In the Hearts of Palms

Jennifer Lynn Bania
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
IN THE HEARTS OF PALMS

by

Jennifer Lynn Bania

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Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

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by

Jennifer Lynn Bania

Douglas Unger, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

In the Hearts of Palms is a novel, in which the alternating narratives of two characters' lives meet in the most consequential of circumstances. A young girl's coming of age journey collides with a man's grief and search for healing and reaches a tragic denouement within a week of the novel's opening. The setting of the novel is Boulder City, Nevada, where the vast desert landscape limns the isolated landscape of the characters' internal condition.

A major subject of the novel is the characters' negotiations with their developing roles as man and woman in the face of traditional expectations. The interpretations of such roles, combined with divergent interpretations of an ambiguous act, culminate in a dramatic scene that forces the reader to ask questions about the culpability of certain characters, and ostensibly of him and herself.
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CHAPTER 1

Vinny woke in a tangle of drenched hair and clothes. He stretched his legs in the cramped space of his gold '72 Duster. Parked off the road, in a patch of bright sand and scrumby scrub, he was lying on his side, soaked from neck to back in rails of sweat. Still half asleep, he reached for the steering wheel and, before his body could fully register the scathing temperature of the black plastic of the steering wheel, pulled himself upright. The zenith sun entered the car in oblique swatches of light, hot and unrelenting, a stark contrast to the dank weather back home in Philadelphia. This desert sun had scorched the left side of his face and the top of his right hand as he slept. Now, with a corduroy tongue and an inkling of self-contempt, he rested his forehead on the top crest of the wheel and shook his head—home was no more, he thought to himself, he had to forget her. He sat upright and rubbed his forehead where the hot plastic had burned him.

Rough, unshaven skin was slack over his bones, seemingly less attached than he remembered it. With his eyes closed and his hands over his face, he recalled the younger version of himself, the one his wife, Carol, had once fallen in love with and had vowed to look at for the rest of their lives together. Behind him was the disappointment of the known, and ahead of him, the rediscovery of the forgotten. His fingers trembled. He moved them over his aging features—a wedge nose, deep and bony eye sockets above full and flushed cheeks, a rough and disappearing jaw line.

"Goddamn desert," he said aloud, after pulling his hands off the wheel. His lips and mouth were dry as the landscape before him.
He picked up the bottle of whiskey that had been lying on the floor in the shade of the dashboard. He unscrewed the cap and the stinging smell from within brought recollection. He’d pulled over for a drink and then passed out, though for how long he wasn’t sure. There was one full drink left in the bottle. His thirst was suddenly maddening.

Panic rose in him like the heat waves in the distant horizon. He drank the last gulp and was still thirsty. Vinny licked the sweat from the cleft of his top lip. It was too salty to satiate his craving, though it quenched slightly his tongue, plumping it like a drop of water on a sponge.

He rolled down the driver-side window for fresh air. The stench in the car was unbearable despite the two inches of window he’d left cracked before passing out. Exhaust fumes and the sound of wild wheel flaps from a passing semi-truck rattled the car and bellowed in, shaking his consciousness.

For hundreds of miles, Vinny had stayed drunk enough to avoid thinking about Carol, yet sober enough to follow road signs to Nevada. The memory of his last night in their house haggled him unremittingly, poked him, challenged him, dared him—he remained low-headed and still against the memory’s prodding, like a child to a playground bully. And when, finally, such provocation went unanswered, Vinny drank the last warm gulp.

The heat and his dehydration had finally caught up with him. Vinny yanked on the handle of the car door and pushed his shoulder against it before vomiting on the roadside. With his last heave, a red sedan sped passed and kicked gravel and dust into Vinny’s face. His eyes watered. Grit and marl dripped away in cleansing tears. He was relieved to be on his way to see Mitch Walker—he was the only old friend Carol had never met. She
would never guess to look in Nevada, where, Vinny imagined, he would start a new life on his own.

Drive, he told himself.

Far in the distance, the red blip of the four-door sedan yawed in between the yellow and white lines of the road, each time correcting before it exceeded its margins. Once the poison had surged from his bowels, he felt calmed. He was no longer dazed with a vestigial drunkenness. He felt clear-headed, ready to drive. With shaky hands and a wrenching thirst, he turned the ignition. On a few inches of slack dust, Vinny’s tires spun out and threw up a tawny cloud of fine sand behind him as he drove away.

Eighty-seven miles later, Vinny leaned with the pull of sinewy highway curves as he approached the Arizona-Nevada border and, eventually, Boulder City. Snug beside pale sand ridges, bright weeds and scantly-leafed sagebrush, the gold Duster roared on. Vinny pressed down the knob of the cigarette lighter on the dashboard. His gestures were tentative. He was still dulled with fatigue and a bit shaky with thirst. But the flood of nicotine tunneled through his lungs and calmed his nerves. For a few moments, he was still with the same uncanny composure he’d maintained since driving away from his house and life in Philadelphia.

As he descended the canyon towards the Hoover Dam, he thought he could smell the lake. Deep water, heavy, warm water, the potent fetor of wet shore sand. And far deeper than any dive was his hankering for a drink, a single cold foaming gulp of beer with all its effervescence fizzing down his throat and frothing at the rims of his parched insides. Answering the need for something insignificant as a drink became his distraction from all
else, from questioning the loss of everything meaningful. He’d stop at the first store in sight.

Cars and semi-trucks snaked down the final descent of the gorge, all with glowing brake lights in the mid-day sun. There it was, the last state line he had to cross. Wedged impregnable between two towering heights layered in lava rock, red rock and granite, was the Hoover Dam. Lapping at its back—the front was not yet visible—were the shallow green waves of Lake Mead. Vinny stole glances at the sight when he wasn’t watching the road. The water level, Vinny noticed, was extremely low. Thirty or so feet of whitewashed rock bordered the crimson cliffs as a marker of where the water had once reached. The formerly submerged pillars of turbine-shaped watchtowers and offices were exposed. The white material, he figured, was the sun-bleached mineral deposits from the water. But, he wanted a closer look.

Without using his blinker, Vinny turned into the parking lot of Chill’n Gulp and Gift Store. He entered the rickety building. Cold air wafted by, sending a shudder up the back of his neck. The layer of sweat chilled him as he headed toward the back of the store for a drink. He maneuvered past tourists ogling scorpions in glass encasings and personalized license plate key chains. Some were inspecting the weight and comfort of coffee mugs with tiny acrylic dams painted on the front of them. One large, foreign woman held to her chest a large, white tee-shirt that read: I Had The Best Dam Time In Nevada.

The back wall of the store was nothing but a row of smoky-cold beverage cases. Vinny opened each one. Teas, sodas, then water bottles. He walked to the cashier’s desk so he could inquire as to where the fuck—he was losing patience—they kept the beer.

Waiting behind the cash register, with her arms on the fold where her breasts merged
with her belly, was a portly, middle-aged woman with stiff blonde hair and blue tinted eyeglasses. There was an unnatural red tint to her tongue, as if she’d just finished sucking on a cherry lollipop.

He rested his hands on the counter and leaned towards the woman. “Beer?” he said. “Could you tell me where you keep the beer?”

The woman kept her arms crossed over the plump creases of her Dam tee-shirt and scoffed at his request with a snort. Then she repeated his request mockingly.

Vinny couldn’t take his eyes off her red tongue, which jumped pointedly from her mouth when she spoke.

“What’s so goddamn funny?” he asked finally.

The woman laughed harder, waving her hands near her face as woman always seemed to do when struck with joy or despair.

Patience had since evaporated from Vinny’s face like rain drops on hot stone.

“Do you actually think we’d sell beer next to a 726-foot drop? Do you?”

Vinny stared at her, unwilling to fall into her rhetorical trap. The tendons around his neck flashed under his skin, his fists tight as knots.

“Well, mister,” she continued. “We at Chill’n Gulp don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

He looked around impatiently. He was feeling weak and nervous. The room suddenly felt brighter and louder than normal.

“You okay, mister?” she asked. The sarcasm in her voice had vanished.

“How far is Boulder City?”

“How far is Boulder City?”

“About 15 miles up the hill, but Miner’s Pass Casino is just across the dam. Though
you look like you could use a drink of water. We got four different brands of bottled
water back there. Help yourself.”

With that, she raised her right arm and pointed at the back of the store where the
glass-door coolers were. A pale wad of fatty skin hung from beneath her arm and swayed
like a full udder in the wind.

He went the opposite direction and out the door.

Heat swarmed him and soon he was enveloped in the afternoon sun. He stumbled to
his car, blinded slightly by the glare of the white dividing lines on the black asphalt. Once
his vision was attuned to his surroundings, other senses awakened. There was a roll of
young voices not too far away, laughing and talking. When Vinny looked up, he saw a
crowd of young men standing next to a maroon van with their legs or hips against the
guardrail near a sign that read: Scenic View Point. Below it was a black and yellow
warning sign of a stickman falling off a cliff.

Vinny saw something. Several gold aluminum beer cans glinted like stars when their
drinkers lifted them to their mouths.

Mercy, Vinny thought.

He shoved his keys into his back pocket and zigzagged through several rows of
parked cars toward the van. He approached the end of the parking lot and saw himself as
the water in front of him, vanishing, sinking as if in a tub once the stopper is pulled.
Vinny thought of Carol. That white mineral rim above the water’s surface, the crusty
residuum of what had once been and the proof that it was no longer. Vinny pursed his lips
together and felt scraps of dead skin tear and peel before he spoke to the jovial group of
young men.
“Can you spare a cold one?” he asked, pulling a cigarette from his shirt pocket and placing it between his flaked lips. He sounded cool and relaxed, not frenetically obsessed by a craving.

A boy in a blue and white football jersey reached into the cooler and tossed him a dripping can. Several nuggets of ice dripped from the can and melted before they reached the ground. Vinny cracked the lid and upended the can, finishing the beer without so much as taking a breath. As he expected, the group thought highly of his drinking feat and decided his exhibition had earned him another one. If they only knew, he thought.

With his leg perched on the guardrail, Vinny had a total of three beers with the guys. He stared out at the jade-green water, his pain at bay, his new life just across the canyon.
CHAPTER 2

Earlier that morning, Lacey Walker was awakened from a dream by her younger sister, Nina, who slept in a twin bed on the other side of their dresser, tangled in rosebud print, cotton sheets. In her dream, Lacey was a tree, a large old oak blowing and bending next to a stream in a warm spring afternoon, and when Nina called her, Lacey saw her suddenly in the dream, swinging from a low branch with stretched arms. With every utterance of her name, she felt Nina’s weight on her branches. And just before she woke, Lacey heard the cracking of wood.

“What?” asked Lacey, still drowsy from sleep.

Nina stood at Lacey’s bedside, staring at her. Lacey lifted her blanket like a winged creature, inviting Nina inside.

The bedroom they shared was dark with dawn, save for streetlamp’s glare that illuminated the opposite wall in orange stacks of light formed by chinked blinds. The heads of the girls’ beds were below the skirt of the curtains and separated by a six-drawer oak dresser, on the sides of which the sisters placed their favorite stickers—glitter kittens, the girls’ loopy-lettered names, palm trees, and girl superheroes.

Nina hummed herself to sleep, which didn’t bother Lacey. She felt soothed by it, brought back to near unconsciousness by her sister’s young voice, until she felt Nina’s tiny toes stroke her calf, which was fuzzed with light blonde hair because her mother prohibited her from shaving her legs until high school. That was still two years away. Lacey wasn’t able to fall back asleep, mostly because of her sister’s toes and the bright
yellow tint morning brought through her window. She listened to her sister’s sleep noises, which had since gone from song to snore, and the annoying click of the ceiling fan’s light chain against the bulb covers. Lacey grabbed an old teddy bear that had fallen in the crack between the wall and her bed, and threw it at the fan, hoping she might at least jar the clicking free, move one of the light bulb covers out of the chain’s way.

It worked.

Her stuffed animal dropped to the ground in a muffled thud. White ceiling flakes floated down after it like snow.

And then it stopped working. The light cover fell back to place, and the chain regained some momentum and continued to knock against the overhead light on the fan.

