian brothers from stumbling*, but they never explained why Caty couldn’t help imagining kissing a guy when she tried on an old, skimpy dress she found in her mother’s drawers. She wanted to ask if the dress was Renee’s, but since she had tried it on behind a locked door, she wouldn’t touch the subject with a ten-foot pole. She was thirteen then. At fifteen she started having dreams. Usually, it was Alec from

*Tess* and she would go back and forth between being *Tess* and herself. Sometimes it was in the woods and there was a horse. Sometimes the horse was the neighbors' brown Suffolk and it would find them behind a bush near the lake. When she woke, she would pray that the dreams would leave her, but a thought she refused to acknowledge was that she didn't want them to leave. They released something building up inside.

Once in the room, she fidgeted with the nightgown that was lying on the bureau while Lemuel simply got undressed. With a real person, she realized, she was shy, and kept her face to the wall, unable to overcome her ingrained modesty. She was glad, it would be easier. The book said to let the husband always lead. She heard the creak of the bedsprings and then he said, "What time do you want to get up in the morning?"

Caty turned around, surprised. "Well, uh, what time do you want breakfast?"

"I usually eat around seven-thirty."

"All right, then, I guess I'll get up at seven."

Lemuel punched some buttons on the bedside clock. In the silence of the room it sounded ridiculously loud, like reverberation of gun shots in thick woods. He then lay back with his eyes shut. Caty stood still for a moment and then hurriedly changed out of her white dress, got in bed and waited, stiff, like the dead kitten she had found last week in the road. Nothing happened. Eventually, she heard Lemuel's even breathing, and her tenseness began to fade into a haze of wonder and worry. What had she done wrong? Why had he just gone to sleep? Maybe he was just so tired. Tomorrow . . .

But the routine varied little from that first night. Occasionally the alarm clock was set earlier for some reason related to farming, but nothing of significance happened or seemed likely to happen.

A week after their wedding, nine of Lemuel's does and a couple of fawns began exhibiting nasal discharge, a symptom of pneumonia. That morning, Caty woke up with the alarm clock. She waited until Lemuel went into the bathroom before she got up and dressed. She didn't see him again until she called him in for breakfast. She placed a large stack of buckwheat blueberry pancakes on the table next to the maple syrup and butter before sitting down.

"Lord, we thank thee for thy bountiful blessings. Amen." Lemuel transferred half of the stack onto his plate.

They ate in silence for a while, the gas stove clicking in the background under a pan of blueberry sauce. Caty looked out the window. There was a cold drizzle fogging up the flat landscape. She could barely see the neighbor's farmhouse across the county road.

"It was a little chilly last night, didn't you think?—the heater didn't seem to be working very well." Caty left her fork stabbing the pancake to listen for his answer.

"I didn't notice anything." Lemuel put another forkful in his mouth. "If you were cold, you can put an extra blanket on your side of the bed. You did bring blankets, didn't you?"

"Yes, my mother brought some over with my hope chest before the wedding."

"Hmm." Lemuel nodded.

"I guess it'll take some getting used to living in a new house. Everything seems topsy-turvy. This morning I couldn't figure out where I put the pancake spatula."

“Well, the kitchen is your domain—I’m sure you’ll have it all down in no time. The pancakes are good.”

“Well, I’m glad my *pancakes* please you.” Caty set her fork down. “Perhaps I should talk to my mother.”

“What for? I said the pancakes were fine.”

Caty picked up her fork and stabbed a piece of pancake. “About the heater—in our bedroom.”

“What does your mother know about heaters?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, I didn’t feel anything, but I’ll take a look at it later if it’ll make you feel better—dear.”

“I wonder how many problems this house really has.”

Lemuel glanced up. “The realtor mentioned a few before I signed the rent agreement, but I fixed those before the wedding. Everything’s in order.”

Lemuel ate quickly. Before heading back out, he called Reid to ask for help with the sick deer. Medicating the animals was a two-man job at best and the DVM program encouraged any hands-on experience Reid could find.

The men had been out in the rain for two hours working with the deer when Caty decided to bring them coffee. She filled two Thermoses, put on some Muck boots and a wind jacket with a hood and trudged outside through the muddy yard. Everything was brown: the ground, the wood in the fence posts, the wet trees, the deer. Smells of earth, manure, and wet nylon collected in the recesses of her jacket and puffed out with every movement of her head. When

she reached the pen with the sick animals, Reid was sitting in the mud cradling a spotted fawn. As the rain made pit-pattering sounds on her hood, Caty watched Reid's thin, veiny hands stroke the fawn's neck as Lemuel prepared a syringe. Watching him like that, Caty wondered why she had ever been scared of his wildness. Quickly, Lemuel injected 2cc's of LA 200 antibiotic into the fawn's neck. The dainty fawn struggled and tried to thrash, but Reid's embrace held firm. The syringe came out. Reid released the fawn and it kicked its way over to the sopping does huddled in the far corner of the pen. Lemuel looked at Caty, his mouth set in a line.

"I brought you some coffee," she said, gesturing with one of the Thermoses.

Lemuel approached and took it in silence.

Caty noticed Reid regarding them from his seat in the mud. "This one's for you," she said.

Reid picked himself up out of the mud and squished his way over to Caty. "Thanks."

Lemuel took a gulp of coffee and then addressed himself to Reid. "I'm going to go get another package of syringes from the shed."

When Lemuel was gone, Caty let out a puff of air. It turned to steam in the cold, damp air. She began running her thumbnail into the grain of the fence wood. She didn't have any reason to be there anymore, but she didn't want to go back into the brown house. The house seemed to hold all her misgivings. She looked at Reid. He was watching her. No doubt, he could see right through all of it; he could see what a disaster it all was. Suddenly, the brown house didn't seem as bad as Reid's knowing expression and she turned back through the mud without a word.

Now the deer were sick again—probably sick. And Reid would probably end up coming again. Caty didn't mind the sickness and the extra work, she minded the scrutiny Reid would unavoidably give. That night, as Caty leaned against the iron frame of the spare bed, she prayed the deer would miraculously stop coughing.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*The dress was old, but it was loose under the bust and I hadn't been able to fit into my jeans for a week.*

*I was the last one down to Sunday breakfast, but it was always cold: orange juice, milk, spoons crushing corn flakes into a congealed slop. All six of them were seated around the table, except my mom.*

*Baby Sylvia sprouting out of her hip and a smeared apron over her long jumper, she poured cream into my dad's coffee. "Good morning, Renee. I haven't seen that on you in ages. A little heavy for summer, though, don't you think?"*

*I plunked my bowl in my usual spot next to Jon, slouched and scooted up to the table in a hurry. The lip of the table pressed down onto my stomach.*

*"I wanted something different."*

*Jon spoke through his teeth and cornflake mush. "I bet it's 'cause pastor's son's gonna be there. You always had a crush on him in middle school. When he got to be Joseph you wanted to be Mary so bad."*

*Jon was fourteen and programmed to say the worst thing possible.*

*“Shut up, I don’t give a flip about Mary.”*



*From our pew, I could see the back of his head bobbing up and down as he sang to the tinkle of the piano, and it was a good head with curly black hair set on a solid neck. Usually, when I’m in church I feel like I could be good, like I could leave the car keys in the coffee can on Friday nights, like I could close my mind to memories from the sheep’s belly, his vinyl backseat, and the dressing rooms offstage, like I could tell my parents. But the back of his head made me feel different that Sunday, like I could never measure up, lost.*

*During the sermon, I came up with a plan while I bored holes into a brown, straight-haired head. A pastor’s son would be responsible. He wouldn’t drive away with a crying babe at his doorstep. I had to act fast or it would be too late—it might already be too late.*

*Organ music played us out of the sanctuary and into the foyer where we stood like sardines because it was raining and no one wanted to go out. I angled for the corner where he was and thought everyone must have noticed how thick I was as I squeezed through the floral prints, jacquards, leather, satin, mohair, and spandex.*

*He smiled when I popped out of the crowd like a seed when you pinch the pod.*

*“Hi.”*

*“Hey, Renee,” he said.*

*“When did you get back?”*

*“Last night.”*

*I dove right in. “You wanna hang out sometime?”*

*“Sure, there’s a youth meeting at my house tonight.”*

*Well, it was a start.*

SATURDAY, CATY DROVE across the dam on the north end of Tecumseh Lake, after which the road fell behind some hills and created a secluded-feeling area. Caty parked the Tahoe at the end of a long gravel lane lined with barbed-wire fence to one side. Behind the fence, a modest Jersey herd nodded their heads, sniffing for tender grass shoots. There was a house with a red tin roof and shutters plopped where the gravel fanned out and dissipated. Beyond that, like someone had thrown the trio of buildings from the end of the lane and the heaviest had gone farthest, sat a rough milking parlor followed by a barn. This was her brother, Jon’s place, Damsel in the Dell Farm.

Outside, the cold air was rubbery—it had lost the crispness of winter. From the passenger seat, Caty pulled a wooden rectangle that looked like a wash-board and a stone crock. Caty already had an apron tied over her wool skirt and turtle neck, and there was a braid in her hair. The woman who ushered her through the red door was all limbs, had a pinched face and two exhausted dangling breasts with separate agendas. A large, practical kitchen was their destination.

Jon’s wife, Rachel, took Caty’s crock and set it by the stove. The island counter was already covered with fresh, frilly green cabbages the size of bowling balls. Two other women stood around shuffling stainless steel bowls, crocks, and wooden mashers. They were Rachel’s younger sisters, Annetta and Shalom, both married, both with long, frizzy hair.

Annetta smiled with an overbite. “Find yourself some space and start chopping.”

Caty took up a knife and halved seven cabbages. She was self-absorbed as the sisters talked.

Shalom spoke between the sharp knock of knife against wood. “I’ve been having awful morning sickness lately so Alicia gave me this great ginger tea and it really helps—when I can get it down.” She ended laughing. The other sisters looked up knowingly.

“When I was carrying James in there—” Rachel pointed to a playpen in the living room. “It was winter, and I used to go into the bathroom and lie on the cold tile. The heat didn’t really reach that bathroom. I’m not sure if it helped the nausea or simply made me so numb I couldn’t feel anything.” Another peal of laughter.

Caty waited for the third sister to reciprocate with her story. It came disguised as advice.

“Have you tried sniffing rubbing alcohol? You dump it on a cotton ball and hold it under your nose. I think it works similar to smelling salts or something. It got me through my last one.”

“Is that all right for the baby?” Shalom’s knife paused halfway through a green head.

“Well, that was Ethan and he seems fine so far.”

The knives knocked in the silence and Caty supposed the sisters realized she had no pregnancy story to share. The cabbages were all halved and the boards came out. Caty grabbed a half and ran it back and forth over the blade embedded in the wood.

Shalom suddenly let out a little gasp and everyone glanced up, afraid she’d cut herself.

“Caty’s married now! We can talk about married stuff.”

Caty deliberately looked at her cabbage for a moment, then looked up and pushed out a laugh. “Yeah.”

They eased into it.

“Y’know, I came in from the chicken coop last week,” Rachel began, “And I was covered in dirt, and there was a light drizzle so my hair was wet, and I think I even had some chicken poop on my neck. And you know what Jon says? He says, ‘Honey, you look *hot*.’ He actually said that! I couldn’t believe he said that, and then he kissed me, dirt and everything. I told him he has to stop reading those Christian mystery books if he’s going to talk like that.”

“Well,” said Annetta, “I guess we know he likes his ladies dirty.”

Laughter. Cabbage overflowed from Caty’s bowl. She took her load and dumped it into one of the crocks. After throwing in some salt and coriander seeds, she picked up a wooden masher and began tamping the cabbage shreds down into the crock. The cabbage bruised and released spicy juices.