It was well into a Thursday morning, though during the summer, which was soon coming to a close, Lacey lost track of days and dates. All she needed to know was that there was no school on any given morning. Everything else fell into place.

Through the air ducts and open staircase near the kitchen, Lacey heard the soggy sound of French toast slapping and sizzling on the pan. The smell had not yet reached her room. She rustled Nina awake by telling her what was on for breakfast. The mention of food was all she needed to wake up.

Soon, the two sisters were making their way downstairs, Nina taking each stair step one at a time and lagging behind Lacey, who, when she entered the kitchen, waved through a band of her mother’s cigarette smoke. She was pressing a plastic spatula on the French toast and holding her cigarette in her free left hand. Their father slurped coffee smacked his lips after each sip.

“You two are up early,” he said.
Nina ran into the kitchen behind Lacey and crawled knee first on to a chair across from her father at the kitchen table and whispered, “Juice.” She reached for the canister of powdered sugar and lifted a heaping spoonful to her mouth. Like Lacey did when she was young, Nina wore a small t-shirt and Cabbage Patch doll panties, her legs still chubby around the knees like an infant’s. But ever since her mother, Jillian, asked Lacey to dress more appropriately around the house—she’d made a big fuss about it three summers ago—Lacey wore her favorite t-shirt, the one with the unicorn iron-on, and cotton draw-string shorts.

“What time is it?” asked Lacey, sitting down between her father, Mitch, and her little sister.

“6:30.”

“What?” asked Lacey, as though she’d been hit across the face. “Are you serious?”

“I’m on my way out of here. Your mom’s making me French toast for the road.”

Lacey’s father was a large man with small, gray eyes. His hands were hairy and dry, rough with calluses on his wide palm from working at a metal-melting plant. The fork looked like one of Nina’s tea-set utensils in his hand.

Her father was right about the time. The light in the kitchen was dimmer than usual, but the colors outside now, belts of tangerine and blue over the shingled rooftops, looked deep and damp.

“You might as well stay up then, kiddo,” he said with a crooked smile, as if he were amused by her early rise or entertained by watching Nina lick the powdered sugar with the tip of her tongue.
Lacey tucked her bare feet around the cool metal rung of her chair and scratch her thigh.

“What ‘till Vinny sees this picture,” said Jillian. “Mitch Walker with two drowsy daughters. One little one, half asleep at the table and one with endless legs and an attitude.”

Lacey sighed deeply and felt hunger tighten her insides. “Gawwdd!” she exclaimed, rubbing her legs. “Why do you have to say stuff like that?”

Her father folded his paper three times and stuck some of it under his plate. “Forgot to tell you, girls,” he said, unresponsive as usual to anything regarding Lacey’s body. “Got a call last night. An old friend of mine, I’m talking high school old, is coming through town. I invited him to stay for a while. Might try and get him a job at the plant.”

“Great,” said Lacey, rolling her eyes. To her mother—“And what does any of that have to do with my legs? Gawwdd! Like you have to say that, in front of Dad?”

“It was a compliment,” her mother sighed in exasperation. “Take it while you can get it.”

But Lacey was sick of people talking about her body. Recently, she’d been excommunicated from a neighborhood group of boys who said they were starting a private boys-only club and that she couldn’t join. You’re too much of a girl, they’d told her, and when she asked them what they meant by “too much,” their answer was: It’s just so obvious. But it was true. In the last year, Lacey’s chest had swollen to the size of two small dinner rolls. And as luck would have it, all the kids in the immediate neighborhood—she wasn’t allowed to play beyond Silver Oak Drive or Sagewood Avenue—were boys. The only other girl was Nina, who was six, and Georgie, Nate’s
younger brother, who was also six and too young to count as a boy. Playing with the boys had been fun during Lacey’s younger years. They played games, got sweaty and dirty in the desert behind Birch Avenue, while the girls in other neighborhoods lounged on grass lawns or played indoors. That wasn’t Lacey’s style. She preferred the gritty games and enjoyed being the only girl because, at fourteen, she was taller than most of them by a couple of inches and could beat them at most any challenge. But with the inception of the club, things had started to change. At least once a week, or whenever one of the boys called a meeting, seven or eight of her playmates took magazines, cokes and cigarettes down to the concrete wash a few blocks away. On non-club nights, however, they allowed Lacey to play kick-the-can, the bat game, or combat hide-n-seek. One night, after reminding her that there were no girls allowed where they were going, Lacey followed them and spied on their meeting. All they did was sit under a cement bridge and pass around the magazines and play dead-arm, a punching game that she could hold her own in. Nate, her boyfriend with pond-green eyes and amber freckles, often told her he had to go with them and that he’d see her the next day.

Lacey’s mother served everyone a plate of French toast. Nina mixed maple syrup and powdered sugar on her plate and stirred the two until the mixture resembled gray, kindergarten glue.

“You girls will have chores today,” said Jillian, placing the pan in the white ceramic sink.

The cool faucet water snapped and popped on the skillet when she turned on the spigot. Steam billowed against the low kitchen ceiling and rolled past the fluorescent lights.
With a dripping mouthful of food, Nina sat erect and said, “I want to dust!”

“You’ll both dust,” Jillian said, looking intently at Lacey, who returned the glance with a dulled expression.

“You’re not eating?” she asked her mother, who was standing next to the table watching everyone. Without much of an answer, Jillian shrugged and sipped Nina’s orange juice.

Lacey’s father left in the middle of breakfast, though not before ruffling the heads of Lacey and Nina and waving to Jillian. He left his plate still on the blue rubber placemat.

“How come Dad doesn’t have to take his plate to the sink?” asked Lacey. “We do.”

“Yeah,” said Nina, as though it were the biggest injustice she’d ever heard. “How come?” She’d cleaned her plate by spooning the sugar-syrup mixture into her mouth and now held her stomach.

“He just doesn’t. He goes to work and I do his dishes. We have a deal.”

Lacey lifted her shoulders and said in a low voice, which she intended her mother to hear, “Sounds like a shitty deal to me.”

“Watch it,” her mother snapped, pointing her finger at Lacey’s mouth. “The rags and polish are under the sink. If you start now, you’ll be done before your cartoons come on.”

Lacey dropped several bites of her uneaten breakfast in the trashcan and then rinsed her plate in the sink. She told her mother that after cleaning, she was going to Nate’s.

“So early?” her mother asked, adjusting the elastic waistband of her pajama pants.

“He’s up.”

Lacey went through the house quickly with her rag and aerosol polish, pine scent. She dusted under stoneware candy dishes, half drunk vodka glasses, ashtrays, pens and mugs.
from the coffee table, end tables and shelves. Meanwhile, Nina strutted around with the long, purple fuzzy duster like a wand in her hand, tickling the claw-like feet of chairs and the brass bases of lamps.

"Wake up, little chair," said Nina. "Good morning, Mr. Light."

The house soon smelled waxy and citric in some places and like a wet pine forest in others.

Nina was listlessly working her way up the staircase, stroking the banister and baseboards as she went, though now with less animation than before. She was on the third step when Lacey came up behind her.

"We have to do upstairs, too?" she asked Nina.

Nina shrugged and climbed on her knees to the next step. She sat still for a moment and then turned toward Lacey and vomited on her unicorn t-shirt.

"Mom!" yelled Lacey. She ran into the downstairs bathroom. She gagged and coughed and stood in front of the mirror, fanning her face with fresher air. Nina stood next to her, crying and looking at her sister's reflection. Lacey shouted for her mother once more and she finally came running in.

"What in the—oh, shit," she said when she saw—and surely smelled—the bits of syrupy French toast splattered on Lacey's chest. She held the t-shirt at its seams so the vomit wouldn't drip on to the floor.

"Get it off," cried Lacey, watching herself in the mirror. "Hurry, I'm going to puke, get it off." She couldn't take her eyes off herself.

"Okay, okay," Jillian replied, lifting the shirt slowly and carefully over Lacey's head.
Once she had the shirt off, Jillian dropped it in the sink, turned on both the hot and cold water valves, and pulled the lever that closed the drain. She pumped some of the yellow hand-soap over the shirt to help with the smell.

Meanwhile, while Jillian calmed Nina and led her out of the bathroom for a drink of water, Lacey stood topless in front of the mirror, her arms hiding her chest and the water running in the sink. She dropped her hands to her side and felt more uncomfortable than ever. She shivered slightly and saw her nipples—which were the deep red of sun-dried tomatoes—stiffen and lift like the gooseflesh on her skin. Her breasts had a swollen quality to them and sometimes felt bruised on the inside when she touched them. She had a dark mole on the left crest of her ribcage and another smaller one near her bellybutton.

"Here," said her mother, jolting Lacey from her idle stare. Lacey covered her chest. Her mother had tossed her a blue, terry-cloth towel, which Lacey caught in front of herself without having to drop her arms. Nina stood by the staircase, sobbing tearlessly.

"Don't worry," her mother said, as she wiped away water drips on the counter.

"They'll get bigger. Trust me."

"Who said—I never said I wanted them bigger."

"Go change upstairs," her mother instructed. She turned off the water faucet then walked away. She held Nina in her arms as she ascended the stairs and called, "I'm going to give her a warm bath and then put her down for a nap."

"It was the sugar," barked Lacey. She folded the towel around her torso and went to her room, leaving her shirt submerged in the sink.
CHAPTER 3

An eroded white line in the middle of the dam’s two-lane road designated the state border between Arizona and Nevada. As Vinny crossed, he imagined there would be a perceptible change, something which would differentiate there from here, something tenable to mark his leaving of one life and the beginning of another. But there was nothing, nothing aside from the rubbery lick of tires over the white crosswalk.

He flicked ashes out the window and ambled over the dam at the 10 mph speed limit. He had more time than he wanted to watch tourists stroll by in bright shirts and sunglasses, waving amiably at him as he drove by. Vinny didn’t wave back. He eyed a young boy up ahead looking over the river side of the dam with his chin just barely over the stony ledge. The boy’s mother had a tight, one-handed grip on the neck of his striped shirt while she used her other hand to buy a map and a bottle of water from a small booth. Vinny saw the boy dig into his pocket, look at his palm, and then toss the prize in the air as if making a wish in a shopping mall fountain. He watched as the boy’s penny ascended. It flipped in copper flashes like a salmon breaching out of water. The coin stopped still in mid-air, then tumbled in glinting somersaults to the concrete foot of the dam. For as long as he could keep his eyes off the road, Vinny watched the back of the child’s head follow the penny’s descent. What had begun as a harmless and nearly weightless token would land at the base of the dam with perilous momentum and force.

Soon enough, Vinny was ascending out of the narrow and scab-like shelves of the canyon, which appeared stitched together by black wires traversing the gorge. The road
was winding and steep and made more treacherous by the rows of semi-trucks. He exhaled a smoky breath and turned up the volume on the Rolling Stones' lyrics:

\[
\text{And in this crazy world of hit and run} \\
\text{There are no laws here} \\
\text{Just a loaded gun} \\
\text{She's got a mean disposition} \\
\text{Got a big shooter too}
\]

A bump in the road signaled the conclusion of the dam’s boundary and the beginning of Boulder City’s. The eighteen-wheeler in front of him quivered with straining gears up the last steep grade of the pass where more cable sutures braided overhead. Where the road leveled, a desert oasis shimmied in the hot light before him. White. Gold. Palm trees. A paper-white stucco casino was nuzzled between narrow stacks of high lava rock. Miner’s Pass Casino. Its 24-hour animated billboard advertised Prime Rib for $3.99, Sunday Champagne Brunch for $5.99 and 10X craps odds. He pulled in.

From the parking lot, the white casino was so blinding beneath the empty blue sky that Vinny’s eyes swelled with tears. He looked down and wiped the wetness away. As he got closer to the front entrance, he could hear the clinking of coins emanating from behind tinted glass doors that shone slick as onyx.

Inside, the temperature dropped at least thirty degrees, or so it felt to Vinny. The lounge bar was empty in the blue glow of video poker machines that lined the bar. He scanned the room and saw nothing but elderly people at the slot machines. Nickel by nickel, they dropped their bets into the brightly lit machines and ordered free drinks—coffee or bourbon, it looked like—from middle-age cocktail waitresses who knew them by name. Vinny, amused that he might be the youngest patron in the casino, took a seat at the bar.
A young brunette wearing black slacks, a white blouse, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, and a gold-plated nametag clipped to her breast pocket, walked around the bar with a plastic bin of dirty dishes in her arms. As she walked, a loose ponytail swung and bounced behind her. She was definitely younger, he thought to himself.

"Bartender'll be right with you," she said without expression. She maneuvered behind the bar with the container balanced on her hipbone and supported by a thin, freckle sprinkled arm. From the way she leaned back, Vinny could tell her burden was heavy. He had never seen anyone who could be so tough and darling at the same time.

"Need some help?" Before he'd finished speaking, he'd started to climb off his stool. When he had one foot firmly on the ground, she replied.

"No, I got it. Thanks, though. I'm stronger than I look."

He watched her add several more ceramic mugs to her load. Each time one clanked wetly, Vinny was surprised it didn't shatter. The girl's eyes were big and brown, lined with chestnut eyeliner and brushed with heavy strokes of mascara. Her bottom lip was fuller than the top one, though it, too, was fleshy and the livid color of ripe plums. Her skin was smooth and pale with powder. She'd be prettier without the make-up, thought Vinny, but he found it sexy nonetheless.

"Can I get a beer, please? A real cold one," he asked, reaching for his wallet in the back pocket of his faded jeans.

"I can get you water," she said, as she rested the bin on the back counter.

Muscles and veins shivered beneath the skin of his temples. "What is it with everybody offering me water today?" he grumbled.

"What?" She seemed entertained by his aggravation.
"Nothing," he said. "This is a bar isn’t it?"

"Yeah, it’s just that I can’t serve beer yet. You have to be 21." She took a water glass from a stack of clean ones lined up against the mirrored back wall behind the bar. "I’m only 18. Just graduated in May," she said proudly.

He nodded politely and offered her congratulations, all the while thinking how ridiculous a day it had been trying to find one goddamn beer.

"Hey, you’ve got nice eyes," she said, as if stating a fact and not an opinion.

Vinny didn’t know how to respond to such a brazen compliment.

"Barb’s on break. She should be back any minute. I can go look for her..." She paused. "I mean if you want me to? I’m off in like fifteen minutes anyway."

The girl leaned over in front of him with the ice-scoop in hand. The ice in the cooler was frozen solid, so she was hitting the mound with the metallic scooper. She was positioned in such a way that the open v of her shirt hung inches from her chest and her gold necklace swung against the exposed, bare skin.

"Why don’t you stay?"

Their eye contact lingered too long. It seemed they were both recognizing some shared knowledge or secret between them. Katie put her hand to her chest to hold back her shirt. She smiled to herself, as if remembering an inside joke.

Vinny had no idea what she was thought of him.

"So, what are you, just the busboy or something? No college for you?"

In between a loud crack of splitting ice, she said, "You mean busgirl?" She removed her hand from her blouse and placed it on the edge of the cooler for balance. Then with another blow to the ice, her small breasts shuddered inside the blouse. "And, no on the
college issue. I’m going to take some time off. Travel, work, live, you know?"

“Yeah, kinda,” he said, realizing he and Katie both wanted the same thing—a little
time away. “I’m traveling right now myself, actually.”

She served him like a professional. Napkin. Glass. Straw with the paper still on the
tip. “Really?” she said curiously.

“Looks like you’ve done this before,” he said, holding up his drink.

She beamed with satisfaction as he took a small sip, then another, then another. He
was relieved by the cold burning in his chest until it spread across his sinuses like a stain
on cotton.

He squeezed his eyes shut and cussed under his breath.

“Take deep breaths,” she said. “I hate when that happens.”

And then he felt her hand on his forehead. She’d mounted the sink counter for
leverage and placed her hand against his head as if checking for a fever. Her other hand
was wrapped gently around the nape of his neck. She pressed her palm into him,
compressing his head between her two hands.

“The heat in my hands helps thaw the cold,” she whispered. “It’s almost over.”

He knew this did nothing to ease the ache deep behind his eyes, but he did not
withdraw. He opened his eyes and focused on the video poker machine on the counter.
The neon screen blinked erratically, switching game menus every few seconds. It didn’t
help his headache. He changed his focus, letting his eyes wander down her shirt, down
the v-shaped trail of her thin breastbone skin. The gold charm, which dangled inches
from her chest at the end of a thin gold chain, was a knot encircling a ruby pendant. The
blue screen revealed flashes of her lace-cupped cleavage. Everything in him swelled with excitement.

She pulled away and looked at him expectedly, her thin eyebrows lifted.

“IT helped,” he said. “Amazing.”

“It’s all in the hands,” she said, holding them out before her.

“I bet.”

She took a white rag from the counter and snapped it at his arm in a playfully scolding manner.

“What?” he asked, feigning ignorance.

“You’re bad. Cute, but bad.”

“No, just thirsty,” he said, leaning his chest against the brass railing of the bar. “What do you say? I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I don’t want your money.”

Vinny wondered what it was that she did want, in life, with him at this very moment. She bit her bottom lip as if holding back all the answers. He stared helplessly at Katie.

“There’s a gift shop over there. You can buy a six pack and be on your way.”

“To be honest, Katie, I’m sick of drinking alone.”

“How’d you know my name?”

He pointed at the nametag on her shirt, almost touching it with the tip of his finger.

“Oh,” she said embarrassed. “I can’t drink a beer here. Are you crazy?”

“Quite possibly,” he said bluntly. “But we don’t have to stay here. I was thinking about getting a room. Maybe taking a shower before I get to Mitch’s place.”

“What’s your name again?”
“Vinny.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, I have an idea, Vinny.”

She searched the casino and then waved at someone. Katie explained that she could get him a free room and that she’d be right back. He turned and watched her ponytail bob through the maze of slot machines and green felt table tops. In an open space near the change cage, Katie stopped and spoke to a maid, a girl who looked her age, if not younger.

Vinny faced the bar and drained his water glass of its last drops. As he lowered the glass, his own reflection struck him with horror. He could barely make out his own eyes and that Katie had mentioned them unnerved him in an inexplicable way, as if she could see something in him he could not. He thought of Carol and his heart sank like a boulder in water. She was beautiful and successful. She had deep blue eyes and a maddening sway about her hips that had been hypnotizing him for years. Five years after they married, she had been promoted from a junior portfolio analyst to the senior account manager at a big name bank in Philadelphia, while Vinny waited for a foreman position to open up. Time flew. Carol put off kids in order to advance in her career and eventually created a private stock management firm. He admitted resenting her success and she acknowledged her bitterness over his lack of—everything. That’s how she’d said it, too. He had nothing to offer her any longer. He was lifeless.

But thirsty, cool, alone—Vinny found himself listening to coins drop from the mouths
of machines into metal holding troughs. With each fallen coin, another second passed since Katie had left him there at the bar. In a lucid fantasy, Vinny saw himself pulling her towards him while she pretended to pull away, giggling at his attempt, and then catching her when she impulsively decided to fall into his arms.

A few minutes later, his hand was still around the empty water glass when Katie appeared at his side.

“No Barb yet?”

“Uh, no,” he said.

“Here’s the deal,” she whispered, placing a small white envelope before him on the bar. “You can pick up some beer or whatever in the gift shop and you can stay in room 309 for the day.”

He put his index finger on the envelope and slid it his way. Stoic as a card player, he lifted it slowly, confidently, as though it were the ace he’d been praying for. Inside the envelope was a hotel room keycard. He stared at it. “What about you?” he finally said, holding the plastic keycard in his hand. “You’re not going to make an old man like me drink alone are you?”

“Um, I guess not,” she said, somewhere between flirtatious and coy. She was close then distant, coming and going like a pendulum. One moment, it was as if she was inviting him to touch her and then was backing away. “I have to wait for Barb to finish her like sixth cigarette. I can sneak up. Relax, turn on the television. Whatever you want.”

Vinny rode alone in the mirror-walled elevator to the sixth floor. He found it
unsettling to be surrounded by reflections of his own body, most of which stood with backs to him. He was without a true vision of himself.

He followed the cigarette-ash burned carpet to room 309. The room was spacious with low ceilings, which made it feel pressed flat by an overhead force, and wallpapered in a muted taupe color. The furniture was plain and office-like, the faint light bulbs covered in pleated chiffon lampshades, the air dank and warm. Vinny walked past a queen bed to the window where the air-conditioning unit was well hidden beneath the closed crimson curtains and turned the machine on its highest setting. It rumbled then gushed cold air in his face, wafting the curtains from their plumb fall so that they rose like lungs filling with a breath. On the table at his right, he noticed the plastic ice-bucket on a tray in between two plastic wrapped glasses. But the beer was cold. He wouldn’t need any ice. He opened one and pulled back the curtains. The violet shade of the window tint dimmed the only patch of sky visible from the room. Large gray air-conditioning units whirled and hummed in evenly spaced rows and columns on the rooftop. Fat hanks of tar sealed cracks in the concrete and asphalt surface. It wasn’t a pretty view, not nearly the oasis it appeared to be from the road. He shut the curtains, though slivers of pink light fell into the room by a slit in the shade. He took his beer to the shower with him, balancing the bottle precariously in a little groove meant for a bar of soap.

He stepped out of the shower and wrapped a small white towel around his waist. The bathroom was clouded with steam. It felt good to be clean and warm. With his hand, he cleared a circle on the mirror. He thought of Katie, what she seemed to like about him,
why such a pretty girl wanted to spend her afternoon with an old loser like him. He looked into the same eyes she had less than an hour ago. They were topaz blue and pink where they should be white. He saw a glimpse of the familiar in them, though the rest of his face—dull, rough, and wrinkled—seemed unrecognizable. He wondered what Carol saw when she looked at him, but stopped when probable answers surfaced—disappointment, resentment, frustration. Still, he told himself, she had no right to betray him.

There was a faint knock on the bathroom door.

When he opened the door, steam floated out before him, wafting around him as if announcing the mystical arrival of a specter.

“Hi,” Katie said cheerfully, from the chair by the window. She was helping herself to a beer. “All clean?”

“As a whistle,” he said, though less enthusiastically.

He reached for the pile of clothes at the end of the bed and then stopped to look at Katie. She’d stood up. She unbuttoned her shirt. He watched as she let it drop from her shoulders, the nametag thudded on the carpet. She undid her pants and stepped out of them, walking towards the bed. She was pale, though around her panty line he noticed the slightest tan line from a bathing suit. And she wanted him, which baffled Vinny. His hair was uncombed and slicked back, his paunch sagging over his waist, and his erection hardened as he watched her. Katie was on all fours, drawing back the bed spread before slipping beneath the sheets.

At the end of the bed, he let the towel drop from his waist. He hadn’t meant to be dramatic—in fact, he intended to be impassive—but Katie must have seen something
charming in his gesture, because she smiled and cooed as if he were giving her a private striptease.

"Quit," he told her.

"Sorry. I just thought that was cute," she said, revealing herself by lifting the sheet off her body.

He brushed off his humiliation and couldn’t help but grin bashfully as he kneeled on the corner of the bed in order to reach her ankles, which were knotted and tucked beneath her bare legs. He unraveled her crossed legs and pulled her toward the end of the bed. She didn’t resist his move and didn’t even blush at being naked and exposed. Vinny held her feet against his cheeks. When he kissed the thin-skinned divot beneath her right ankle, she arched her back and opened her mouth. This was no girl, he thought to himself. He let go of her legs—she held them near his shoulders on her own—and ran his hands down the back of her thighs as far as he could reach. He was stunned by her flawless skin, and his desire for her made him feel wound tight as a reel.

Unwillingly, he saw visions of Carol from the night he left. He remembered the sounds in the house, smelled the mulberry candle burning on her nightstand in the bedroom.

"Hey," whispered Katie. "Where are you?"

Vinny was brought back to the rush of his present moment. He looked at the young girl, naked and desirous before him, and all thoughts of Carol diminished in the face of his sexual craving for Katie. It was his turn, he told himself.