Caty found the conversation interesting, embarrassing, and humiliating all at the same time. The idea of a man being aroused by a woman’s looks was of interest. At the beginning of her courtship-age she had developed a hazy idea about this reaction—mostly stemming from their modesty rules—but after her marriage that hazy idea had completely melted into the pool of other dissolved theories like men wanted sex more than women and fighting was the number-one sign of a poor marriage. Since Caty had never actually seen a man react this way, she blushed to hear them speak so openly about it. So her lost theory was true. And something definitely was wrong with her marriage, and she was right to try to do something about it. But, she realized, it was the sight of Rachel that started the reaction. Rachel was so beautiful that her husband was powerless to resist. Caty had never thought Rachel very striking, but then she didn’t think her brother was too great-looking either, and she always thought people matched up according to

where they were on the attractive-spectrum. Caty thought Lemuel was better looking than average, and she always assumed he considered her his equal in looks or he wouldn't have been attracted to her in the first place. But maybe she was wrong. Maybe this was another theory that was about to be liquefied and poured into the amalgamated pool.

“You ladies must be getting thirsty,” said Rachel. “I have kombucha and ginger pop.”

The periodic making of sauerkraut and these traditional drinks extracted from Eastern Europe were part of a health regimen that some of the church practiced. Pastor Gem and his family followed this way of living as an example to others, but it was only encouraged, not required. Those who embraced this lifestyle quoted the Bible verse “For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's” whenever questioned about their eccentric diets, or, they saw one of their brothers eating a Whopper.

Rachel poured a fizzy amber drink that smelled like apple cider vinegar into glass tumblers for her guests.

Shalom heaved a sigh after she tasted it. “This batch turned out really good.”

Caty couldn't stand kombucha—it smelled like vinegar, but she sipped it politely while holding her breath. Her family incorporated a few of the dietary practices that were more palatable than others, but her parents were still attached to their yeast breads and held the raw egg in mortal dread. Lemuel hated all fermented foods, but Caty had managed to introduce sauerkraut to their kitchen since she had a soft spot for it.

The women resumed sauerkrauting but the occasional tinkle of glass hitting acrylic polymer now mingled with the sounds of mutilating cabbage.

Shalom took up the conversation thread. “I’ve been dropping subtle hints to David about waiting longer before having our next child. He likes to be spontaneous, and when he does that, I can’t, you know, keep track of things. The book says to play the little girl around your husband sometimes to make him feel dominant, so I’ve been doing it when he’s being spontaneous and I’m not prepared. He doesn’t know what to do!” Shalom laughed and almost sliced off her finger nail. “What can he do when I act like I don’t know what he means when he says he’s going to check on something up in the hayloft?”

Caty suddenly stopped shredding. “Do you always follow what the book says?”

She might as well have offered them a smoke.

“I mean, is there ever a time when it doesn’t work?”

“No,” said Annetta, sticking her lower lip out for a second, “It’s always been helpful. It’s work—like everything—to conform yourself to the ways of Lord, but it’s necessary.”

Rachel dumped her cabbage into a crock. “Why do you ask, Caty?”

Caty shoved her cabbage across the blade. “I don’t know, I—” Caty grimaced. A chunk of flesh the same shape as a white indentation slowly growing red dangled from her middle finger. “Cut myself.” Caty looked up at Rachel.

“I have Band-Aids.”

Caty followed Rachel into the bathroom. When they emerged, Caty’s finger was wrapped in gauze and tape.

“I think I’ll take a break.” Caty glanced around. “Where’s Jon?”

“Out milking.”

Caty slipped on a pair of rubber boots standing by the back door. As she walked through the grass toward the milking parlor, the boot shafts flapped against her legs making a hollow, gulping sound.

The milking parlor was nothing more than a two-story shed with a lot of overhanging roof for shelter. Jon had the Jerseys penned up behind two parallel stalls for milking. The eternal clack of the pump snapped and wheezed as two cows with their heads shoved into feed drums let the bucket milkers relieve the pressure in their udders. Jon leaned against the far stall rubbing a cow with striking Jersey features—a prominent dorsal stripe and wide eyes that looked like they wore mascara and eye liner.

As Caty approached, the smell of decaying flesh and manure peculiar to farms invaded her senses. The odor was slightly deeper and earthier than that of Lemuel's deer.

"Enough 'krauting?" Jon said when Caty stopped at the near stall. Jon was Caty's oldest brother. Forty was starting to come into focus on the horizon. Caty couldn't remember a time when Jon hadn't been married or milking cows.

She held up her bandaged finger and said, "I thought I'd give it a rest."

Jon shifted off the stall and squatted between the two cows with his arms stretched out pressing down on the claws to create more pressure. Caty had seen him do it a hundred times and bent down to take over the closest cow. Jon gave her an appreciative smile. They squatted there in the manure and dirt, blowing flies off the cows' bellies.

The absence of any inquiry about her husband didn't surprise Caty. Jon disapproved of everything Lemuel did. His quarrel was not with Lemuel's character—he had no opinion on that—but with his farming methods and philosophy. After the first meeting between the two,

when the arguing got so intense the room buzzed with their animosity, each acted as though the other didn't exist. Jon thought Lemuel was an idiot for refusing to see the logic behind grass-feeding ruminants. Caty certainly wasn't going to tell her brother that Lemuel's deer were probably sick again. She had a more pressing topic of conversation anyway.

“What was Renee like?” Caty shifted her weight to one leg and unbent her cramped knee.

Jon didn't turn around. “Renee? Didn't you get an earful on her from Mom and Dad?”

“Yeah, but that was Mom and Dad. I want to hear what somebody who wasn't her parent thought of her. You're only two years younger than her.”

Jon let out a huff of air that sent a dozen flies into momentary flight. “I don't think about her much. I don't remember.”

“Well, try. What was it like before we moved here?”

Jon rubbed his hair against the cow's belly. “I don't know. There was TV, and we only went to church on Sundays, and we ate a lot of corn flakes.”

Caty tucked the corner of her mouth in, slightly exasperated, but kept going. “What was church like?”

“It was a lot shorter—maybe an hour.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“Yeah.”

“So, they weren't teaching you a bunch of heresy.”

Jon laughed.

“Didn’t Renee listen?” Caty didn’t like having to ask so many questions. She knew Jon hated them. If he would just talk without prompting it would go a lot smoother.

“I guess not. She was always hanging out with the youth group. We moved the year before I was old enough to join.”

“Did you listen to rock music?”

“Yeah, some.”

“Did you like it?”

“Caty.”

“Well?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you feel less holy because you did those kind of things?”

Jon stopped the suction on his claw and released the cups.

Caty looked at her cow. “She done?”

“Mm, yeah.”

Caty hung her milker on its bucket. Jon already had his cow trotting out the exit chute, udders swinging light and free. Caty pulled away the manure-encrusted two-by-four behind her cow’s rump and let her back out.

“So, did you feel less Christian?”

“No.” Jon closed the exit chute and opened the waiting pen gate. One cow volunteered to be milked and walked into a stall unasked. The other cows rolled their eyes and swung their heads away. Jon prodded a cow toward the stall but she didn’t like it. She refused to move any farther once Caty closed the gate. Jon grabbed her hip bones and shoved her into the stall like a

lawn mower. Caty dropped the two-by-four behind her and the cow lowed. The wood creaked as the Jersey backed against it in defiance.

“Molly, quit yer bellyachin’.” Jon always threw an extra twang into his language when addressing the animals.

“Why did you stay here when you knew what the world was like outside this place and you didn’t think it was that bad?”

“I like it here. Nobody’s in a hurry.” Jon popped the milkers onto the cows and stood up. “I think it’s a good idea that women wear skirts.”

“Why?” Caty looked at him closely.

“I guess it’s all what you get used to because when I saw girls’ legs back in Pennsylvania, it didn’t bother me, but now—” He readjusted his ball cap. “—seeing skin above a woman’s knees can make me look twice.”

Jon put a new paper filter into the milk strainer. “What’s with all these questions? I’m a homebody. I thought you were too.”

“So did I.” Caty grabbed a kitten scavenging for spilled milk and rubbed its head determinedly.

“I’ve liked farming ever since I got my first whiff of it. Pastor Gem’s got a lot of good ideas on it too. He deserves the respect this community gives him.”

Caty tucked the kitten under her chin. “So, Renee could’ve decided there was nothing wrong with the church you attended and stayed behind.”

“She was real pretty. And she liked the world too much. She wasn’t stopping to compare theologies.”

“The world? You mean like rock n’ roll and pants?”

“Caty. Renee got pregnant. Renee was wild. She drank and had this druggie boyfriend. She was not okay.”

Caty stood there stroking the kitten and thought, at least she’d been able to get a male interested in her—even if he was the wrong one.

Jon glanced at her. “If Renee had been brought up here, I don’t think she’d be lost today.”

“Are you sure she’s lost? Are you sure wearing skirts and having babies is the only way for us to love God and stay out of trouble?”

“Caty, I don’t want to answer all these questions about Renee. I haven’t seen her in over twenty years. All I know is, I prefer women to wear skirts and not question and try to run their own lives bulldozing over other people in the process.”

Caty knew somewhere in there he was telling her to shut up, but she figured in the long run the amount of damage she could do by continuing compared to what she had already done was negligible. “Do you think you would have got in trouble if Mom and Dad hadn’t moved the family when they did?”

Jon wrote “23” one at a time on plastic milk jugs with a Sharpie.

“I mean, the rules, did they help you at all?”

“I like rules. Less decisions. If I can’t touch Rachel before I’m married to her, then I don’t have to worry about going too far, or getting her pregnant, or anything.”

“Was it—did you find it *hard* to break the habit of the rules once you were married?”

Caty shifted the kitten to her chest as if its fragile frame could somehow handle what was coming better than she could.

Jon shifted his weight, his boots scraping, and shook his head. “Caty, these questions sound like something for Mother.”

“I’m asking you.”

“*Why?*”

“Because you’re the only one who comes close to having a balanced view. Mom didn’t grow up with the rules, she just enforced them.”

“Are you having some sort of trouble? ‘Cause I don’t get where this is coming from.”

“No.” Caty didn’t know what else to say. “No. I’m going to go back and finish my sauerkraut.”

Caty turned to leave as Jon bent down to press the claws. Caty stopped. “Jon.”

Jon looked up at her sharply.

“I was just going to ask what your favorite thing about Rachel is.”

“That seems kind of private.”

“Please.”

The waiting herd scuffled and crashed into a gate. Jon glanced over and then back down at his milkers.

“Well, I don’t know, I guess her hair maybe. It’s glossy and curly when she doesn’t brush it, and I like to feel the mass of it in my hands.”

“Do you ever tell her that?”

Jon released a claw. “I think so.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

*The youth meeting was tedious. I'd been so caught up in my own wild ride I hadn't noticed how stuffy my old friends had gotten. Yeah, we all had no style in middle school, but didn't they learn anything when they moved to ninth grade? Joyce was still in a skirt that touched her calves and Malinda desperately needed some blue eye shadow. They sat around eating cookies until nine-thirty.*

*When the living room emptied, he looked at me with raised eyebrows. I tossed out the idea of getting ice cream. He went for it.*

*The Tastee Freeze was crowded, so he dropped me off to get in line while he parked. I ordered one large cone and forgot the spoons. We took turns licking the cone on the hood of his brown Nissan. He had parked across the street in front of a quiet, residential row. It was his turn and while he was slurping the softening vanilla, I screamed in a little voice, "Oh, no! It's melting!" and dove in mouth first to save the caving dairy.*

*He laughed and I kissed him. He kissed me back, but then returned to the ice cream.*

*I was out of moves. I thought that was about as overt as you could get with a pastor's son, and he hadn't gone for it.*

*He invited me to a game night when he dropped me off. Another group event, and I needed him to get in my pants.*

CATY LEFT HER brother's farm after lunch. A stone crock of mashed cabbage rode in the passenger seat. When she pulled into the drive, she decided to make one last desperate attempt before Monday. She might not have done everything in her power, and she needed a clear conscience if she was going to make a new life work. She couldn't do it tonight though, she decided. A strategy needed to be crafted and the nerve worked up. She needed to give it everything so that the blame would be off her shoulders.

Sitting in her pew on Sunday, Caty evaluated the congregation. She studied each married couple and tried to imagine what their home life was like based on how they appeared in public. About half the husbands had their arms around their wives. She tried to imagine how they behaved at night—after the baby was down. Maybe he hung around while she washed dishes and kissed the back of her neck. Maybe they danced around in the kitchen to soft music on the radio even though dancing wasn't allowed. Perhaps this study was rude, dirty, but it felt less disgusting than imagining—or heaven forbid, *asking*—her parents.

The other half was older and had large families by this time. The couples sat like bookends holding their long row of tight-bound children in place. The book warned against letting a family usurp intimacy in the marriage. These couples probably had to work at it. They probably had it marked on the calendar as “date night” or something even more cryptic like

“early to bed night” followed by a “do it yourself in the kitchen day” in the next square. Caty felt Lemuel next to her. He sat next to her at a polite distance as if she were a stranger, or maybe a distant cousin. It was possible he didn’t like to be touched. Sylvia, her sister, didn’t like to be touched. You could massage her shoulders for any length of time, but if you placed your hand on her shoulder for only a moment and took it away, she had to rub the area to get rid of the sensation the touch left.

Caty tried to picture herself unmarried again. What if she never got married ever? She looked around trying to find examples for her imagination, but couldn’t find any. There were no older, single women. There was one widow, but that didn’t count. She had children anyway, and they took care of her. If there were no single, older women . . . Caty looked around for any unmarried man past thirty. This category was empty as well. There was no category. It didn’t exist. So there was no precedent for what she was imagining. Probably because there wasn’t supposed to be and never would be.

By the time the service was over on Sunday, Caty had a plan. No work was done on Sunday so she would have Lemuel’s full attention. As they drove home, Lemuel was more talkative than usual. Caty thought this was auspicious even if it was only about the weather, and she tried to be responsive.

“Don’t get this weather,” Lemuel was saying. “Did you see the sky this morning?”

“It was reddish,” said Caty.

“Yeah, tornadoes usually.

Caty glanced at him, but he didn’t continue so she said, “Usually?”

“The weather said a strong front’s coming in—with snow—something like a blizzard—unheard of.”

The Tahoe bumped twice as they crossed railroad tracks. Lemuel turned down the main street of Osco, the town in whose city limits they technically lived. A post office the size of an outhouse, a one-pump gas station with a diner attached, and a grain elevator by the tracks made up the town.

“So will we be getting tornadoes with snow?” Caty asked.

“Maybe.” Lemuel pulled off the gas as a cop behind a dusty windshield signaled for him to slow down. Lemuel brought his speed down by five and rolled past. The car remained planted by the elevator like it was the sibling of the tree growing on the other side. “They say storms like this come around every fifty or a hundred years or so.”

Caty twisted back toward the cop. “Does he ever give anyone a ticket?”

Lemuel sniffed. “Maybe he should. Bring some revenue in, then they could pave this road.”

The town was gone. Sun lit up the dirty windshield and Lemuel fell silent.

Caty smoothed out her print skirt. “What’ll we do—with the deer?”

“Imagine we’ll have to put them in the barn.”

“They’ll fit?” Caty pictured the small barn crammed with tools, a tractor, and the last of winter’s hay. “At least most of the hay is gone.”

“We’ll put the rest of it down before we bring them in. We’re just putting the sick ones and nursing mothers with fawns inside.”

“Why do they keep getting sick?”

Lemuel exhaled. “I don’t know. Guess they weren’t healthy to start with.” He took the last sharp turn before home. “I’m going to listen to the weather again. The front may not hit for a day or so—might even stall out. If we do have to put them in, it’s gonna have to be at the last minute. There’s too many for them to stay in there long. And we’re gonna have to set up a quarantine,” he added as they pulled into the drive. “Those ones with symptoms, we have to keep them as separate as possible.”

Lemuel didn’t stop in the drive, but drove onto a two-groove lane that led out back to the barn and lean-to. He parked in front of the lean-to and got out. Caty sat in the SUV for a moment and watched him stride to the barn in the heavy boots he wore for work and church. He was probably already planning on what to do for the storm. Caty slid down from her seat and dodged manure in her flimsy flats. She had plans too.

She didn’t have to prepare lunch because there was always a cold pot-luck after service—cold because no one did any work, including making hot food, on Sundays, and always because if you said to your brother in need, *keep warm and well-fed*, but did nothing about it, what good was it?

Caty trundled up the stairs with a broom, hamper, and fresh sheets straight into the master bedroom. Visions of musty clothes stiff with old sweat clinging to the edges of dressers and arms of chairs caused her to grab a vanilla candle on the way in. When she opened the door, however, the room was decidedly tidy. One pile of old clothes lay by the door. An effort had been made with the bed—not exactly catalogue ready, but smooth and straight. The dresser top and chair were clear except for some hunting knives and a pair of socks in need of darning. Caty

slouched in wonder. The room did have a stiff, stale odor to it, so Caty yanked up a window and lit the candle.

In a few minutes, she had the laundry removed, the sheets changed, and the wood floor clear of particulates. Lemuel had removed the white and navy quilt that had topped off her hope chest and replaced it with a fleece blanket. He probably wanted to keep it nice, she thought, in case she ever decided to leave the spare bedroom. Caty pulled it out of the dresser bottom where he'd stuffed it and spread it over the bed. The room looked fresh, inviting; the candle looked romantic, she thought. She pulled the window down and closed the curtains. Warm vanilla permeated the room.

Caty unbuttoned her blouse as she walked to the spare room. She didn't shut the door before she shrugged out of her blouse, skirt, and everything underneath. On stifling summer days, she used to lie topless on her bed for a while, letting her skin breathe. She did it more frequently as the house emptied through high school and afterwards. At first, lying around naked made her giddy, and she wouldn't feel right until she was buttoned up in her cotton shirt and skirt.

Caty sat on the edge of the spare bed and realized she needed this to work, not only to save her marriage and her whole world, but she had been waiting so long she was beginning to petrify and turn brittle, and she was about ready to snap. She lay back. Could this be what Renee felt? Did she lie unclothed in her bed—Caty'd heard Pennsylvania summers could be brutal—and let herself get out of hand? She had been younger than Caty was, and she wasn't married, but people matured at different paces. Suddenly, Caty felt dangerously close to a

gravelly precipice. This had to work. If it didn't, and she went out there single and untethered from everything that held her together, she could spin out on the gravel and fall.

She rose and went back toward the master bedroom. The hall was cool and made her skin prickle. Lemuel had never seen his wife's body. This fissure in her memory had opened while in church, and the plan sprang forth from there. She considered waiting on the bed, but decided it looked desperate. She didn't want to beg, she wanted to startle him—into action. Turning around, she headed back downstairs. She was flying by the seat of her pants—actually, just her seat since no pants were involved in her plan. The book was silent on this subject. *Wait for your husband, a godly home is a home where the man leads.* Caty was in new territory. She wasn't exactly leading, she was prodding with the only electrified prod she had. Specific advice? *Play the little girl sometimes, act helpless.* Play the little girl? She wasn't even sure what that meant anymore.

She knew no one but Lemuel was outside, but she couldn't help ducking whenever she passed a window. She felt like a hermit crab that had outgrown and burst from its shell and couldn't find a suitable replacement. Caty stood in the living room behind a chair. Lemuel would leave his boots on the mat outside the kitchen door, fling his ball cap onto his spot at the table, wash his hands in the kitchen sink, and head toward the stairs through the dining room. Caty sat in a flowery, wing-backed chair facing the dining room and crossed her legs. The embarrassed vulnerability of the hermit crab became stronger. She had nothing to do. She cast about for something, anything. She picked up a Bible. It seemed an obscene contrast, yet what she was doing, at least parts of it, were sanctioned by its author. She turned to Song of Solomon. It was appropriate.

Caty's mind was tangled in gazelle's legs and Lebanese cedars when the kitchen door creaked and slammed. She tore the tissue page on chapter three as she fumbled with the book. A hot flush rose from her neck to her crown. The hermit crab was completely bare—not even an ill-fitting shell for reserve. She replaced the Bible on the end table and listened for the faucet. Nothing.

Lemuel strode through the doorway, his cap still on his head. *He must be going back out.* Their eyes locked for an instant and then he blinked.

“I’m sorry.” He turned half away. “What happened? Where—where are your clothes?”

Caty squeezed her vocal chords together before answering in her best naively feminine voice, “I lost them.”

“Well . . .” He studied their ottoman. “Aren’t you cold? What about a blanket?” Finally, he looked up.

Beyond the fact that he believed his wife was crazy, his gaze held no interest.

Caty rose. “Yes, I believe I’ll take a blanket.” She crossed over toward him where a crocheted throw bristled on the back of a chair. Lemuel held it out to her and she took it. She stood less than an arm’s length away, carefully wrapping the throw under her arms.

“I’m going back out,” he said.

“But it’s Sunday.” She didn’t know why she was arguing. Her plan hadn’t worked. She knew that.

“I’m just going to look at a few things so I know what I’ve got to do tomorrow.” He moved away and took the first few stairs.

“Lemuel—”

He turned halfway, still moving.

She couldn't let him see the room. He already delivered the deathblow, but the room would be like beating out her dying breath.

“What'd you come in for?”

Lemuel stopped with a foot on the next stair and gazed up into the second story. He shook his head. “Well. I can't remember.” He did an about-face on one foot and thumped down the stairs.

Bunching up the trailing throw, Caty trundled up toward the master bedroom. Inside, the room was heady with vanilla and smoke. She shut the door, dropped the throw and blew out the candle. The wick still glowed, smoking. Caty licked her thumb and forefinger and pinched the wick. She ran to the window and opened it. There was no breeze. She yanked a pillow off the bed and swung it up and down next to the window. She forgot she was naked until Lemuel appeared outside. She pressed the pillow to her chest and dove onto the bed. The curtains licked like white tongues toward her in a sudden puff of breeze. *What if Lemuel noticed the window?* He'd know she was in their room. She got up and shut the window quietly. He would know she'd been in there anyway when he saw the bed and the floor. She really wasn't supposed to do cleaning on Sunday so that wouldn't be a good explanation.

Caty grabbed the quilt up and stuffed it in the drawer. She threw the fleece blanket over the bed and pulled it taut like it had been. In the bathroom, she grabbed the trash basket and pulled out a handful of the grass and hay she swept up earlier. She scattered it around the room like rose petals. She ran into the spare room and threw on her clothes. Downstairs, she grabbed the hamper from the utility room and dragged it up to the room. Careful to select the same shirts

she had picked up, she dropped a pile of Lemuel's clothes by the door. On her way out, she grabbed the candle and shut the door.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Too late. But I knew that before I started really. At least I didn't ruin the pastor's son. He was gone on a two-month mission trip to India. He said he'd write me. I just smiled.*

*I started noticing mothers with babies everywhere. Most of them looked haggard behind their goggle glasses and flaky hair. I didn't want to be haggard; I didn't want to be a mother.*

*I sat on the porch and let the summer heat press down on me. A black box pulled by a bay mare trotted down the grey road. I could just make out a black bonnet through the open door. I wondered if Amish girls ever got pregnant before they're married. Probably not. Who would want them in those hideous dresses? That's probably why they wore them. If I was Amish I wouldn't be pregnant now, I thought. It would be so easy to be good if I was Amish.*

*I was going to have to tell my parents soon. Or maybe not—they would notice my bump pretty soon anyway. I'd let them figure it out—they were smart adults, always knew what was best for everyone.*

ON MONDAY, the sun spilled blood across the horizon before being swallowed by a low quilting of clouds. Her neighbor was busy, so Caty had to take the Tahoe to the Law Offices of Ebol & Whitaker. She knew the weather would probably turn bad, that Lemuel would likely need the vehicle, but she couldn't wait. After her humiliation of the day before, she had jailed herself in her room, finding comfort in her cell walls that hid her like a covering, like a shell. She let Lemuel fend for himself at supper time. She couldn't keep ignoring her duties though, so at three in the morning she threw some eggs, sausage and whatever else in the fridge looked decent into a casserole dish. Before creeping back up the stairs, she set it to bake slowly and scribbled a note for Lemuel. As she pulled out of the drive in the morning, she saw Lemuel in the grey light sorting the hacking deer from the rest. He never looked her way.