Katie dropped her legs off the rim of his shoulders and dangled them over his forearms. She stretched her arms toward the pillows overhead and brought her arms down
to her side the same way children make snow angels in the park. The further her legs dropped, the more she opened for him. It was a signal, Vinny realized, to touch her, to enter her. He wrapped her legs around his waist, folding her ankles as if in a knot behind his back, and crouched over her. She touched his hair, smoothed his face and kissed him on the mouth. Her lips were warm, plush. Vinny cupped her breast in his right hand and pressed his body against hers. She moaned lightly and reached for him yearningly.

"That's dangerous," he warned, pulling away from her grasp on him.

"What do you mean?"

Without answering that it had been some time since he'd been with anyone, Vinny redirected the attention on Katie. He ran his hand down the center of her chest, on to her flat stomach, and then to the trim patch of dark hair. She shivered. He drew her nipple into his mouth and felt her open.

"You can't finish inside me," she said quickly. She was writhing, pushing her hips at him.

Vinny crawled on top of her, balancing on his left elbow and forearm as he used his right hand to guide himself inside her. Dead end. He'd run into the curve of her thigh. Without a word between them, Katie widened her legs and helped him find his way. She wasn't as tight as he thought she'd be, though she was snug and warm, saturated. He groaned from a place within, a place he'd not given himself to in years—a place of unchecked pleasure to which he now felt entitled.

At first he went slow, worried he'd finish too early. When he felt Katie's ankles press into the small of his back, pulling him to her, he moved faster and harder. She seemed to like it, her grip around his neck tightened. With one arm, he lifted her hips towards him—
she seemed weightless—and pressed deeper inside her. Then suddenly he pulled out. It was close.

"Done?" she asked, wiping damp strands of hair from her forehead. "Tell me you pulled out before you—"

"I just need a break." He sat back from her on his ankles. Not yet, he said to himself. Not yet. "You’re too much for an old man like me, you know?" he said to her.

"You’re not old," she said. "You’re mature, handsome."

"Yeah," he laughed dismissively. "Turn over."

"Are you serious?"

"Don’t I look it?" he said and winked. He held her ankle and rotated it slightly. She seemed hesitant initially, but then surrendered.

"Like this?" Katie asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

He put his hand on her shoulder for resistance and found her opening with his fingers. With his legs, he spread her knees apart, so he could situate himself between her legs, and then entered her with ease. She dropped her head, her pony tail flopping to the side.

"Okay?" Vinny asked.

Katie simply nodded and with that, Vinny held the front of her hipbones. He pushed and pulled, the skin on her backside rippling when their bodies collided.

As Vinny’s climax neared, he became more verbal, asking Katie how it felt when he went all the way inside, if she was going to cum, if she liked him. In grunting pants, she answered yes to everything.

Carol had, too, in the beginning. But after several years, she stopped saying anything altogether. They made love on occasion, mostly when he came home after being at the
bar all night. He’d climb into bed, smelling of smoke and alcohol, and touch her wildly
for the first time in weeks. When he finished—she didn’t even bother faking it—she’d
roll over and sleep as though the encounter had been a dream, and then, the next day, ask
only what time it was when he’d gotten home.

“You finish at the end there, eh?” he wheezed.

“Sort of,” Katie said with a crinkled nose. “I’m not sure.”

“Uh, how can you not be sure? I gave you all I had there.”

“And it felt amazing. Crazy.”

“So you did?”

“I think.”

Vinny stood and got a beer from the table. He looked at the girl on his bed, legs apart,
naked. If she didn’t understand what kind of performance he’d given her, he thought,
then maybe she was too young, too inexperienced.

“I’ll get at towel,” he said, after a few pulls from the tepid beer.

“No, I’ll just stay like this forever,” she quipped.

He didn’t respond. Vinny went to the bathroom and came back with a white, terry-
cloth wash towel. He wiped her back clean then tossed the rag toward the corner by the
curtains.

“I better get going,” he said, starting to dress. “I’ve got to find my friend’s house
before it gets dark.”

“Where’s he live?”

“Boulder City, on Birch Street, or Avenue. Whatever.”
"That’s near the cemetery, I think, right down by the ditch. Anyway, there’s only one stoplight in town. You shouldn’t get lost.” She fastened her bra in front and then rotated it to the back, slipping her arms in the straps. “Are you going to stay here for a while or get where ever you’re going?”

Vinny pictured Carol in his old house, making love on his bed. He felt displaced, angry. “I might stay for a while.”

“Well, this place gets real old, real fast. I’d take the road if I were you.”

They finished dressing in silence.

“Will I see you again?” asked Katie. She was sitting on the corner of the bed with her legs crossed, looking up at Vinny. Her eye-makeup was smudged, her hair tousled, eyes hopeful and big. Her girlishness was appealing.

“I don’t know.”

“I’d like to.”

“We’ll see,” he said, putting his wallet, keys and cigarettes into the correct pockets of his shirt and jeans.

“Can I have one of those?” She was pointing to the cigarettes.

He lifted two from the pack and handed one to her. She readied it in her mouth and waited for a light. He flipped open a silver Zippo and offered the flame to her. The blue-orange flickering of the flame cast a bronze glow on Katie’s face. In that instant, he remembered the bright glint of the penny just before it started to fall over the dam. He lit a cigarette for himself and took two deep drags in the breath of one.

“I should give you my number then,” she said, reaching for her purse. With a blue ink pen she wrote her name and number on the back of a bank receipt, a cigarette dangling
from her lips, smoke in her watering eyes. “Here.”

Vinny folded the paper once without looking at it and put it in his back pocket. She was a nice girl. He got laid and might want to again. The option was liberating.

He picked up the half-empty six-pack from the table and mumbled, “Thanks,” as he walked away. He stopped by the door and said, “See you around.”

“Yeah, sure.”

In the diminishing space of the closing door, he glanced back and saw her squinting at him as though he were falling out of focus.

Outside the sun was low and deep orange, flooding the red rock of the canyon with the tint of dusk. Vinny shook his head at himself as he wavered towards his car. He couldn’t believe what he’d done. Slept with someone besides Carol, slept with a stranger. He thought of his wife, how she’d never been as beautiful as Katie was, and he smiled at himself. It felt good that a girl, a young, attractive girl, wanted him. Hah, he laughed to himself, as if saying to Carol’s face. He was slowly settling into his new life and liking it.

Amid a row of all white cars, which seemed to be an uncanny coincidence in the first place, Vinny’s gold Duster glinted like a capped tooth in a mouth of otherwise perfect teeth.

On the way up the face of a hill that overlooked Lake Mead, he scanned clusters of homes-with-a-view that were stacked on dirt mounds and humps of yucca hills. In his rear-view mirror, he glimpsed plum-colored mesas guarding the lake’s green water. White wakes, like jet contrails in the sky, split behind outboard boats and soon vanished into the water. At the top of the hill before the stoplight Katie had mentioned, was a sign
that read: 2,570 feet above sea level. Population: 10,400. At the red light, he read over Mitch’s directions. When the light turned green, he cruised through the intersection and noticed two gas stations on opposite corners of the street, both overcrowded with boaters and people in swim trunks and sunglasses. Further down the road, there was a video store, a smoke shop, a used car lot lined with triangle banners slapping the wind, and a parched nursery at the end of the street. It all came and went in that order and celerity.

Just when he wondered if he’d driven through his destination city, a blue sign with white block-letters read: Thanks for Visiting Boulder City—It Was A Dam Pleasure. He made a quick u-turn in the dirt median. A hazy plume of sand lingered above the highway.

He lit a cigarette and rolled down the window. Surrounding him was a vast desert valley. Yellow sand sloped and faded from the road then rose again in the distance, violet in the shadow of a far ridge. It was early evening, the sun barely visible behind a jagged peak in the west.

Welcome to Clean, Green Boulder City. Stay Awhile, another sign said.

Vinny felt as though he were driving through a summer evening like any other: Boats, on rickety trailers with broken tail lights, were either coming in for the day or going out over night. Teenagers cruised along the streets, music blaring. And before a darkening denim sky, blue-white tufts of barbecue smoke were bursting through treetops like steam from a boiling pot.

Up ahead, in loopy cursive, was the El Dorado Motel. Large palm tree fronds splayed as a canopy, reaching halfway across the oval pool. The subsurface bulb illuminated the water like a radioactive lagoon, creating a Martian-green glow on the underside of the foliage. The poolside was crowded with families.
After an hour wandering past stucco-plastered houses that all looked the same in the indefinite light of street lamps, Vinny declared himself lost. He stopped the car in the middle of the road and let the engine hum idly. Night seemed to have fallen on him like a rock, the sky heavy with darkness and stars. He noticed a few homeowners on the street had painted the house-side of the streetlight lamp black to, he assumed, minimize the flooding glare. The opposite side of the street seemed to be infinite darkness, the only light a silvery glint on the steel railing guarding the cement wash below. He drove along the length of the wash, wondering, if he followed it like a river, where he might end up. A block or so later, he spotted a small group of kids gathered on the sidewalk near the wash. They were his only hope for direction.
CHAPTER 4

They’d been playing the bat game for over an hour and Lacey was determined to get at least one grounder-point. It was a game some boys in the neighborhood had made up years ago. The object was to hurl, what they called, a bat-pack, into the air. Each player has his or her own bat-pack, which is a gravel-stuffed sock knotted at the ankle. The bats believe the socks are large bugs, dinner at twilight, and by the time they dive-bomb for their meal and sink their sharp fangs into the sock’s toe, it’s too late. Their teeth end up tangled in the cotton stitching, their wings flapping in vain against the weight of the sack. And so they plunge. And as expected, the impact causes some suffering. Broken wings. Crushed skulls. The rule is that a Grounding—when any part of the bat’s body touches or skims the ground—is worth one point. Death—the most valuable and also gut wrenching aspect of the game—is worth two points. The players on this night—which was not a boy’s club evening— included Lacey, Nate, Ryan and young Georgie.

“So what’s the bet?” asked Ryan, swinging his bat-pack in circles over his head.

“Nothing. I hate your bets. You can’t make a player join the bet if she doesn’t want to,” said Lacey.

With some hesitation in his voice, Nate said, “Yes, he can.” He was kneeling with his little brother and stuffing the sock with handfuls of dust-driven sand. “Champion can call anything.”

“But—,” started Lacey, though without an argument. She stared indignantly at Nate because she hated when he sided with a friend over her, when she knew for a fact that he
liked her more than Ryan. For a moment no one said a word. But she knew Nate was right. Ryan had won the most recent bat game by a lucky landside and by the rules, particularly street rules, was granted some command over the next match.

Overhead, night was seeping across the blue sky, turning it lavender where the sun had once been tangerine orange. Bats circled above the street lamps, waiting ignorantly for another throw, while off in the distance, on a sagging strand of telephone wires, several black crows sat like spectators. One cawed riotously, startling Lacey. "Fine. Whatever," she said. "But I have no more allowance."

Ryan was an imposing, rich bully, who lived on the hill in a magnificent rose-stucco house with palm trees lining the crescent driveway and grass as green as a golf course's. He had neighborhood friends because kids liked to play at nice houses like his, with pools and games and lots of snack food. He was taller than most boys his age and had a rotund torso on top of a skinny pair of legs, a ball on two sticks. Lacey knew Nate didn’t really care for Ryan, but he played along so that he and Georgie could swim in his pool whenever they wanted to, get away from their father at home. A part of Lacey hated Nate for selling out like that, but she forgave him when he invited her and Nina swimming with them.

"Nate," called Ryan, waddling to the edge of the street where Georgie and Nate were still adjusting a bat-pack. "What should we make her do when she loses?"

"You mean if I lose?"

For the most part, Nate had tried to stay out of it. Beneath the current of banter among Lacey and Ryan, he continued talking with Georgie about what makes the perfect pack. The right balance between sand and stone and the tightest knot. Tight as a first, he said,
holding his hand up for Georgie to see.

"Nate," Ryan prodded. "Huh?"

Nate handed Georgie his new and improved pack and stood, wiping bits of asphalt from his bare knees. He tightened the noose on his tube-sock sack.

“One throw each. Winner names the dare. Everyone’s in.”

“What’s the out?” asked Lacey.

“There is no out, I guess. You have to do the dare.”

Ryan raised his hand in protest. “I’ll let you have an out, it’s twenty dollars.”

“I don’t have any money!” shouted Lacey.

Ryan shrugged as if to say there was nothing he could do.

“Then don’t lose,” Nate said to Lacey, though she wasn’t sure if he’d intended to encourage her or threaten her.

Everyone nodded, even Georgie, who didn’t really count. He just came along so Nate wouldn’t feel guilty about leaving him at home with their father. Nina usually tagged along, but their mother made her stay home all day after the French-toast incident earlier that morning.

Ryan and Lacey both responded by saying, cool. Lacey was ready, ready to beat the boys at their own game. Ready to make them run home with their shorts around their ankles and their bat-packs tied to their privates. She had plans for them.

“You can go first,” Nate said, pointing at Lacey.

“Thank you,” she said. She sneered at Ryan, lifting her shoulder as she turned her back on him.

Lacey looked at the light above and saw a swarm of excited insects teeming in the
warmth of the bulb. A dark shadow swooped through them with its mouth agape, scattering the bugs like a shark in a school of minnows. This was a good sign, an indication that the bats were still feeding, still hungry. She wiped wet strands of hair away from her forehead—even at night, the sun’s effect lingered. She bent her legs in preparation for, what they called, a granny shot, an underhand pitch that gained momentum by swinging the object between one’s legs before letting go. After three deep swings, she hurled the pack in the air with all she had. It vanished beyond the glow of the streetlight, up into the dark sky, which was lightly granulated with stars.

Suddenly, a black-winged flash dove into view. It seemed to have a strong hold on the ankle of the sock as it plunged to, as Lacey secretly hoped, its inevitable death.

A foot or so from smashing onto the street, when two-death points seemed a sure thing, the bat loosened its grip and saved itself. As the sack thudded in a poof of dust, the bat was already on its way upward, flapping in aimless circles beneath the streetlight’s electric hum, then higher into the safe, dark night.

“No points,” said Ryan, readying for his turn.

“My turn,” yelled Georgie, stepping forward.

“Let him go ahead,” Nate said quietly.

Georgie tried the granny-shot, but each time he lowered the sack for it to swing through his legs, it smacked the street. Finally, after several useless swings, he released his deadly toy. It made it just above Nate’s head and didn’t get a bite. Still, Lacey and Nate clapped and said what a good throw it was. He shrugged it off with the passive resignation of someone who’s tried his hardest and failed.

Ryan went next. His bat hung on for the ride, slamming into the concrete on its side.
It flapped its wings against the hot asphalt of the street trying to free itself.

The hardest rule was that the player who threw the sack had to watch the bat die.

Others could look away. Nate made Georgie turn around.

"Is it over yet?" shouted Georgie, his arms crossed, his voice vexed.

Nate answered, "No, Georgie. Not yet."

After tiring itself with futile jumps and flaps, and scathing its wings on the street, the bat began to surrender by twitching and heaving. They waited for it to be completely still while Ryan applauded himself and its imminent death. Lacey turned her head, sickened by the sight.

"Come on two points," Ryan cheered. "Do you think he hit his head or what?"

"Looks like broken wings to me," said Nate.

"Is it over yet?" asked Georgie.

The bat took its last breath. Ryan stepped on its wings and unhooked his sack from its fangs. He kicked the bat to the gutter and said, "You can’t beat that."

"Yes, Georgie. It’s over. You can look," said Nate.

Georgie ran to the curb where Ryan was admiring his win, put his hands on his knees and crouched over the bat in awe. Georgie picked up a small tumbleweed twig and use it to poke the bat.

"Car!" shouted Nate.

Lacey looked up and saw headlights. They all moved safely out of the car’s way, closer to the sidewalk so it could pass. But it didn’t. It slowed and stopped in the middle of the road, music spilling into the night air.

"What’s going to happen to it?" Lacey heard Georgie ask. But the oncoming car had
distracted Lacey and though she’d heard Georgie’s voice, she was too preoccupied to respond. All eyes were on the car. Nate approached the driver. Ryan waited behind and, when Nate was far enough away that he couldn’t hear, he leaned close to Lacey and sneered, “Loser takes off her shirt,” and then raced away toward the car. He was gone before she had a chance to say anything.

Somewhat dazed by the car and Ryan’s wisecrack, she watched the boys talk to the driver. She couldn’t see much, only that the car was old and shimmery and that the man’s hands, one of which he was using while he talked to Nate, appeared large and veiny.

Georgie asked the same question once again.

“What?” She’d heard a voice, but registered no meaning.

With the thin twig, he pointed at the bat that lay dead in the dry gutter.

“Oh,” she said in a low, sympathetic voice. The truth was, she didn’t exactly know. Would it simply rot? Would its mother fly down and lift it from the street and bring it to their home, if they even had one? She decided to be honest with Georgie and told him she had no idea.

“He hurted his head?”

“Yes, I think so. And his wings,” said Lacey, who had her eye on Nate as he spoke to the driver of the car.

“I don’t like this game.”

“Me neither, Georgie. We’ll go home soon, when your brother’s done, okay?”

He nodded faintly, stroking the bat’s lifeless belly with the twig.
As the man drove away, Lacey saw that he turned his head in her direction, though she wasn’t sure if he was looking in his rearview mirror or looking directly at her. Within the shade of blackness inside the car, his eyes were completely invisible to her.

Nate and Ryan laughed hysterically and gave one another a high-five. Lacey left Georgie at the sidewalk and met the boys in the middle of the street near the steel manhole cover.

“What’s so funny?” asked Lacey.

After laughing themselves red in the face, Nate blurted, “Gave him bad directions,” and burst into hysterics again. “He was probably a freak, anyway.”

“Funny,” she sang with boredom. “A riot.” She folded her arms reproachfully, like a mother listening to her child confess to a misdeed.

“I guess you had to be there,” chuckled Ryan, nudging Nate in the arm.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Lacey was out of the joke and losing the game. Her only ally at the moment was Georgie, the distracted kid who seemed morbidly obsessed with the bat, poking its hairy abdomen with a twig. She was ready to go home.

“I’m out of here, you guys. It’s probably late.” She lifted her left heel out of her purple jelly-sandals and extracted a tiny pebble from inside the shoe.

“You can’t leave yet. Nate hasn’t even thrown.”

“Come on,” she pleaded. “It’s late, and if that guy finds his way back here, he’ll be pissed.”

Nate and Ryan looked at each other, their eyes big, their amusement suspended. Ryan
punched Nate on the arm and they both fell into laughter.

"Twenty bucks," said Ryan, opening his palm toward Lacey.

Lacey waited defiantly, her hand on her hip. She thought about how to get out of the situation and was relieved when Nate spoke up. "I have to get Georgie home anyway or my Dad will kill me. What's the dare?" He was probably expecting the usual—ring someone's doorbell and pretend you're their long-lost child, run barefoot in the darkest hills of the desert behind the wash, turn on someone's yard hose and loop it through the front door handle so when they open the door water pours inside.

"I told Lacey," Ryan sneered.

"What is it?" Nate asked, smiling as if anticipating the humor in the challenge.

"Shirts off or twenty bucks," Ryan stated.

Nate looked at Lacey, and she could see in his eyes how much he, like her, disdained Ryan. They each took one step toward one another.

"I don't have any money," he said. "Or I'd give it to you."

Lacey's concerns about money and shirts and points and dead bats lifted from her mind like birds to flight. It was the nicest thing Nate had ever said to her and as she started to speak, her mouth went dry as a cloth. All she could manage was a garbled, thanks.

"Well?" Ryan called. "What's it going to be?"

"I'll do it fast," she said to Nate. "Don't worry." Lacey turned and spoke to Ryan, her hand still on her hip. "Okay, but I'm only going to unbutton my shirt, open it, and then shut it."

"Deal," he said, but he made Nate take his shirt off first. He argued that it made the
dare totally fair if everyone did it and added that it was no big deal for boys. Nate agreed
and lifted his shirt over his head. His torso was tanned from summer days of swimming,
but in the glow of the streetlight, his skin looked pasty, translucent, and when he inhaled,
his ribs rippled into sight then faded when he exhaled. He put his shirt back on with
Ryan’s permission.

Lacey positioned herself with her back to the curb so that Georgie wouldn’t see
anything if, by chance, he looked up from the bat. She opened the first snap on her shirt
and felt nauseated and lightheaded. Ryan’s gawking eyes embittered her. Nate watched,
too, though Lacey felt his intentions were to protect her rather than ogle at her, though
she couldn’t be sure.

They continued watching her—she was on the third snap—as if she weren’t Lacey
Walker, as if she were someone bigger than they, an image on a two-story movie screen,
an intangible wonder. There was a part of her that wanted to see herself the way they did
and be as awed by the vision of herself as they were, but as she undressed, she was
nervous and graceless and wishing she were not.

She undid the sixth snap down the center of her purple tank-top. She waited, with her
shirt now crossed about her chest. “Ready?” she asked.

Ryan licked his lips. Nate nodded.

“One,” she started slowly. “Two...”

She knew exactly what they would see—she’d looked at herself in the bathroom
mirror often enough to know—and wondered what they’d think of it. She had nothing
more than a plumping of the chest where, last summer, she was as flat as any boy her age.
Her nipples were each the size of a quarter. And unlike Nate, whose upper body had been
bathed in sunlight summer after summer, Lacey would appear pale, a milky blue in the bleaching light of the moon and streetlamp.

And before she could say, three, Nate protested and said, “That’s enough. We’re leaving.”

Ryan put his face close to Nate’s and said, “Let her finish. It’ll cost you.”

Lacey had already begun fastening her shirt.

“No, she’s going home. Lacey,” he said, his voice taut with rage. “Go home. I’ll handle this.”

“But what about—” she started, when he cut her off. She was going to ask about Georgie.

“Just go,” he said. “You don’t have to do this.”

With her shirt fastened again, she left and looked back once to see Nate and Ryan standing eye to eye. She turned the corner and heard their angry voices flare behind her.
CHAPTER 5

With a cigarette between his lips, Vinny grabbed the wheel underhandedly and made his fifth u-turn. As his beams skimmed brightly past mailboxes, wrought-iron gates, and defunct shrubbery, a green and white street sign flashed into vision: Birch Avenue.

Finally.

That little street kid had tried to give him the runaround, but he’d finally found his way through the darkened neighborhood. With his foot on the brake, Vinny looked at his directions again and checked the address: 973. It was too dark to see the numbers on the house, but he knew he was close. He turned right for no reason.

Several houses ahead, a security sensor bulb clicked on and spat yellow light across its empty driveway. He thought a stray cat or his loud music had activated the light alert. That is, until the figure of a young girl walked in and then out of the shower of light. Vinny took his foot off the brake and advanced.

Lacey heard the car behind her—crumbs of asphalt cracking and snapping under the slow roll of the tires—but didn’t look back. She quickened her pace and lengthened her stride. And then she recognized the music and the hum of the engine. It was him and he was after her, she imagined. A madman with Nate, Ryan and Georgie in the trunk.

As he pulled up parallel to her, he turned the volume down on the radio and cranked his head out of the window. “Excuse me there,” he said, in the kindest and most patient voice he could muster. And then the recognition hit him like a fist to the gut. It was her, the girl from the bat game. She stopped and faced the car.
"Yeah?" she said, wishing she could run faster than he could drive.

"Um, I'm looking for 973. You know it?"

Lacey hoped to see something that might identify him, though she was quite certain now that he was her father's friend. She walked straight toward him and stood a foot or so away from the car door, squinting at the man inside.

Vinny looked up at her and was surprised at how pretty she was. He hadn't thought of this when he'd seen her earlier from a distance. Then, he'd thought her features sharp, her figure too tall and lanky. But here, she was softer, smaller.

"That's my house," she said, now aware of who he was. "Can you give me a lift on your way? I'm late and so are you. Vinny, right?"

Flustered on several different levels, he simply nodded. That Mitch had a daughter her age was one. That the girl knew that little shit who got him lost was two. And the serendipitous encounter was three.

"Jump on in," he said.