The stack of papers Mr. Ebol ran through was enormous and confusing. Caty felt like apologizing for wasting the lawyer's time and just leaving. It was too much for a girl whose chief purpose in her education had been making yogurt and turning out a nice buttonhole. Caty read the first page as the lawyer's pen marked off different aspects of the divorce she had to consider and enumerate. Mr. Ebol went ahead and filled in the blanks of the title: "In the Matter of the Marriage of" *blank* "Petitioner and" *blank* "Respondent." Caty knew he could simply run the page through the gnashing teeth of the paper shredder and the document would mean nothing, but seeing her and Lemuel's names scrawled in ink made her feel like she was already divorced. Her marriage was dead. Lemuel was nothing to her, a stranger. But these already were, so Caty forced her pity-party to wind down and focused.

Next there was the reason for divorce, which, according to Mr. Ebol, could be either *No-Fault* or *General*, and the papers listed what reasons fell under which category. Mr. Ebol

directed her to circle a reason. Under *General*, Caty read *(1) failure to perform a material marital duty or obligation*. It sounded absurdly scientific and mechanical. *(1) Crank engine. If engine does not respond check valves*. Under the obvious layer, Caty didn't even know the reason for this divorce.

Mr. Ebol agreed that number one's legal wording best matched her reason for divorce. He went on to discuss how the property would be divided, which would be decided partly by what their standard of living was prior to divorce and how the "spouse" had handled the property, but Caty didn't listen very well. She had brought nothing into the marriage but herself. They lived in a rented house and everything Lemuel owned walked on four skinny legs in pens all day. There was the possibility of court-ordered counseling and whether or not she would be awarded maintenance, which Mr. Ebol was sure she would.

Maintenance? Where would maintenance come from? Expenses would go up if they lived separately, and Lemuel barely made enough to keep them under the same roof. At least, that was the feeling Caty got. Lemuel never discussed their actual financial position with her. Occasionally, he would look at her slim shopping receipts approvingly and ask whether there was a generic version of any brand-name purchase, but that was all. So Caty never bought anything nice that wasn't on sale and clothed them from the clearance rack. When the lawyer slipped the last page into her file, Caty rose wearily. She told Mr. Ebol she would call him with her final decision.

"Say 'hello' to Victoria for me," the lawyer said as she walked out.

Caty just smiled.

When she reached the Tahoe, she realized it wasn't even noon yet. She decided to eat lunch in Topeka before returning home. In the old part of town, Caty found a Mexican place and ordered a chicken quesadilla. She hadn't been out to eat since she was married and she found it gave her the same feeling she got on a hot day when a burst of wind would breathe up her skirt. The cook behind the half-moon-shaped window assembled her lunch while she sat doing absolutely nothing. She even felt less absurd in her long skirt as she watched the waitresses navigate the tables in flowing refajos. Being alone in the city with no one to answer to felt like the time when she was small and climbed a tree to the highest branch, and as she stood there gripping the tapered trunk she truly believed if she jumped she would float. This feeling lasted three-quarters through her quesadilla. By the last slice, though, the city became the ground when she slipped and was only saved from bashing her brains in by Reid's quick hand grabbing her overalls. She imagined being unmoored and thrust off into the current: a dingy apartment on the other side of the rail yard where fifteen-year-old cars sat on the curb for weeks without being moved, a patrol car only rolled by once a day, where the meat-packers and convenience store clerks lived because they'd never been to college, either. What if she ended up working in a meat packing plant where the work was so repetitive you sliced off your finger because your brain was on standby?

Caty left the last bite of tortilla and cheese and hurried out of the restaurant. A frigid wind with tiny snowflakes kicked at her skirt. The snow cleared out on highway ninety-one, but the wind was still fierce, pushing the SUV around in bursts. The sky looked like a picture of stomach fat Caty had seen in biology: yellow, grey and lumpy.

When Caty pulled up to the brown house, she noticed her parents' van parked on the gravel driveway. She didn't see Lemuel around. Inside, she found both her parents sitting in the living room looking like two wooden carvings placed on a precarious ledge. Caty glanced through the living room into the dining room and down the hall. No Lemuel yet. Her ears tensed listening for the telling creak of a body overhead. Silence. In spite of her parents, she exhaled.

"Caty!" Her mother rose and hugged Caty.

Her father spoke from his seat on the couch. "Caty, we want to remind you of what you believe, what you vowed to the church, before Pastor Gem feels obligated to step in."

A remote corner of Caty's brain noted the grotesque hilarity of the inescapable storm. A patch of unnatural cold tingled Caty's neck. Her mother returned to her seat by the window.

"I know what I said." Caty turned her face to the window. The bare arms of the spindly redbud tree were trembling in the wind.

Her father placed his hands on his knees. "Caty, this idea of divorce is ludicrous. How many times have you been told divorce stinks in the Lord's nostrils? Must we read to you all the books and Bible passages over again? We've done everything we know to bring you up a holy child of God in a safe environment."

"I do believe that—it's what I've been raised on—it's all I know, but—"

"We don't want you to end up like Renee." Caty's mother leaned forward in her chair. "Don't you see that? All these years of training, and now, you want to just throw it all over and us with it? Caty—"

“I’m not rejecting all of it. It’s just all the rules—they haven’t worked. If rules like the courting rod and never being alone on dates are so good, then why am I in this position?”

“The courting rod is there to keep your pre-marriage relationship pure,” said her mother.

“And it’s still working.” Caty dropped her purse on the floor.

Her father spoke. “You weren’t there when we had to deal with Renee. It was terrible for everyone—but mostly for Renee. These rules are for your protection.”

Caty’s mother got up. “We believe this is the best way. Honey,” she put a hand on Caty’s arm, “you know the church membership vow. If you get a divorce—” Her voice cracked. “Caty, you’re my baby girl, I can’t give you up! Don’t make me do that.”

“And Caty—” her father stood up—“not only will you be separated from everyone you know, there’ll be no one to marry you either.”

She had expected that; she knew the consequences. If Caty divorced Lemuel, she would never be able to marry again. No one from their church would marry her; they would both get thrown out forever. She would never be fulfilled as a woman was supposed to be. She couldn’t take part in the mandate to “be fruitful and multiply.” And worst of all, she would have no one. Caty was stuck—like the baby her mother lost when it got lodged in the birth canal with the umbilical cord wrapped around its neck. She could vaguely remember snippets of that night; short reels burned into her three-year-old brain. Her father kept rushing up and down the stairs, his form interrupted by the many white spindles of the staircase. Behind a white door with a line of light under it, she could hear the midwife’s strong voice commanding her mother to be calm and breathe, and everything would turn out fine. Her mother’s screams grew sharper and longer, and the line of light grew brighter. The last trip her father made down the stairs brought men in

white flashy shirts back with him. They dented the wall with a large yellow criss-crossing thing they carried and her father didn't yell at them. They put her mother on it and the midwife kept saying "I didn't know. I didn't know."

As they left, Caty's parents declared a hope that what they had said made an impact on her heart. Caty said she'd think about it while she made supper.

It was only five o' clock. Generally, Lemuel didn't come in until at least six. Caty had an hour to regroup before her husband came inside. Caty opened the fridge to look for carrots, but she only stood there with the door open, cold air sinking down to her feet. Marvin Ebol's card pressed into her sweaty palm. She was wearing the card into lint with her nervous fidgeting.

The door opened. Caty shoved the card into her apron pocket and pressed her face deeper into the fridge. There was no movement, no sound. He must be staring at her. She swung the fridge door in and faced her fears. It was Reid. The puff of cold air exhaled by the closing fridge stirred Caty's hair. Reid stood at the door looking hesitant. When Caty didn't say anything, he shut it and walked into the kitchen.

Caty spoke. "Lemuel's probably in the barn getting it ready for the storm."

"That's nice." Reid looked like he had when he was fifteen and accidentally filed his fingertips down working with a new file. They burned for a week. "Caty, I heard about your trip today."

"You're not here to help Lemuel?"

"I wanted—"

The door opened again. Lemuel and Pastor Gem walked in. There were three men in the room, but the space was filled exclusively by Lemuel. The pastor was on the short side with a nervy face and hands—one of the only pairs around that wasn't work-hardened—and a receding hairline.

Lemuel looked at Reid. "Reid."

The two men shook hands.

Lemuel turned toward Caty. She thought he looked her up and down as if to reassure himself his wife was wearing clothes. The coolness of the fridge was gone. Caty's cheeks flushed the color of hot iron.

"Caty, Pastor Gem will be with us for supper. Are your parents gone already? I thought they might be staying."

For the first time, Caty realized the oddity of Pastor Gem's presence. What fresh horror had she brought down on herself? Caty was angry now.

"With the weather outside like it is? I don't think so," Caty said, "But Reid is staying." Caty didn't know how that was going to go over, but she knew she didn't want to be alone with Lemuel and Pastor Gem.

"Of course he is," said Lemuel. "He'll be with us all night. I can't handle the deer by myself."

*Idiot. Of course he would be staying. How desperate did that look?*

All three men watched her.

“Right.” Caty fingered the card in her pocket. “Uh, well, supper will be ready in about thirty minutes. You can wait in the living room if you like.” Caty turned toward the sink and began ripping celery stalks from a root.

Lemuel took off his jacket. “I’ll go clean up.”

Reid hung back. “Do you need some help? I’m handy with a knife.”

“Thank you, no,” said Caty, “you and Pastor Gem can go have a nice chat. Tell him he should get out of here, it’s going to storm.”

The men went into the living room, and Caty made soup.

The dinner was an awkward business. While it was usual for little to be said between Caty and Lemuel, it was strange for such silence with four present. The clanking of the soup spoons on the ceramic bottoms of bowls was startling at times.

After a stretch, Reid spoke. “Do you have supper over here every Wednesday, Pastor?”

“No, no,” replied Pastor Gem. “This is a special occasion.”

Caty glanced up from her bowl at the middle-aged pastor and dreaded further explanation.

“Lemuel said he had some matter to discuss.” But the pastor looked at Caty, not Lemuel. “What brings you here, son?”

“The deer.”

“Oh, right.” The pastor dove into his soup.

“And, actually I had a—something to discuss with Caty—a prayer request.” Reid glanced at Caty. “So, it’s worked out perfectly. You and Lemuel can discuss your matter, and I can talk

to Caty about my prayer request—” he looked at Lemuel “—and then you and me can get started with the dosing.”

“A prayer request?” Pastor Gem looked vaguely concerned.

“Yes. It’s something a—a woman would understand.”

Lemuel cleared his throat. “Actually, I was hoping for Caty to be present at our discussion.”

“Well, I’m sure it can be worked out,” Caty said. She didn’t know what he was doing, but whatever it was, it was bound to be better than the alternative. “I’m sure Reid’s request won’t take too long. Pastor Gem, would you like another roll?”

The dinner shifted back into silent mode and finished up quickly. Lemuel and Pastor Gem went back to the living room and Reid helped Caty clear the table.

Caty took the last stack of dishes from Reid. “Do you really have something to say to me or were you just helping me out?”

“No, I want to talk.” Reid glanced toward the living room. “Is there somewhere else we could go for a minute?”

“Outside.” Caty grabbed a jacket from the pegs by the door and led the way toward the barn.

The sky was prematurely dark. A faint lavender glow hovered behind the clouds, but they were so thick there was no difference between the east and west. In the soft light, they could see the dark forms of deer huddling together. A few brave ones picked at a hay bale. Caty and Reid stood under the green cast of the barn light. Dropping, chunky snowflakes looked grass-stained in the fluorescent light.

Caty looked at Reid. His face was washed out.

He didn't say anything immediately. Caty wasn't sure he hadn't made the whole prayer request thing up, so she said, "I can't believe Lemuel is wasting time in there with Pastor Gem while a storm is bearing down on us and his deer are scattered out in pens like this."

"I know why." Reid looked at her hard.

Caty felt her face bloom with perspiration.

"I heard your parents were over today. I wanted to know if you were okay."

Caty worked the corner of the card in her apron. "How much do you know?"

"Enough," Reid said, "enough to know that these rules we have been brought up under have reached their limit. This is out of their scope."

Caty watched a large snowflake cover a weed sprout at her feet and wondered just what he was referring to. She couldn't believe he'd heard about her stunt yesterday, but her guilt assumed the worst.

"Caty, I know this is hard. It's all you know, but you're right to push out."

"You've always pushed the limits, Reid. You're not me—I'm not you. I don't know what I'm doing!" Caty pressed her face into her hands. He always flouted the rules, but he would never reject the whole church and renounce his family. "You wouldn't even go *this* far. You can't tell me what's right."

Reid raised his hands and then dropped them into his jacket pockets. "I know, yeah. My father's paying for my schooling—eight years of it. I need it. And once I'm done—what kind of ungrateful deadbeat is like 'hey, thanks for the doctorate! See you on the other side!'"

She knew what Reid meant by “the other side,” but for her the other side seemed much closer. Death was imminent with the flick of a wrist holding a pen. The other side was a dingy apartment in Topeka where the smoke that hung permanently in the corridor made the walls yellow.

“They tell me God will reject me if I divorce Lemuel. They will have to reject me too.”

“They might, but I don’t think God will.” Reid’s jacket made a loud swishing sound as he crossed his arms. “There must be some love in God. It says so in the Bible.”

“But I’ve never heard it in anything anyone says. All they talk about is what God will do to us if we sin.”

“I know.” Reid looked out toward the deer pens.

“We should go back in. It’s freezing.”

Reid turned back to her. “What are you going to do?”

Caty stopped turning away. “Why do you want to know?”

“You should know.” Reid glanced down at his boots and shifted his weight to his left side. “We’re old friends, Caty. I know what you want, and I know you can’t have it where you’re at.”

A doe grunted out in the dark. Both Caty and Reid looked over at the dark pens. In a momentary lull of the wind, they heard the light patter of a fawn’s hooves.

Caty was glad for the disruption. Reid’s words disturbed her. Reid shouldn’t know what she wanted, that was her husband’s job—but *he* didn’t know. *Reid didn’t really know what she wanted*, she decided. That was absurd. All he knew was that she wanted a divorce. He didn’t know about the spare bedroom or the wedding night or yesterday. Oh, yesterday. She physically

cringed when she recalled the naked hermit crab sitting brash and shell-less in the living room. She glanced at Reid involuntarily. She refused to believe he could see that. They had been friends for a long time, but he couldn't just *know* what was going on in her head without her saying. He couldn't know how at night she dreamed of someone holding her so hard the loneliness couldn't get in. She wanted to be touched. She ached for it, but she never *said* anything. When the empty, dark minutes would stretch into hours, she would recreate her life starting with her wedding day, substituting Reid for Lemuel. Caty looked at Reid, her forehead creased. He certainly looked like he knew. She needed to get out of here. God was not here. Only her unfulfilled impulses of the last six months.

“We need to go in,” she repeated.

Reid nodded his head. “Can I pray for you?” He suddenly smiled. “After all, this was supposed to be a prayer request.”

Yeah, let's bring God into this mess, she thought.

“Yes.” Her voice was tight.

Reid grabbed her freezing hand and covered it with his thin one. Caty jerked in surprise, but he grasped it tighter. He bowed his head and Caty could tell from the slight frown on his forehead that he was praying. Caty looked down at the hand holding hers. Even in his religion, Reid couldn't follow rules. She hoped prayer would clear her thoughts, but all she could think was *God, God*, over and over until even that faded away and all that remained was the callous on Reid's thumb rubbing the back of her hand. Caty studied the long fingers pressing hers and the bones and veins disrupting the smooth skin stretched across the back of the hand.

Reid squeezed her hand. Caty jerked her head up.

“I hope you feel a little better.”

Caty’s hand tingled from being held so still. She looked at Reid. He still had her hand.

“Inside.”

“I know.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*“Renee looks pregnant.”*

*Mom’s eyes bugged. “Jon Boy, you hush!”*

*They liked to call him Jon Boy. The Waltons was their favorite show. I pulled the crocheted afghan over my belly. I was slouching in the couch corner which always made my belly bulge.*

*Mom fed Sylvia overcooked carrots. “Renee honey, I was thinking maybe instead of reading so much, you should go outside. You know, do something physical.”*

*“Why?”*

*“I’ve noticed you do seem to have put on a little weight, and maybe it’s because you’ve been so sedentary this summer.”*

*“I don’t like doing stuff outside. The heat makes me nauseous.”*

*“It never used to.” Orange saliva stretched from Sylvia’s mouth to the spoon Mom held.*

*“Maybe it’s ’cause I gained weight.” I almost laughed at this.*

*“Honey, be serious.”*

*“Okay. Jon’s right. I am pregnant.”*

*“Renee, that’s not what I was asking for.”*

*I grinned. There was a real, physical hurt in my sternum. “I bet not.”*

CATY TURNED TO go into the house where Lemuel and Pastor Gem were sitting. They probably wouldn’t look like wooden carvings—more like granite statues, scored from the stone of Sinai. She heard low voices in the living room before Reid shuffled in behind her and closed the door. Reid followed her into the living room where he flopped carelessly into a chair. He looked hard as cement too.

Lemuel gave him a direct look and then said, “How’s the weather looking out there?”

“It’s coming up real bad.”

“Why don’t you go and start.”

Reid slapped his hands on his legs and left them there, outstretched. “I don’t know how you want to set it up. I wouldn’t know what to do until you got out there.”

Caty stared in astonishment. Reid wasn’t going to leave.

The branches of a tree scratched on a window and the house made barely discernible snapping sounds as the wind pulled on its eaves. A fawn screamed out a distress call.

Reid jolted from his chair as Lemuel hurried his large frame toward the floor upsetting a picture frame on the coffee table.

“I guess we missed our window,” said Lemuel, “Pastor, you’re welcome to stay if the storm’s too bad.” He bounded out the door with Reid trailing.

It only took Caty a second of toe-curling silence with the pastor to decide she should help outside. “Make yourself comfortable, Pastor.”

Pastor Gem did not respond. He appeared to be on edge as he sat stiffly against the hard springs of the sofa back.

She didn’t take time to find her insulated boots and heavy work coat. She fled out the door sifting through ankle-deep snow in rubber boots. Light flooded from the open barn door so she ran there. Lemuel already had the hay spread on the barn floor and makeshift pens constructed on opposite sides. Reid was opening the far one, but he was having trouble getting the gate to stay open or finding something to tie it to. Caty grabbed it and planted herself behind the gate holding it open.

Reid ran outside as Lemuel carried a fawn into the enclosure. The fawn was from last year’s crop and had to weigh at least a hundred pounds.

“Shut it!” he yelled on his way out. “Keep it shut until we bring in the next one.”

The fawn coughed. It wasn’t spotted anymore and looked like a small doe.

Reid trundled in with a tiny fawn born last week—an early birth for that season. It was bleating in protest and had one of its front twig-legs crossed over its neck. He deposited it in the pen at the opposite end. Lemuel followed with its twin. He laid the fawn down gently then snapped up.

“This is taking too long. It’s coming down out there.” Lemuel grabbed a roll of electric fence and hefted it toward Caty.

Caty stared at it, unsure. “Is this all right to use in snow?”

“I’m not turning it on. They’ll still think it’s hot.”

The three began unrolling the mesh fencing and shoving stakes in the ground. They stretched it out to the first pen, then Lemuel placed Reid and Caty on opposite sides of the chute while he pushed out the sick whitetails and herded them toward the chute. The scared deer coughed and inhaled ragged breaths as they responded to Caty and Reid's prompts pushing them toward the barn. Eleven deer staggered down the chute and then Lemuel signaled Reid to shut the pen in the barn. Lemuel shut his own gate and ran into the barn. Caty pulled up stakes from her end while the men connected the chute to the other pen.

The night was black now, and the light on the barn and the one out in the pens did little but illuminate the veil of snow descending.

"Which one has the nursing does?" Caty yelled. Her voice sounded like she was shouting into fur.

Lemuel pointed, and Caty dragged her portion of the netting toward to the left. The netting was heavy to begin with, and now it was wet. She was freezing. Her toes felt like stuffing at the end of her boots, and her heels felt rubbery. Even her armpits were cold. She stepped back, but her numb nerves sent the wrong signal to her brain and her foot didn't move back far enough. She fell and hit her tailbone on a stick, bruising it. She got up and brushed the snow from her rear. Now her backside was wet and freezing too.

She had the fencing set up, but was fumbling with tying it to the pen's gate post when Lemuel reached her. He fixed it for her and opened the pen.

"Stand there," he said, pointing again.

The process began again, but these deer were healthy and much faster. There were only two nursing mothers and one more fawn to get. The mother of the twins bounded toward the

distress call of her captive fawn, but the other mother got frantic and tried to jump the fence on Caty's side. She headed her off and the doe bolted down the line with her fawn trailing. The pens were closed and Caty ran for shelter in the barn. She was so cold her tailbone didn't even ache. She closed the heavy door behind her.

The healthy whitetails were pacing with poised ears, but the sick ones drooped, soggy with melting snow. There was another pen behind the sick ones, empty.

Reid pushed in the door and stumbled into the warm light of the barn. "What're you doing? There's a buck we still have to get in." He stopped talking and looked at her for a moment. "You're not dressed at all for this! What is that you're wearing—a wind breaker?"

Caty stood stock still, long past resisting the cold. Reid stepped in front of her and rubbed her arms up and down. He put his hands over her bare ears and then her hands. He went back to rubbing her arms.

"This is absurd, Caty. Go inside."

Caty just stared at his shoulder, unseeing, unfeeling.

Lemuel shoved open the door. Caty jumped out of her torpor.

"What's going on? The buck's still out there."

Caty ran out the door with her hands shoved in her pockets. Lemuel followed her.

"Wer's the buck?" Caty lips refused to form the words correctly, but she didn't think Lemuel could hear the difference.

"I got him in the pen past the light." Lemuel switched on a million-candlelight beam and pointed out into the snow.

The wind was terrific. It pushed up under her jacket and bit at her. She felt her skin harden against it. Somewhere in the dullness that was her frozen brain Caty abused Lemuel for ignoring his deer and persecuting her instead.

Someone jerked her arm. Lemuel whipped her around and pushed her toward the barn. “Go back. We’ve got it.”

Reid slogged through the fresh snow to his left. He jerked his head back. Caty could just see the barn light and pointed herself in that direction.

She pushed open the barn door. She wasn’t going in the house—the pastor’s car was still parked in the driveway. Inside, the sick deer looked awful. Their hides were muddy, with fresh hay spackled on. Caty rummaged until she found a heat lamp she’d seen Lemuel use once. She mounted it on the wall closest to the deer and plugged it in. Standing near the pen, she let the heat push through her clothes. Her fingers were just beginning to tingle when the electricity went off with a pop. Even with the wind sighing, Caty noticed a deadening in the barn. Somewhere, she knew, Lemuel had a generator, but she’d never worked one and was too cold to try.

She found a bit of hay piled by the wall, burrowed down and waited. In the freezing air, the smell of the hay was muted. She hoped she had picked fresh hay: if not, there were probably mice enjoying the warmth of her body a few layers down. Then again, she’d heard decomposition gives off heat, so rotting hay might be warmer, so she guessed it didn’t matter. She imagined Reid and Lemuel with only a flashlight trying to bring in the afflicted buck. She’d seen him the other day looking pretty lopsided with only half a rack. Hopefully he lost the other before Lemuel and Reid had to tackle him.

In the darkness, Caty heard the wind catch on something and play it like a flute. According to the radio, the storm's full force would hit later, while decent people slept. She wondered what the pastor was doing inside the house. Maybe he had gone to sleep on the couch. It seemed like an eternity since dinner. Maybe it was the middle of the night and the storm had already reached its height.