As she hurried around the front of the car to the passenger side, Lacey was relieved that he was not the maniac she'd envisioned and, at the same time, embarrassed about Nate's prank on him. In the car, the damp skin under her thigh cleaved then skidded loudly and flatulently across the vinyl seat as she sat down. Mortified, she cupped her hand over her mouth.

"Can you get the door?" asked Vinny, ignoring her embarrassing moment, which he found quite endearing.

"Oh, sorry." Lacey said, reaching for the passenger door. She pulled. It was too heavy for her to shut.
“Here, let me get it,” he said, putting the car in park.

With her hands in her lap, she pressed herself against the back of the seat, making room for him as he reached across her lap for the door handle. He reeked of tobacco and sweat. She held her breath against his stale odor as he yanked the door handle.

“That’s a heavy one,” he grunted.

His eyes were fixed on the tan skin of her arm. He was surprised at the light hairs bowing in unison as if freshly combed. He would have expected darker hair, like the hair pouring from the spout of her ponytail, but her strands were lucent as honey.

His forearm brushed against her smaller, smoother one.

She felt herself shiver against the unexpected contact and hoped he hadn’t noticed.

The interior light faded to darkness once the door was securely shut. The hot engine air wafted in through the window. Lacey wiped her forehead and raked her fingers through sections of hair that had somehow escaped the coiling rubber band around her ponytail.

“Hot?” he asked her.

“I’m okay.”

And then as they drove on, Vinny said it was nice to meet her. He offered her his right hand and said his whole name with his eyes on the road—Vincent Parker. “But call me Vinny. Everyone does.”

She thought it odd that he wanted to shake hands as an introduction, but she followed suit. His hand felt like it looked—rough, hairy, strong. Her entire hand felt no bigger than his palm.

Vinny held Lacey’s hand softly, glanced at her, though the light in the car shaded
their faces. She looked ahead and blinked fast, as if suddenly embarrassed.

"A right at this stop sign," said Lacey. A moment later, she said, "Look, that kid, his name’s Nate, he didn’t know who you were, either did I and if you tell on him, his dad will really... well, it would just be bad if you told anyone."

"No problem," he said, burying the desire to teach that boy a little lesson. But this was Mitch’s daughter and he didn’t want to cause trouble for her.

"Serious?" asked Lacey, her hands were in her lap.

"Yes, but only if you think he’s worth saving?"

Embarrassed, Lacey’s face was overrun with an involuntary smile. She nodded repeatedly.

Vinny said, "Okay then." And with that, he let go of his frustration and said, "It’s a good trick anyway. I used to use it myself. Hell, I thought I invented it."

Lacey smiled at him with relief. She was glad to meet a cool adult, one who wasn’t obsessed with punishment or authority. They drove on in silence, save for the hum of the motor and the intermittent swell of radio static.

With a large red and white duffel bag hanging in his right hand, Vinny walked behind Lacey up the cement walkway of Mitch and Jillian’s two-story house. The roof, covered in stubbles of sandpaper shingles, canted streetward and the stucco coating of the house was an indiscernible, bland color. The front yard consisted of dirt, lava rock and the occasional sprout of desert plants and weed. Vinny lost his balance momentarily and scuffed his right foot into a stretch of dirt that bordered the walkway. Dust barely materialized because the earth was so packed, the tiles of dirt so dry. He looked ahead
and was relieved that Lacey hadn’t seen him trip. Before he stepped up the four-inch cement rise near the front door, Vinny noticed pale blue television light flash through the chinks of the front window curtain. To him, after his long and unprecedented day, the home seemed closed off to him, less inviting than the blaring bulbs on the Miner’s Pass highway sign. He promised himself he wouldn’t stay long.

“Guess who I found!” Lacey shouted, once inside the house. She waited in the dark foyer with the graceful and extended arms of a game show girl before the curtain reveals the prize. She hoped that her parents’ excitement over Vinny’s arrival would make them forget that she was late. After a long moment, she turned on the overhead light, which was a wrought-iron and glass chandelier that had come with the house.

Vinny shut the door behind him and stood in the cramped entrance way. There was a small table with an overgrown plant spilling out of its pot and wrapping around the table legs, kids’ shoes littering the floor, and a lavender and pink miniature three-wheel bike. Vinny heard footsteps upstairs and muffled sounds from the television in the adjacent room. Applause, it seemed. He set his bag down on the tile floor and looked up to see another young, little girl, much younger than Lacey. She had black hair and sloe eyes that blinked frantically from under a trimmed tassel of bangs. She stood several feet from Vinny in a summer nightgown with her eyes wide and mouth agape as if Bigfoot had just walked in her house. Vinny hoped the look on her face wasn’t the prelude to a screaming fit. He wouldn’t know what to do.

Lacey comforted the little girl by standing close beside her. She put her hand on her little sister’s shoulder and fiddled with the lace trim of the nightgown as she explained who the man in front of them was. Vinny’s nerves eased as he watched the little girl’s
expression settle calmly, her eyes shift from fear to fond curiosity.

“Better late than never!” a man’s voice yelled from somewhere upstairs.

Vinny felt anxious and depleted, nagged by thirst. On a drunken and heartbroken whim, he had come to a place where he was without history to see people from his past. There were no other intentions behind his journey. He’d never much considered what he’d do when he got anywhere. He didn’t really care.

Lacey cracked her toes against the arch of her supporting foot and said that her sister’s name was Nina. Nina held her left thumb down and showed him her age with four tiny fingers. The girls looked just like Jillian, but had Mitch’s quiet disposition.

“Get us a few beers will you, Lace?” her father shouted from the second-floor hallway. “We’ll be right there.”

Following Mitch’s voice was Jillian’s distant avowal that it couldn’t be, just couldn’t be who she thought it was, after twenty some years.

“What’re you doing up there, eh? Save it for later,” hollered Vinny. Laughter rippled down the stairwell. Then realizing his not so subtle innuendo might have registered with the girls, he glanced at them. It didn’t appear that Nina had understood anything he’d said. In fact, he could have spoken in another language by the bewildered expression on her small face. Lacey, though, eyed him like a disapproving wife. Where did Lacey learn that, he thought to himself and remembered the way Carol used to glare at him if he cussed in a mall where kids could overhear him, or ordered himself a drink she thought too potent for the occasion. Before Vinny could apologize, out of habit rather than sincerity, Lacey was swallowed up by the bright yellow light of the kitchen. The slab of light extended toward him down the hallway. From the foyer, Vinny had a direct view of
“After all this time,” Jillian said, coming down the stairs. Nina rushed to her mother and hugged her thigh.

“Jillian,” sighed Vinny. He stood transfixed. She descended like the bride he remembered seeing some twenty years ago, her hand gliding along the banister, her smile growing with each step. It was strange to see her as he did—a true woman now, with a child clinging to her leg. She comforted the little girl with a gentle maternity he’d only imagined she possessed. Jillian peeled Nina from her leg and came toward Vinny with her arms open. He returned her embrace and lifted her in the hug, turning in a fast circle. Her long madras skirt, which was speckled with prints of pastel flowers, rippled at her ankles. Her hair smelled of mint, her neck of patchouli. She squeezed him tightly then released him.

“I can’t believe it!” she said, putting her hands on his cheeks.

As she examined him, he glanced at Mitch, who was waiting on the last step of the staircase. He seemed pleased with his wife’s joy and excited to see his old friend.

“You look just great,” continued Jillian. “A bit tired from your drive, but good.” She patted his belly and hugged him by wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Jesus,” said Mitch. “You’ll squeeze him to death if you don’t let go.” Mitch laughed at himself and reached his hand between Jillian and Vinny. Jillian stepped back and lifted Nina in her arms.

“Here,” Lacey said. She had three beers cradled in her arms.

“How ‘bout a cold one?” Mitch asked, handing a can to Vinny after shaking his hand.
Vinny opened his beer and waited for Mitch and Jillian to open theirs. They cheered and drank.

While they took their first, long drinks, Lacey rubbed the cold spots on her arm and looked with annoyance at the redness of her skin.

“Well, shit, come on in,” said Mitch, wiping foam from his top lip. He gestured to a room next to the foyer.

Jillian put her arm around Vinny’s waist as they walked into the family room. Vinny was surprised that she hugged him right away. It felt good, he thought. When she asked how he was, he nodded, said he was fine and that it had been a good trip so far. Behind him, he felt the weight of her fingers, one or two perhaps—he couldn’t tell how many—pulling slightly on the belt loop around which she’d hooked them. He felt comfortable here, with her arm around his waist. Mitch had taken a seat on the couch, leaving room for only one more person. So, without much thought, Vinny saw the recliner on which he’d been silently assigned to sit and began to walk that way. As he and Jillian separated, Vinny felt her fingers leave his belt loop.

There would be no two ways about it: Vinny would sleep in the spare bedroom upstairs, across from the girls’ room and adjacent to Mitch and Jillian’s. They insisted. Vinny could do nothing but accept their offer until he lined up some work.

He relaxed in the brown faux-leather recliner, which had let out a leathery squeak when he sat in it. The chair was kitty-corner to the beige sofa and faced the short end of the pinchbeck and glass coffee table.

They each had a beer or two over a volley of surface conversations—How have you been? The town seems nice. How was the drive? The lake is amazing, but low. What kind
of work are you looking for?—while the daughters sat in quiet observation.

With his right foot propped on the edge of the coffee table, Mitch was sunk in the couch cushion, surrounded by three women. Jillian had barely spoken, but Vinny knew she was enjoying this reunion. The memory of Vinny as her sinewy high school boyfriend seemed to gloss her eyes with the fondness of a younger and less complicated life. She had gone from drill-team dancer to mother. Her legs, which were visible with her skirt tucked and wrapped at her knees, were tanner than he would have expected, concealing slightly the spider veins on her ankles. Still, she was a vision. Her body was much like he remembered it, curvy and welcoming. When Vinny broke up with Jillian for another girl, Mitch was waiting for her in the wings. Eventually, they all became a happy threesome of friends, though he always sensed a subsurface bitterness from Jillian.

But Vinny saw things had changed. The threesome into which he’d hoped to reenter was no longer there. Kids, jobs, marriages. Too much had happened to each of them over the years, though none of it shared between them. As it goes with reunions and old friends, the past was their only tie and it made meeting one another in the present more awkward than meeting a perfect stranger.

“Vin, we’ve got to ask,” said Jillian, stroking Nina’s back. “Why did you leave home? Mitch said you called from Arizona or something.”

“Got laid off,” said Vinny, before taking a swig of beer. It was too early in their visit to broach the issue of Carol and too late in the night to tell even half truths. “What can you do, right?”

“We’ll find you something,” Mitch said assuredly. “I’ll put a few calls in tomorrow,
but you should relax for the weekend. We’ll get started Monday, eh?” He raised his beer can, cheering himself.

“Your wife,” Jillian said to Vinny, pointing at his wedding band and signaling him to fill in his wife’s name for her. Vinny remained silent. He’d not taken off the ring yet, whether forgetting to or refusing to, he wasn’t certain. “She’ll come once you’ve found a job and place, right?”

Vinny fidgeted with the ring and nodded.

“She must be excited.” Jillian smiled.

“She is,” sighed Vinny, his grip constricting the beer can. The empty aluminum can snapped loudly in his hand.

“You must be exhausted,” said Mitch, whose eyelids had drooped considerably since they sat down.

“I am beyond tired,” Vinny said, pushing himself up from the recliner. “All I need is one good night’s sleep I think.”

Jillian went over a list of household details and finished by saying, “There are fresh towels in the bathroom. Please make yourself at home.” She kissed him on the cheek and wished him goodnight before walking upstairs behind the two daughters she would tuck into bed.

“A lucky man,” Vinny said to Mitch.

“Sure am.” Mitch put his hand on Vinny’s shoulder and said, “Listen, tomorrow I want to hear everything.”

Vinny ignored Mitch’s solicitous inquiry and, as they ascended the stairs, asked which room was his. Once at the top, Mitch pointed down the hall at a bedroom door on
the left and said, “That one’s yours, man.”

“Thanks a lot. Really.”