Wood crashed, white light flashed, and the two men stumbled through the door.

"It's in the lean-to," she heard Lemuel say.

"Right."

The door opened again and the one holding the flashlight left. Caty remained still and heard the breathing of the man left. She had lain awake countless nights listening to Lemuel's even breathing, but this was different, it was heavy breathing, and she couldn't decide who it was. The person moved, but it was a shuffle not a walk, so she couldn't tell by the gait either. He came close, closer. She heard the ring of metal as his hand followed the outline of the pen and the hushing sound of hay underfoot. A heavy boot kicked her in the groin. She cried out. He stumbled.

"Holy crap!" It was Reid. He must've picked that up at the university. "Is that you, Caty?"

Her eyes were adjusted to the dark, but it didn't matter; the barn was pitch black.

"Yeah."

Reid's hand brushed against her neck. He couldn't see her either. She reached out and found his shoulder.

“What are you doing down here?” Like the veterinarian he was, he prodded her as he would an injured calf. “Are you all right? Where did I kick you?”

Caty grabbed his hands to stop the thoughtless examination. “I’m cold.”

“You are.”

He chafed them again; brought them to his mouth and breathed on them. His practicality had always overrun the rules, but perhaps this wasn’t a good thing. Suddenly she felt warm, but not from Reid’s effort, it was something inside her responding to his touch. Her heart flailed like a rabbit after a stunning blow. So this is how it happens, she thought: without warning or consequence to time. Renee should have said no—Caty’d always wondered why she hadn’t. But she knew why now: it was hard, she wanted it. Every fiber in her body demanded it. All she had to do was reach out. Reid’s face was hidden in the darkness, but she could tell by the exceptionally business-like way he was warming her hands, briskly rubbing the backs each in their turn, that all she would have to do was touch his face and the struggle would be over. She didn’t know where they would go: up into the hayloft, out into the storm. Maybe Lemuel wouldn’t come back, he was dead, hands frozen onto the metal generator.

All the rules hadn’t prevented her from being in this place either. In the breadth of a single moment, she had leaped over every hedge her family had constructed and sat, feet dangling, on the last fence. His scrawny hands felt like the soft bark of a paper birch. She imagined them sliding up her arm, pulling her into a place she had always wanted to be: a warm, safe place, an equal place where she knew what she was. But it wouldn’t be safe, really. How could it, if it wouldn’t be hers forever? When her hand automatically searched in the dark air for Reid’s cheek, she pulled it back not because she was wearing a long skirt or she had never

touched a man or her parents would disown her, but because she knew it would be sin and God would see her, because she knew it was basically wrong to get that close to home and have it ripped away.

A motor grumbled and the lights flicked on. Reid's eyes didn't blink. He'd been staring at her the whole time, even in the dark. The door rumbled. Reid dropped her hands.

Lemuel stood planted inside the door. "Lights are on."

Reid looked down. "Yeah." There was a glitch in his voice. He stood up. "You should walk your wife back to the house. She's nearly frozen."

Caty rose quickly. "No, I'm fine. I'm really—great." Caty stumbled from her nest.

Lemuel looked at Caty and then Reid. "All right then, we'd better get to the dosing."

Suddenly, Caty realized the far pen was still empty. "Where's the buck?"

"Dead." Lemuel turned away toward the small office in the back.

"Dead? What do you mean dead?"

Lemuel turned back. "I mean dead. Frozen. Solid."

"It was the pneumonia." Reid took a step toward Caty. "He didn't get treated soon enough."

Lemuel remained still, looking at them sideways, as if a different angle would provide new insight.

Caty shivered. The warmth had passed away and her jacket was miserably thin. "Is there an extra coat in here somewhere?"

"No." Lemuel still didn't move.

Reid made a small movement, closer to a thought than an action, as if he was about to shrug his coat off, but stopped. He glanced at Lemuel.

Lemuel turned and disappeared into the office, his boots scudding on the plank floor.

“Maybe there’s a blanket around.” He followed Lemuel. “I’ll check.”

The air shifted and Caty felt a finger of warm air brush her. The lamp. She hurried to it like a mosquito to a zapper and let it bake her back. It penetrated rather than radiated.

The men returned with syringes, antiseptic and rags. Tucked under Lemuel’s arm was an old horse blanket. He tossed it to Caty.

“This is all we could find.”

It was stiff with dust and full of white horse hairs so Caty beat it against a support beam, but the deer spooked and began pacing the pens.

“Cut that out.” Lemuel waved his hand at her from inside the sick pen. “You’re making them nervous.”

Caty looked at him dumbly.

“Reid has to go back to the house to get the antibiotics. He’ll grab your coat.” He glanced at Reid.

“Sure,” Reid said. “But actually, I just realized I’m going need hot water to keep the antibiotic warm. It’s too cold out here—it’ll freeze. I could use help with that.”

“Then I’ll just go. Where’s the medicine?”

“In my bag inside the kitchen door. I think you should use a rope.”

Caty smiled incredulously. “Seriously? This isn’t *Little House on the Prairie*. It’s not that bad out there.” She walked to the door and pushed it open a crack. “There’s not a rope long enough anyway.” She turned around.

Reid was already knotting a hemp rope to a green nylon length. “Then take it to the gate and yank on it twice and I’ll let it off. You can tie it to the gate post and get to the house. Do the same thing on the way back. I’m sure Pastor Gem can help you.”

Caty looked at Lemuel. He was bent over a downed doe.

“It’s bad enough.” His voice had a pinched sound from having too much blood pressure in the head. “If you won’t take the rope, then I’m going.”

Grabbing the rope, Caty tied it around her waist and marched toward the door. “Where’s the flashlight?”

“Here.” Reid handed it to her and followed her outside.

The snow was thick and the wind was heavy. Still, Caty was sure she could see the porch light, but when she told Reid it was fine and she didn’t need the rope, the light disappeared.

“Yank twice,” he said, jerking her rope like she was a two-year-old. He pulled off his jacket and shoved her into it. “Ready?” His voice was snatched from his mouth the moment he opened it.

Her lips already numb beyond speaking, Caty gave him a nod. She followed along the barn side until she ran into the bucket of a backhoe and had to wade out into the white sea. She looked back but Reid wasn’t visible, the barn wasn’t visible, but she knew he was feeding her rope because it was taut. She pressed on. The world was black and white. Where the LED light shone, the snow was bleach white. Outside the beam, Caty felt the blackness pushing in,

enveloping her in a freezing wool blanket—from a black sheep. The darkness was white, but without the light, the whiteness was black. Caty wondered if the cold was going to her head. Because the temperature was so low, the foot of snow accumulated was soft and her boots barely topped the snow. Her wet skirt dragged along and helped the snow into her boots.

People said women have bad directional senses, but Caty arrived at the gate without searching. Her arrival was three feet short, but she could see it, green and iced, in her beam, so she yanked twice and felt the rope slacken. When she reeled in the last of her rope, she tied herself off to the gate post. It took her longer than anticipated. She had to cradle the heavy, metal icicle of a flashlight in her neck and shoulder to show her frozen hands what they had to do. As she passed through the gate, she decided bare feet could hardly be worse than her rubber slush containers. Occasionally, she thought she saw the porch light, but it would disappear and she wasn't convinced she wasn't seeing things. Thankfully, the distance from the gate to the porch was shorter than the barnyard. By the time she stood in the real light of the house unleashing herself, Reid's jacket was remarkably warm and she couldn't understand why her hands were having so much trouble with the knot.

Even though she was frozen out of her mind—or perhaps because—she stopped outside the door and removed her boots before going inside. She stumbled through the kitchen in her wet socks and hoisted herself onto the counter by the sink. She put her feet into the sink, socks and everything. At first, the hot water ran cold, but it was warm to her feet even so. She had been cold before, so she was prepared for the needle-pricking sensation that attended resuscitating her extremities. However, she was not prepared to look up and find the head of her church quietly observing her from the doorway. Like a turtle, she recoiled into Reid's jacket,

drawing her skirt closer. But it was all instinctual: there was too much frost in her brain for it to remember why.

She felt she needed to make an excuse for her strange position. “It’s very cold out there.” She wasn’t surprised when her words sounded garbled, tripping over her numb lips.

“Yes, I know,” he replied, coming into the kitchen, “Go ahead with what you need to do.”

Caty didn’t have anything to do except sit there, so she rubbed her feet.

“That was a wonderful supper you fixed.”

Caty had trouble remembering the supper. It seemed like a week ago. “Thanks. What was supper?”

“Soup. Alicia will want the recipe.”

What is it about pastors that makes them so creepy?—they’re just trying to help, she thought, and then realized she’d said it out loud. The tingling in her feet was reaching a distractingly painful level. She dropped her head onto her knees. Her wet clothes smelled like hay and Reid.

“Yes,” she heard Pastor Gem say, “We’re always trying to help. I heard that you might be considering breaking your marriage vows with Lemuel. I want to help you see why that would be such a bad idea.”

She rolled her head up. Her brain felt like it was swimming in iced tea. She confused the pastor’s meaning and forgot he couldn’t possibly know about Reid. “But I didn’t do it,” she said, staring at the ceiling. It looked red. She closed her eyes. “I wanted to, I know. It would have

been so nice in the hay, and Lemuel never touches me, so I really, really wanted it, but I didn't do it. Temptation doesn't equal sin."

The pastor was silent.

She dropped her head again and spoke into her wet skirt. "I have to take Reid his medicine for the deer. They're waiting for me."

Through a rushing sound in her ears, she heard the pastor shift. Weight began to pull her down as her blood finally pumped warm. She didn't look up immediately; she let the heaviness keep dragging her into the counter and the counter keep pushing up into her bruised tailbone until she was quite sure she and the counter had melted into one, throbbing lump.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Tomorrow. Tomorrow is when I will change. Until tomorrow, I will fill the craving in my pit for one more time.*

*Ian had wiry legs and his own apartment. He played in a plain old rock band at night, took people's linty, crumpled bills at a gas station during the day, and got high in between. My parents weren't overjoyed when I didn't come home some nights, but they couldn't really do anything. Ian would pick me up at the corner and I'd stay at his place for two hits. He said he liked what the extra hormones did to me.*

*This was the most permanent relationship I'd had. I knew it would last at least until I got too big and I found some momentary peace in that. Ian said he liked babies. He never went any farther than that.*

*When I came home, my mom's open prayer journal would say she was worried about me. Colorful scraps of paper with verses like "My son [daughter], keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching" taped to the bathroom mirror impressed upon me the fact that they didn't know what they were doing. I replied by taping my own verse: "What has*

*been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.” This engendered a larger quantity of purple and red slips.*

MINUTES, ETERNITY—she wasn’t sure how long she stayed slumped over the sink, but when she looked up the kitchen was empty. Empty like no one had ever been there. Oh, she hoped not. Her head was clear; the kitchen was a dull off-white again. What had she been mumbling?

Caty eased off the counter. No sound but the storm. Maybe Pastor had gone home, maybe he’d never been there. She saw Reid’s bag poised in the corner. *Snap out of it, Caty. Get out of your head—get to work.* She tried talking to herself out loud. “Now we need to—” she cut off. Her voice sounded garish in the empty house, like a rabbit screaming in the twilight, and she quickly closed her mouth. Filling a pot from the tap, she put it on to boil. Under the sink, she found a Thermos and set it beside the stove. To change into warmer clothes, she would have to pass through the living room. She wasn’t surprised to find it empty. After this endless day of apparitions, it was to be expected that the pastor would magically disappear in the middle of a storm.

A few minutes later, armed with a Thermos of hot water, Reid’s bag, and a drawer-full of layers, Caty emerged into the harried night. Kicking her boot through the snow, she searched for the rope. She didn’t find it. It wasn’t on the porch or tied to a railing—she should have done that—or farther out in the yard. She decided to try without the rope. The deer needed the medicine and she didn’t want Lemuel to have one more grievance against her.