Vinny’s duffle bag collided with the metal bars of the banister and sent a ringing through the hall. He placed his hand on the railing to settle the vibration and continued to his room. Directly across from his room was the girls’, from which leaked a thin stretch of ocher light under the door.

The spare bedroom was dull. Egg-white walls, dark plaid curtains, storage boxes in the corner, an old ironing board against the far wall, and beneath the window, a queen size bed with a blue comforter. He put his bag on top of a small dresser that had, he could tell by the scent, been freshly polished. He waited to go to the bathroom until the house was still, until there were no more whispers, no more toilet flushes, and no more creaking floorboards. The bathroom was full of entertaining distractions for kids. Toys in the dry tub. Starfish stickers on the wall. Toothbrushes with mermaids for handles. To say the least, Vinny felt out of place in the house and before he fell asleep, he promised himself he wouldn’t stay long.

He slept through most of the following morning, thanks to the darkening shield of the plaid curtains.
CHAPTER 6

Late the following morning, from her bedroom window, Lacey watched Nate in his garage and knew she had to go tell him about Vinny. When she got to his house, Nate was sitting in the shade of his dad’s old, light blue truck, which was parked in the driveway. He was poking holes in a black box. When she got closer, she saw that it was a large shoebox meant for boots and its top was a black and white landscape picture in the shape of a cowboy boot with a lone saguaro reaching from spur to leg.

Lacey peered over Nate’s shoulder as he finished making the twelve holes in the box with a screwdriver, four on the top and two on every side.

“What is it?” Lacey asked, looking around for any sign of Nate’s father. She preferred to avoid him at all costs.

“You’ll see.”

“Oh,” she said, almost forgetting her purpose for visiting. “You’re not going to believe——”

“I’m going to Utah with my dad in a few hours,” Nate said. “Hunting.” Anticipation lifted his eyes and tone.

“Why?” asked Lacey, with revulsion. It perplexed her greatly, Nate’s relationship with his father. One minute he despised and feared him, the next they were going out of town together.

“Because,” answered Nate. “He said I could. His roofing partner, Pete Duncan, he’s going, too. It’s like a real boys’ weekend, you know?”
“Fun,” sang Lacey, moving into the shade. She stood with her fisted hands at her hips.

The Dolan’s two-car garage, like most families’ on Birch Ave., was dusty, too cramped to accommodate a vehicle, hot, and missing dry wall sheets. Nate’s father, Greg Dolan, kept a slew of guns on the right side, while the left side was congested with everything else, including Nate’s and his mother’s stuff: bikes and wheels, a sewing kit, a large box marked X-Mas Decs in cursive letters, cracked dry garden hoses, an old end table with a missing glass knob, a fishing net, an unframed painting of a forest creek, three work horse benches, an old slot machine, a six-drawer tool box on wheels, and other dirty and unintelligible items only a family can identify. The back wall bore the water heater and washer and dryer and a small folding table on the right which was always piled high with clothes, clean and dirty. On the gun side of the garage, Nate’s father kept his prize rifles, the ones he liked to show-off and tell hunting stories about, protected in special cloth casings which he mounted on orange crampons against a custom peg-wall. Nate and his friends had permission to play in the garage as long as they didn’t mess around with any of his father’s guns. Greg Dolan warned them all that if anyone so much as touched one of the cases, he’d know. They, of course, called his bluff one day when Ryan, against Nate’s pleadings, removed the AHR CZ-550 rifle from its case—fiberglass stock, dovetail scope mounts, chrome-moly barrel, hinged floor-plate assembly—and pretended to be Mr. Dolan and shoot an imaginary buck which, in this case, apparently stood on the washing machine. The next day, Nate was punished for two things: not listening and not believing.

From her bedroom across the street that day, Lacey had heard the shouting coming
from Nate’s. When she looked at his house from her window, his mother was standing just outside the garage smoking and staring blankly at the ground. She saw the woman’s mouth moving, as though she were lecturing the very ground upon which she stood. Her body jolted in reaction to a sound—Lacey couldn’t hear what it was—that seemed to come from within the house.

When Nate was done with the holes, he said, “There, so it can breathe.” Then he reached into a dirty yellow bucket for her gift. In his right hand, he lifted a small reptile from the container. Nate held his thumb down on its back in case it tried to wriggle free and let the front legs hang over the ridge of his index finger so that it looked like the lizard was peering over a wall.

“It’s a baby,” she whispered. Lacey petted its small head with one finger, gently stroking the flat area between paranoid eyes that were set in the middle of two devilish spikes. “He’s so little,” she cooed, disregarding momentarily the reason she’d come over. “I have to tell you something, Nate,” she said, but he didn’t seem to hear her with his excitement about the lizard.

“Thought you’d like the little hornytoad, instead of the whiptail. The baby’s dad got away and I don’t think this one knew what to do. Right before it went under a rock, I just, wham, put my hand over him like that and I had him.”

Lacey’s glance fell on the lizard. She searched his flat round body with concern.

“No, not that hard, Lace. I didn’t hurt him, swear. Anyway, Ryan and Danny went for the dad, but I was like, no way, I want that little one. They’re harder to find, too, ‘cause they just lie there like a flat stone, can fit just about anywhere, but when they run, they’re faster than the adults. We were out there for two hours today. This was all I got, but we
saw three jackrabbits over by the wash. They were fast as hell.”

“Okay. Can I hold him now?” She cupped her hands in front of her as if for an offering of water. “Is it a girl?” Lacey shifted her position and scratched inquisitively at the sweaty bases of her ponytail.

“I dunno,” he said and turned the lizard on its back.

It wriggled as if it were swimming out of Nate’s hands, its eyes leaping and frightened. Once on its back, the horny toad’s white belly looked wet, oily even, but Nate explained that it had to be really sleek so that it didn’t catch on small rocks and plants, that it was designed to glide over everything. Lacey said cool and ran her finger down its disc-like abdomen. When she reached what she imagined to be its stomach area, it inhaled, as if tickled by her, and a striation of tiny rib bones pushed against the thin ventral skin. This sent the toad into frenetic spasm, legs kicking, head tossing, tail whipping, body writhing. A miniature claw scratched Nate’s hand. He cussed at the lizard for scraping him and tightened his grip.

“Don’t drop him!” yelled Lacey. “Or squish him!”

“I got him. Little shit,” Nate said, staring at the small abrasion on his hand.

“What is it? Can you tell if it’s a girl?”

By now, Nate used two hands to hold the pet, one hand for each set of limbs. The reptile was splayed and belly up. Spread eagle, Nate said.

They looked for its gender and saw nothing more than a paper cut-like slit.

“That means it’s a girl, right?” he asked.

“Probably.” They stared blankly at the sliver of white skin. Lacey was too embarrassed to look at Nate. “Whatever. It doesn’t really matter, I guess,” said Lacey.
“No one will know one way or the other.”

“Well, just give it a name.”

The door that led into the house creaked open. It was Georgie, his hands near his head on the door knob, his blue eyes big with anticipation.

“What is it?” he asked. “I wanna see, let me see.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Nate. “Come and look.”

He turned the horny toad over again so that its head poked malevolently from the curve between his closed thumb and forefinger. “Don’t stare into his eyes,” Nate warned his brother. “It’ll shoot blood at you.”

“Nate,” scolded Lacey. “Quit scaring him.”

“It’s true,” he said earnestly. “I swear to God.”

“Are you going to let me hold it?” she asked, reaching for her pet.

He told her to let the toad climb from his hands to hers. “Put your right hand in front of mine, yeah, like that. When he crawls into yours, you gotta push down with your thumb, sort of squeeze him.”

The horny toad, with its jagged back of spikes, stepped from Nate’s hand into Lacey’s. “There,” he said, letting go, “hold ‘em tight.”

Its crenellated dorsal thorns rose and fell in heavy breaths.

Lacey held it close to her face, but at an angle so that it couldn’t look directly into her eyes. If its fidgety head turned her way to stare at her, to spit blood from its eye sockets, she’d throw it across the room.

“What’s the name of it?” asked Georgie. Snot was running down his nose on to his
top lip. He didn’t seem to mind, running his tongue over his lip as though licking away a milk mustache.

"Georgie, wipe your nose," said Lacey, hoping he’d find a tissue or a towel. Instead, he wiped it with his blue and red striped t-shirt and sniffed the rest back into his nostrils.

"Thanks," said Lacey, shaking her head. She looked at the lizard in her hand and said, "Let’s call him Spike."

"That’s too obvious," Nate responded. And then for any number of reasons, Spike stabbed his claws into Lacey’s soft hand and launched free from her grip. Lacey and Georgie screamed, Nate shouted, shit!, and the orphaned lizard flew, landing unwittingly right into the box on the floor. Nate moved in a flash to get the box lid on then sat on the oil spotted cement floor and didn’t make a sound. The house door slammed behind Georgie, who’d run away in fright, while Lacey waited silently with her hands over her open mouth, unsure if Nate was mad at her for letting go. He’d be so angry at her, she thought, watching his back for a sign. A moment later, his shoulders began to shake.

"Nate? I didn’t mean to let…"

"That was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen!" he shouted, slapping the hot concrete. "He flew right into the box!"

Lacey followed his lead, relieved he wasn’t upset with her, and sat and laughed hysterically with him about the squeal she’d made, the oh shit look on Nate’s face, and the perfect irony of it all. When the laughing finally ceased, he held out the black and white box and said, “Well, so there’s your pet hornytoad.” And as he spoke another smile surfaced. “Your flying horny toad!”

They laughed again, holding their stomachs.
“Thanks,” she said. “I love it. But I have to tell you something. Remember the other night—”

“I’m sorry about all that. Ryan can be a real jerk.”

Lacey put her hand up to stop him from saying anything else. “No, not that.”

Nate’s eyes slanted in question, the humor in them already gone.

“That guy you gave directions to... Look,” she said, pointing at Vinny’s car. “My Dad’s friend.”

Nate’s went blank. “Oh, shit,” he said quietly. Lacey could see recollection surface in his eyes, as though he were going over every minute of that night. “I’m dead,” he whispered, and his expression changed. Pure fear had struck him, a panic inspired by the thought of his father.

“He’s not pissed,” she assured him. “But you should still come over and apologize.”

“No way.” Nate stood and began pacing in the garage, his hand at his forehead. “He’ll kill me.”

“No, he’s cool. I swear he won’t.”

From just outside the shade of the garage, Lacey heard the slamming of her garage door and looked across the street to see who it was. The glare reflecting off Nate’s dad’s truck, which was parked in the driveway, blinded her momentarily. She blocked the flash of sun with her right hand.

“Who is it?” Nate whispered. He’d ducked behind a rusty lawnmower.

“Him and my mom,” Lacey replied. “He must of just got up. They don’t see me. Mom’s putting a load of wash in, he’s just standing there talking to her.”

“Get down!” Nate exclaimed.
Lacey squatted on her haunches, like a frog, and remained perfectly still among a pile of miscellaneous objects. She wrapped her arms around her legs and waited.

"Shit." Nate wiped his temple on his forearm.

"It’s no big deal. I took care of it. He didn’t tell my parents anything."

"Not yet at least."

"He won’t, trust me." Lacey said assuredly. She was proud of herself for resolving the issue for Nate. "Anyway, if you want to come to a barbecue tomorrow when you get back, my parents told me to invite you, you can say sorry then."

He’d been staring at Vinny’s car while she spoke. “Yep, that’s the car, all right. Figures, doesn’t it?”

Lacey’s feet were falling asleep, so she sat down completely. Her shoulder touched the rim of a plywood shelf, and, no more than a second later, the entire ledge collapsed behind her—an air-pump, rusted candle sticks, two dusty board games, rubber boots, and a pair of gardening gloves toppled to the ground, though not before bouncing off her back.

“We gotta get out of here!” shouted Nate. “Go. Hurry!” He darted out of the garage, down the lane of pebbles lining the far side of his driveway. Lacey grabbed the lizard’s box and followed Nate until he came to a cinder block wall and hoisted himself up using mostly his arms. Lacey wanted to follow him—one of their friends, Scott Nester, lived a few houses down on the other side of the street—but her hands were full and she knew she wasn’t strong enough to climb the partition.