The storm hadn't died down, but it wasn't any stronger either. She pointed herself toward the gate and wouldn't look down or to the side. She hit the fence the gate was in, but didn't know on which side of the gate it was. The fence surrounding the yard was the only bit of premium fencing on the place. It extended for about a house's length on each side of the gate.

Caty ran to the right until the wood slat under her hand turned to wire, then turned to the left. At what she thought was only a few yards to the left of where she hit the fence, she found the gate. Running the flashlight up and down the post, she searched for the rope again. It was not there. Finally, she decided Pastor Gem must have come out to the barn and used it. That was inconsiderate of him, she thought.

She aimed herself again and trudged on. Occasionally, she tried kicking away the snow and feeling for the familiar two-wheel indent of the farm road. Once, she found it, but the next time she checked, the ground was smooth with frozen grass.

She kept walking until she decided the barn couldn't possibly be any farther out. Then she began to search in earnest. It was absurd shuffling around and around trying to find something so near. Despite the extra layers, Caty was chilled. Perhaps it was fear that she had actually gotten herself lost in her own yard. Her face hurt. The snow wasn't falling, it was being pushed down, like a white blanket that's too heavy and encompassing for a small child. The child pushes, the child screams, but the blanket is too large; it can't find the edge.

To distract herself, she began a rant against Pastor Gem. He was an idiot for ever even starting this church. Who was he to decide what the best way to find a mate was? He was married before he even made up all these rules. The fact that they were happily married should prove that there's more than one way to skin a buck. Reid was right. He had always disagreed.

If she had just married him, they could have lived quietly pulling away until one day they were free and nobody knew the difference. It was all Pastor Gem's fault—and Alicia's—well, she was actually a very nice lady, so what was she doing married to an idiot like that? And now he had stolen her rope without a second thought probably so he could go tell Lemuel what a horrible wife he had, and the deer would keep coughing because he just had to go tell Lemuel and never think to bring the medicine. He was so useless.

Suddenly, she stopped. She would never have allowed herself to upbraid the church leader like this a week ago. Was this good or bad? What was truly bad was she had not found the barn.

*Father, help me find it, if I haven't rejected too many of your servants. I know the husband is the head of the wife, just as you are the head of the church, but Lemuel doesn't love me. God, he doesn't love me! Oh God, am I swearing?*

Her beam flashed across a fence. She stumbled over to it—a deer pen. Deer survived in the snow. What if the does sensed her predicament and let her huddle with them? She had heard of animals taking pity on other species and helping them survive. She found the gate and went in. She knew the deer would be grouped on the north end where the fence would offer a scant windscreen.

Her flashlight found them lying in the snow, packed tightly so their backs and legs were touching. Little drifts of white powder crept up their hides which looked like a spotted fawn's except the spots were all over. Slowly moving around the group, Caty found a small gap between two does. Afraid she would spook the deer with her height, she dropped her bag and got down on her knees. Before approaching, she shoved the Thermos inside her jacket. The deer

let her push into their midst without a murmur. In the gap, she curled up, gently brushed the accumulated snow off one doe and lowered her head onto the deer's back. There was no smell. She knew the deer were filthy, but the snow covered everything.

Stationary and on the ground, she expected she might be colder, but the deer gave off warmth, even if it was wet, and Caty found it tolerable. Soon, Caty wanted to sleep, but she told herself not to in case the warmth was counterfeit and she was drowsy with death. When she was in the kitchen, the clock had read twelve-thirty. It was at least an hour later. The storm would die soon.

Through the hood of her coat, Caty tried to hear the doe's internal functions—gurgling, pumping. There was nothing. She could only feel a faint rise and fall with her breathing. She must be in some dormant state, she thought. Maybe then she could fall asleep without fear.

The first thing Caty noticed when she opened her eyes was a weight on her torso; the second, the wind was silent. She twisted her hand under her and grabbed the flashlight. Clicking it on, she stuck her neck out of her hood to see what was pressing on her. A doe's snowy, dun face appeared in the beam only a few inches away. The doe had laid her neck over Caty while she slept. She didn't move. She stared into the doe's brown eyes that had widened into brown marble orbs when Caty shifted. They were so deep with glassy layers they reminded Caty of the pools at Yellowstone that dropped crystal clear into the earth until they arrived at some unknowable place. Around the doe's muzzle, her whiskers quivered, and then she jerked back her head almost apologetically as if she thought Caty would mind her interference.

From her position on the doe's back, the edge of the barn appeared sideways, sitting ensconced in snow at the far reach of her light. Since it was still dark, she knew it had to be before six in the morning. She pushed herself up gingerly, moving at a sloth-like pace to keep from disturbing her mates. They had saved her, or, at least, probably. She decided to believe they had—that an angel voice whispered in the storm wind and made them willing.

As she picked her way out, she searched for Reid's bag. Only the blue top and handles remained visible a yard off. She yanked the bag out of the snow and wondered if the medicine was ruined.

Weak snow drifted down as she kicked and stomped her way to the barn door. It creaked mercilessly when she pushed it in. The lights were on, but she didn't see anyone. Stiff legs projected from still brown bodies in the sick pen. There wasn't one standing. In a corner, one sucked in its breath slowly. Some of the hay was dark with blood. Caty dropped the bag and scrambled for the antibiotic. She pulled out the brown bottle and shook it. The contents were solid, frozen for hours.

“Caty.”

She glanced up and saw Reid. “Here's the medicine. It's frozen solid. Where's everyone?”

Reid looked drugged. His eyes were red and drained of life.

Before she knew what he was doing, Reid was squeezing the breath out of her.

“Pastor Gem left when it stopped blowing.” His words came out in puffs on her ear. He pulled away, one corner of his mouth pulled up in a mirthless smile. “He took the rope,

obviously, so you couldn't get out here. But I went back to get the medicine. You weren't there. We've been searching—all over.”

“Oh no.” Caty stepped away, afraid Lemuel might come in. “I tried to bring the medicine anyway and got lost.”

“You stupid, crazy girl.”

“It's all right. I found one of the deer pens and the does kept me warm. But I'm sorry you had all that trouble. Where's Lemuel?”

“He's still out looking for you. I think he's gone all the way to the west pasture since he can see now.” Reid rubbed his head. “We should go get him.”

Caty looked at the deer. “Shouldn't you try to save them first?”

Reid's mouth twisted. “Save what? Eleven dead deer—well, almost.” He flung his hand at the wheezing doe. “She's as good as gone. I should just shoot her.”

“You can't save her?”

“Too late.”

Caty stared at the carnage. “Seems kind of fast.”

“Lemuel waited forever. I don't know what he was doing. Should have done it this morning—yesterday.” He took the bottle from her. “It's supposed to be stored at room temperature.” He dropped it in a trash bin. “It's useless.”

He stepped outside through a small door cut in the barn wall. Caty followed him, using his tracks to make the walk easier. As their arms swung, their flashlight beams would dart this way and that, tangle, release, and disappear into space. The night was caving. Before their walk

was done, the lights would be useless. The does were up, sniffing for feed. A disgruntled bird already chattered as it repaired its damaged nest.

Caty wondered what would happen now that Lemuel had lost his prized buck and those does. If he was barely keeping it together before, he might just go under. Would he blame her? She blamed herself. She was stupid not to wait for them to get her. She should have realized they would realize. And if she divorced him, she would be taking more.

“Whatever he had to say to Lemuel was just so much more important than saving all these animals.” Reid was talking.

Caty frowned, trying to get her mind to replay what she knew it had heard but chosen to ignore. “What?” she said, then heard it in her mind. “Who are you talking about?”

“Pastor Gem.”

Her gut twisted. “What did he say?”

He didn’t turn around. “I don’t know.” He turned back waving his arms. “Next time I see that pastor he’s going to get an unmanageably large piece of my mind.”

Reid was keeping a fast pace. Caty sucked in cold air. It burned in the back of her lungs. “You can’t blame Pastor Gem for the animals dying. I should have waited for you or Lemuel to come back.”

Reid stopped mid-stride. “Don’t let anyone tell you it was your fault. Not Pastor Gem, not yourself, not—” he looked out to the field reflecting the pre-dawn grey—“anyone.” He gripped her arm and pulled her through the snow. “I hope the community will not ignore what you’re doing. I will make sure they don’t cover it over like they do with everything that is

inconvenient to their system. You know, your actions just might save some others from pointless suffering.”

“Why are you so sure it’s right for me to leave?”

He stopped again and looked up at the sky, holding in his breath. When he finally opened his mouth, his words came fast. “Because if you don’t, I’ll never be able to justify leaving myself.”

*Oh Reid, don’t say that. Don’t say that.* Caty trudged ahead, beating a haphazard trail to Lemuel.

When Caty spotted Lemuel, he had already seen them and turned back. As he came up, he clicked his flashlight off. He didn’t ask where she’d been or complain about the search, he simply walked ahead and cleared the path. Caty wanted to say how sorry she was about his deer, and she suddenly realized that’s how she had always thought of them. From the moment they were married, she should have considered them *their deer*, but they never were, and it would have been stupid to try. She thought of the little herd she had been a part of during the night. Those were her deer. She hoped Lemuel didn’t ask where or how she’d gotten through the storm because telling him his deer had saved her would take something away from it.

She walked in silence, sandwiched between Lemuel and Reid, until they reached the house. Nobody stopped at the barn or said anything about burying the carcasses. Caty wondered if the last doe had stopped trying to breathe. At the door, she thought she heard a cough, but she knew the barn was too far away for it to be real.

She made coffee, making a mess of the kitchen as her benumbed and exhausted motor skills failed. As Caty leaned against the counter listening to the coffee machine breathe and spit,

Reid said a word to Lemuel who passed him a handgun from the closet. When Caty poured the coffee, she spilt some when the pop echoed into the house. She didn't drink any coffee, she didn't wait for Reid to get back, she went straight to the bathroom and turned the tub spigot as hot as it would go. The only thing that would make her bones warm again was hot water.

In the tub, with the mirror and window fogged from humidity, she lay back and closed her eyes, cocooned in heavy warmth. She tried to pray, to thank the Father for what he had done, but the Father didn't seem to care. In her mind, as she pictured her prayer ascending to the folds of heaven, he looked just like her parents and pastor: statuesque and mute. He was like Lemuel: there, but not there.

She slipped into unconsciousness and dreams. Jesus appeared in her dreams. She knew it was Jesus because he had dark hair and a beard like Jews, and because he said so. He introduced himself to her wearing a work shirt and carpenter jeans, which she found amusing. His eyes were full of light, like the glistening honey streaming from the jar her mother would tip over peanut butter bread when the children were sick. He didn't say much, but he was in every dream she wound through: on the sofa as someone she thought was Renee told her how to make her husband want her, building a fire in a random oil drum as she tried to melt the LA-200, on the other side of the deer as she tried to herd them into the kitchen, holding the rope as she climbed on top of Pastor Gem's car to escape the storm.

When she woke, the bath water was cold and noon light streamed through the clear window. She scrambled out of the tub and dressed. Downstairs, the house was empty. So was the driveway. Caty decided they must be burying the deer carcasses, but when Lemuel came in later, he was alone.

Caty stayed in the kitchen and cooked. She chopped at the cutting board, stirred at the stove, scraping congealed flour from the bottom of the saucepan. Water rolled off lacy kale leaves, as she stared out the window, watching snow melt. When she served the meal, scraping, clinking and slurping were the sounds that filled up the silence. She cooked. He ate. That was how Sunday came that week.

## CHAPTER NINE

*I passed over the red line sometime in the night, December twenty-first. Alana was born in a push of blood and fluids in an ugly hospital. Ian suggested giving her a Gaelic name like his. So I did. Maybe he would take an interest in a baby named after him. Anything to encourage support.*

*Christmas afternoon I sat in my family's small living room made cramped by a bushy fir tree wallowing in the corner. Jon polished his new air rifle. The other kids were tucked here and there marching green soldiers over wrapping paper terrain or turning bows into hair accessories for dolls. Alana made wet noises in her carrier and I listened with increasing anxiety to what my parents were saying.*

*"Now that she's born, we know you're gonna want to clean up and be all there for your daughter." Mom stirred cranberries on the stove.*

*Dad carved turkey. The breast peeled down under his knife. The white meat looked dusty. "And it would be good to get away from this place, anyway. It'd make it easier for you."*

*"I don't want to leave. All my friends are here. What about church?"*

*Mom sent an exasperated look to Dad. He flipped the turkey over and lacerated the back. “We’ve been going to this church for a long time and based on the results, it hasn’t been good for all of us. Maybe it’s too liberal. This church—this community, really—we’ve found is a Bible-based, grassroots sort of a deal.”*

*“Since when have you cared about church anyway?” said Mom.*

*“She hasn’t since pastor’s son went away,” said Jon.*

*“Shut up, Jon,” I said. “What do you think about this whole thing, anyway?”*

*He shrugged. “Whatever. I never liked going to school. Mom and Dad’ll be our teachers and we’ll get to stay home. I’m cool with it.”*

NO ONE HAD an excuse for not showing up. The congregation had had the whole week to right what the storm had wronged and the mismatched pews were full. Some of the pews were from an Episcopal church that had upgraded to cushioned, linkable chairs. The ornate ones with peaked ends and crosses etched into the wood were from a Catholic church that had been turned into a museum after it defaulted on a loan for refurbishing its altar. Caty’s family usually sat in one of the Baptist pews that were plain oak with a worn burgundy cushion. After she married Lemuel, Caty moved to a Presbyterian pew that had an uncomfortably straight back.

As she sat bolt upright in their pew, she thought about how the children’s Sunday school teacher had acted only an hour before. When Caty had arrived to help as she usually did, the woman simply said, “I think I’ve got it this morning. Go ahead and sit in Pastor Gem’s Sunday school. We’ve been using you too much with the children.” Caty wanted to tell Reid, ask him if he thought Pastor had said anything, but he was back at the university.

It was Communion Sunday. Spread on a table with white linen was a flat loaf of bread and a cup of dark grape juice. Instead of passing plates with the sacraments around as Caty had heard other churches did, Pastor Gem invited a pew at a time to come up to the front and receive Communion. At the pastor's signal, an usher would silently gesture to the next pew to file out and line up behind the last partakers.

This process was in progress when Caty noticed no one else was seated in their pew. The usher worked his way down the rows alternating left and right. The pew in front of Caty had already gone and the pew opposite theirs was refilling when Pastor Gem gave the signal. Caty couldn't tell if it was deliberate or accidental, but the usher nodded to the row behind theirs, overlooking Caty and Lemuel entirely. She glanced at Lemuel, but no reaction was visible on his face. His blue eyes were calm and empty.

After communion, Pastor Gem preached. His sermon was lengthy, and Caty found herself wondering where Renee was at that precise moment when the pastor said something that jogged her brain. She wasn't sure what it was, but she was listening.

“And this man's wife was letting others distract her from her purpose as a woman.” Pastor Gem paced in front of the Communion table. “Now it is the husband's duty as head of his home to bring the wife back and give her a reason to stay. Of course, she already has a great reason in her marriage vows, but we must not forget marriage is a cooperative effort.” Pastor Gem paused in his walking and scanned the congregation, looking everywhere but the Presbyterian pew. “If, however, the wife ignores the husband's efforts, she will experience an inner death; her womanly light will dim because she has rejected her sacred duty and cast away the one thing that will fulfill her most.”

Caty thought Pastor Gem was stretching it. His “womanly light” sounded Quakerish; very different from his usual, solid matter. This was a gauzy scarf instead of work-shirt denim theology. She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of his wife’s face. Was this new to Alicia? She couldn’t tell. Her sister Sylvia and her husband were sitting in her line of sight.

When the service ended, Caty retrieved her egg-salad from the communal fridge. It sat in the old operating room which had been designated the kitchen because it had a sink. As she closed the door, her mother appeared to pick up her gazpacho soup.

Caty moved out of the way, skirting a small table. “Hello, Mom.”

Her mother did not open the fridge. “Why aren’t my friends speaking to me?” She planted a ragged arm on her hip. “So far, three women have avoided me in the foyer and parking lot. Mrs. Bates was standing outside the bathroom when I turned down the hall. She saw me and ducked into the bathroom. By the time I got there, she had locked herself in a stall.”

Caty set her bowl and purse on the table and rubbed her cold hands on her skirt. If her mother expected a response, she wasn’t getting one.

She yanked open the refrigerator door and extricated her soup from the other dishes waiting for their cooks. “Of course you know why they won’t speak to me. They think I’m a bad mother! Children who turn out badly are the parents’ fault.” She set down the soup and the lid clattered. “Renee was our first child. If there’s an excuse for bad parenting, wouldn’t that be it? But you’re our baby. What have I done?” She lunged for Caty’s purse and frantically scrambled its contents. Pens and receipts spilled out in the commotion. She pulled out a worn business card and began ripping it into small, papery pieces. Grabbing her soup up, she flung the

pieces at the garbage can on the way out. Most of them missed, sifting to the floor like dead leaves.

The weekly potluck was held outside unless the weather was bad. Caty walked out into the sunshine with her offering and placed it among the other cold dishes prepared the day before. Before her marriage, Caty sat somewhere in the grass by a tree or bush and ate her food. Usually, Reid would eventually find her and hang around, but since she was married, she thought it was expected that she sit with her husband. This Sunday, Lemuel was sandwiched between two men, so Caty took up her old habit. She was vaguely certain she would be just as alone seated at a table anyway.

She found one of her favorite trees, a cottonwood, and looked for a seat. The ground was too moist so she leaned against the trunk and picked at the myriad salads on her paper plate. The bark of the tree was deeply scored with black scars running up and down where the bark had separated. She watched the families from a distance grouping around the interesting people. Like fly tape, pregnant Sylvia garnered an exclusively female circle. All the livestock owners sat or stood at the end of one long table, rearranging their sandwiches after every bite.

With sorrow, Caty noticed her parents sitting at the other end of the table being ignored by everyone but their own children. Rachel, Jon's wife, sat with them looking concerned. She appeared disheveled as usual. She nursed her babe under a heavy shawl. Caty could tell what was going on under there. All of her movements were too explicit. Caty would not nurse in public with her babies. She had decided this a long time ago. Shoving a cube of potato salad in her mouth, Caty realized she would have to change a lot of her thought patterns. They were downright delusional for a woman in her situation.

When the tables were being put away, Caty searched for Lemuel, but couldn't find him with any of the groups. He wasn't putting away tables either. Then she noticed with increased concern that Pastor Gem wasn't in sight. Suddenly, Caty wondered if Lemuel's silence all week was a storm gathering rather than a storm spent. Were they off plotting her final expulsion?

She grabbed up her bowl of egg salad and found it untouched. The small cave where she had served herself was the only disturbance on the yellow textured surface. She snapped the lid on and threw it in its carrying case. Without a nod or glance, she marched to the Tahoe and yanked on the door. It was locked and Lemuel had the keys. She threw her things on the hood and leaned against the cold metal door. She thought she could hear it hiss with the heat of her anger, though it was probably just her zipper scratching it. It was getting absurd. They wouldn't eat her food because it might poison them. By the time Lemuel unlocked the doors, the hot streams spilling in rivulets down Caty's face were running dry.

Silence reigned in the SUV. He didn't even ask if she was okay. As they bumped over the railroad tracks, Caty couldn't help but remember the ride home as she planned her humiliating scheme. Had it only been seven days? They were years, sealing her fate as an outcast, each day adding a decade to her excommunication.

It was late in the day when the brown house swelled to life-size in their windshield. Caty slid from her seat, drained. After she put the egg-salad away, she didn't bother to put up the case. She dragged her purse upstairs and sat on the bed. Life had been heavy for some time now, but she was beginning to crack under the weight.

She heard Lemuel moving around in the room next door. A thud, a little pounding, and the door opened with a creak.

“Caty! Can you come in here, please?” He didn’t sound in a hurry.

“Can I change first?” she yelled back.

“It won’t really matter.”

That reply was strange enough to make her forget about her Sunday clothes and go to his door. The room smelled like wet windowsills in winter. The usual pile of work clothes lay by the door and the same grey blanket calmly covered the bed. Lemuel stood inside still wearing his plaid button-down and navy Dockers.

“Have a seat on the bed.” He flicked his wrist toward what used to be her side.

As she sat down, he walked over to her, avoiding her eyes.

“Is something wrong?” *Besides everything.* She glared at him as if enough eye contact on her part would force reciprocation.

He dropped one knee onto the bed, which was quite low, and pushed her back onto a pillow as he swung the other over her legs. As her head pressed the pillow, the stale smell of Lemuel’s sleep seeped out. He still wouldn’t look at her, and she still didn’t know what was going on, even when he slid her skirt up, carefully folding it at her waist. Caty felt like one of his deer under inspection before worming, his movements were so quick and impersonal. Only when he began working at his belt buckle did understanding descend like a stone slab. It crushed her bones to powder inside her muscles. Her lungs felt brittle like two glass vases, ready to burst into shards if she filled them.

She couldn’t make her eyes look down; she didn’t want to look down. She watched his jaw muscle pulse like a bullfrog’s throat: out, in—out, in. When he touched her waist, his hands

were ice—they were also shaking. The shock of the cold brought a realization as defined as the curl of smoke from an extinguished wick.

“No,” she said hoarsely. She pulled her knees up and dragged herself backwards on her elbows.

Lemuel did not protest. He remained kneeling, his pants crumpled around his knees, staring at the creased blanket.

Caty tumbled off the bed and slammed into a dresser as she tried to escape. Her own horror at what she had been so close to scrambled her mind and created a pursuer when there was none. She picked herself up and pushed her skirt down. When she was reliving it a few moments later in the spare room, she thought she remembered strange crying noises as she ran from the room, but she didn't know if they were coming from her or something else. Later, as the evening sun struggled to push its last rays through the spare room window, she heard a loon's cackle and realized it matched her memory. It wasn't sobbing, it was laughing. The bird was screaming with laughter at her refusal of everything she had wanted only a week ago. But maybe it wasn't laughing at her. Maybe it was laughing at Lemuel's absurd attempt to make their marriage legitimate. Perhaps the bird could laugh, but she couldn't. The whole scene was like the drying, rotting flesh of a dead animal decomposing in the sun. That was their marriage: a stillborn, left to rot in the heat of summer and then preserved that way under layers of snow. It never even had a chance. She hadn't been in love with him, just in awe of him and scared to be left behind. She still didn't know why he married her, but it was of no consequence—it wasn't because he loved her.

In the morning, she would call Marvin Ebol and tell him to file the papers. It didn't matter that her mother threw away the card—she had memorized the number a week ago. After she dressed, she would put her tiered, sprigged skirt—because it was the most fashionable—and a couple shirts into a bag and walk down the stairs and out into the driveway where she would place her bag in the passenger seat of the Tahoe. She would drive to her parents' and ask for the last unopened letter Renee had sent. With Renee's letter in her hand, she would kiss them and leave.

*Whatever of my stuff I thought was actually mine, I moved to Ian's two days before they all disappeared. They told me there would be no contact unless I decided to join them and give up my "path to destruction." As much as they loved me, they owed my brothers and sisters a chance to grow up free from worldly influences.*

*As I wandered through my room and bathroom, I decided to take the hairdryer because that seemed worldly. My sister's new turquoise tights seemed worldly too. And the nail polish. They were running away from the world, and I was running into it. Every time my thoughts lurched into that alley, I kicked a dumpster and ran out. Life in all its haziness would come soon enough. I would slam into the world, or rather, it would slam me. But as long as I didn't acknowledge it, it didn't exist. Not yet. Not yet.*

*Alana cried in her carrier. It would exist sooner if I had her. I propped a bottle against the cushioned side of the carrier. She hadn't grown chubby like I thought she would in the last few months. She was still a petite baby. I moved her into my parents' room near the window where it was warm, but out of the sun. I threw the hairdryer, polish and tights into my bag.*

*I rode the bus to Ian's empty-handed.*

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