“I can’t,” she said to him, lifting the box as a reason. Nate was already perched on the wall, straddling it like a cowboy. Wall climbing was the one thing she couldn’t do with
the boys, and so she often missed out on swimming in strangers' pools. The boys would hop a wall, dive in and dash, leaving wet patches on the cinderblock as their trail.

“Yes you can.”

“No, you go. I can just walk home. Your dad won’t think it was me in the garage. He’ll just think it fell by itself anyway.”

“No, he’ll know it was me.” he said. He looked down the other face of the wall as if reconsidering his escape.

“Can you land?” shouted Lacey. The sun was in her eyes, the sky white with summer heat.

“No, I have to walk to the other end of the yard. There’s rose bushes below me.”

He attempted standing, one foot at a time. First, he balanced on the weight of one leg as he brought up the other foot. Once both feet were safely aligned on the four-inch wide beam of the wall, he stood shakily, arms out wide for stability. He inched halfway across the wall like a tightrope walker. Lacey waited in absolute silence. Several minutes later, when he found a spot where the landing below would be safe, he turned to Lacey and shouted, “I can land here.”

“Nate, I’m sorry about the shelf.”

A moment later, just before he dropped into the other yard, he said, “It was old, don’t worry about it.”

He was always trying to protect her, and she loved him for it. “What about Spike?” called Lacey, having almost forgotten about him.

“I’ll leave him on my porch before I take off for Utah.”
Lacey nodded in agreement, and Nate put his hand up as a wave before dropping over the edge. Lacey waited to hear him land. When she heard footsteps from the other side of the wall, she turned to leave. Reappearing on Birch Avenue, she was struck with a vision—Vinny crossing the street towards Nate's house.

Her nerves flared like a match. She walked swiftly, intending to meet Vinny in the middle of the street before he got to Nate’s house.

"What are you doing?" she said, her arms low and out to the side as she approached him. For a moment, Lacey wished she were a man, so she could be bigger and stronger, so she could harness the ability to intimidate those who threatened the weak.

Vinny had stopped and waited on top of a manhole cover in the middle of the street. He scuffed his boot at the protruding bolts. He'd only had one cup of coffee so far and was still drowsy from such a long slumber.

"Saying hello," he answered, once she'd stopped.

The sun was a high glare over Vinny’s right shoulder. Lacey put her hand over her eyebrow and said, "You promised you wouldn’t get him in trouble.”

"I won’t," Vinny said, his eyes going back and forth between Lacey and Greg Dolan. "Relax."

Without saying another word, Lacey marched towards her house feeling proud, effectual. The shade of her garage did nothing to help the heat, in fact, Lacey thought, it nurtured it, somehow like an oven. Her mother waited near the door after shutting the lid on the washing machine, which rumbled and bumped.

"Nate got me a horny toad, Mom. A baby lizard.”
“One warning—if that lizard so much as sticks his pointy little head in my house…” Jillian pointed at Lacey.

“He’s just a horny toad, they don’t bite.”

“I don’t care what it is. If I catch it, it’s leaving for good… right down the toilet. Get my drift?”

“Whatever,” sighed Lacey, disappointed that her mother didn’t share in her excitement. Before going inside, Lacey stole one last glance at Vinny. He and Greg Dolan were looking at guns, holding them at their shoulder, aiming them at tires and rocks.

“Why’s he got to make friends with Nate’s dad?” asked Lacey, stepping inside with her mother behind her. “Of all people.”

“Give him a break, Lace.” Jillian turned the knob to light one of the gas stove burners. She bent down and lit a cigarette off the blue flame. “I have a feeling he’s lonely and needs to make some friends.”
CHAPTER 7

Greg Dolan had suggested Vinny pack a bag and come hiking with them, they would leave in twenty minutes. Vinny didn’t want to be rude and leave his friends the day after he’d arrived, but when he ran the idea by Jillian, she thought it would be good for him. Mitch, she said, would be working late anyway and they’d have the latter half of the weekend to catch up. Besides, she’d told him, Greg might be able to line you up some work.

Relieved to be out of the heat and the house, Vinny sat at the window, Greg Dolan drove and Peter Duncan, Greg’s second-hand roofing man, sat in the middle. They small-talked on the way out of town. Strip-malls became lone antique shops, which became distant filling stations, which soon became nothing but road and signs. With a beer in hand, Vinny exhaled in relief, which left him languid and at ease in the sun and smacking air. He let his arm hang out the window and get tossed about by the erratic gusts. He watched the cuff of his rolled up shirt sleeve flap in the wind, and the warm engine drafts lift his black fleece of arm hair. Vinny looked at the vast landscape and watched it turn from a flat valley floor to a sinewy and colorful gorge. The canyon’s pink face was glabrous, as if the space for the road had been sliced out like a piece of pie. The highway circumvented Las Vegas, then ran northeast into the mountains. For quite a while, they drove on level ground, seemingly going more east than north. They were surrounded by bright sand, distant granite and lava ridges. Soon, however, the northbound inclination came upon them and the land became verdant with pines, oaks and blooming cacti. The
engine hacked and chugged up the first canyon and the air outside felt as though it had dropped ten degrees in the last mile. Vinny looked at the sky and saw nothing but blue. Not a cloud in sight, and the sun was somewhere ahead of them hidden behind a headland mountain. He caught glimpses of it when the Chevy reached the top of a hill after a laborious climb, then lost sight of it when they dipped below red rock mesas in the valley of a canyon. Even the shrubbery stood taller the farther north they drove. The saguaros seemed burlier—brawny trunks and sharper needles—and what used to be wiry desert plants from a sea-level desert were now clumps of thick-leafed foliage sprouting from granite crevices along Utah's roadsides. It was a landscape in which he'd never hunted before.

Vinny’s eyes followed Greg’s finger, which was pointing ahead at a snow-capped peak. They’d be there by sundown, have a bite, and a few drinks then hit the sack for a good night’s sleep.

With their destination in sight, Vinny felt a tinge of excitement, slight arousal of spirit. There he was with men, on their way into the wilderness. No noise, no women, no kids, no heat. And though he was thankful for Mitch and Jillian’s hospitality, he, too, was relieved to have escaped their house for a night, leaving the cramped space, cartoons, dusty windowsills and endless girlish clatter.

Vinny brought his right arm in from the wind in order to scratch the thigh of his jeans. A loose thread must have rubbed him, or maybe his own leg hair irritated his skin. Whatever the cause, he scratched. And, as he did, he noticed that the scraping of his fingernails left hazy white claw marks on his faded denim. The more he scratched the
more it looked like chalky layers of tic-tac-toe games. He stared at the grill-like palimpsest on his jeans.

He was still in a daze, thinking about marriage in general, his in particular. A beer-inspired revelation came to him: he and Carol had outfitted their marriage like a pair of Levi’s worn backwards and inside out. Empty pocket-sacs exposed. Seams frayed. Stitches loosely sewn. Roomy where they shouldn’t be, too tight where they should. And no belt loops to help the sag. He shook his head, disappointed in himself for thinking of her at all and embarrassed by his metaphor. It would be best, he thought, to avoid thinking about Carol when he was buzzed.

Peter Duncan said sure thing to Vinny’s request for another beer. He handed Vinny the beer from the cooler between his ankles and let him drink in peace. Vinny was grateful and while he gulped down the beer, he smoothed out the scratch lines on the thigh of his pants. He finished his drink in near record time and crunched it in one hand. Without looking, he threw it out the window and howled. Peter and Greg seemed stunned by Vinny’s outburst and stared at him in silence for a moment, Greg looking at the road then at Vinny then at the road again. Vinny must have inspired Greg, because not a minute later, Greg and Peter, both, followed suit and bayed and barked and clanked beers with Vinny. He didn’t know his comrades, but he was glad to finally feel connected.

“So,” started Vinny, after they settled down some. “A roofing business?”

“Yep,” Pete said coolly, “Top of the World Roofing Company at your service.”

“You looking for work?” asked Greg.

“Yeah, eventually.” Vinny drank and reached for his cigarettes.

Greg nodded slowly, as if in deep thought.
There was something about these men that was curious to him. They didn’t seem like hunters dedicated to the hunt. When they’d packed, they seemed more concerned about where the beer would fit than the equipment. It’s not that he took issue with such priorities—he wouldn’t have gone on the trip without that kind of beer stock—it’s just that he found them sloppy for hunters.

“If I’m right,” said Vinny humorously. “You guys spend money on serious hunting rifles, get wasted in the mountains and shoot anything that moves.”

“You could say that.” A smile lurked in Pete’s eyes.

“I like it,” said Vinny, laughing both with them and at them.

“No,” said Greg. “That’s not all true. I’ve taken down a six point before.”

Peter shook his head and scratched at the gray hair bursting from beneath the rim of his cap. “That was a goddamn accident and you know it. It ricocheted for chrissake.”

“Fuck off. At least I got one. You don’t have shit to show for these trips.” Greg made eye contact with Vinny and finished, “Lesley, Pete’s wife, she started to wonder if he was really on these trips if he never brought nothing home.”

“I tell you guys what…after this trip, you’ll have enough meat to show your women that’ll look like you went on five expeditions.”

“I like a big shit-talker,” said Greg. “You’ll fit in just fine.”

They all laughed and chugged more and more beer until the foot of the passenger side was ankle deep with empty cans. Vinny felt as though they liked him, or at least were entertained enough by him. In more ways than Vinny would admit, he was a lot like them on these trips. Driving to leave, not necessarily to arrive.
For the next two hours, the men spoke of jobs and women and sports and roofing and Las Vegas and money, and as they did, the sky turned topaz blue and hot-pink in the low west. Vinny refused to reveal much about his life, except that he had separated from his wife and looking to start over.

They parked in a dirt pull-off on the cliff-side of a windy road. Slouching pine boughs swept atop the truck cabin’s roof when a heavy breeze weaved past. They unpacked their gear and hiked with flashlights down a gradual escarpment that was littered with roadside trash. Chip bags. Beer cans. A tennis shoe. The sky still held a twinge of blue in it, though it offered little illumination for them as they hiked, besides backlighting the trees and ridges ahead. They hiked until all signs of man had vanished.

They found a small and relatively flat glade and decided it would do for the night, that they’d rather have their campsite near the truck and their noise and scents far from their hunting grounds. Pete gathered some large granite stones to make a fire pit while Greg unpacked a sack of kindling and a wad of newspaper—with the threat of summer storms, you could never count on finding dry wood. Greg lit the fire with a zippo lighter and the three of them sat around the campsite grilling hotdogs and eating potato chips. They raised their beers several times, honoring the success of the trip, here-here-ing luck for Vinny’s new life out West, and eulogizing the animals they’d shoot tomorrow. They bullshitted heaps of exaggerated tales and occasionally one of them would excuse himself and step beyond the campfire’s bright reach and relieve himself in between raised roots of trees. The smoke from the campfire towered above the pines, blurring the stars and cloudless sky.

“Your son sure seems like a handful,” said Vinny. The beer had hit him an hour ago
and now he was simply rambling to keep the waning conversation afloat. Peter had long since passed out on top of his sleeping bag. “I wouldn’t know what to do with a son. If I had one that is. I never got to have one.”

“You mean, Nate? He’s a smart-ass if I’ve ever seen one. Takes after his mother.” Greg’s face, round with small eyes, was illuminated then shadowed in the quick dances of the flames.

“We were probably just like him at that age. Defiant, daring. Hell, I played tons of pranks like his on old people for no good reason at all ‘cept showing off. I just hate admitting I’m the old guy now.” Vinny laughed and searched his pockets for a cigarette.

“What kind of pranks?” said Greg, his speech, like Vinny’s, was slow and slurred.

“Yeah, Nate, he did a doozey on me, gave me bad directions to Mitch’s. I just can’t believe I fell for it all. Shit,” he chuckled. “I thought I made that one up.”

“Really?” Greg asked before finishing his beer. He tossed it into a pile, and opened another. He reclined and passed out, never taking a first sip.

Vinny’s drunken thoughts were elsewhere as he drifted to sleep in the silence that smoldered as long as the fire. Back when he and Mitch were young punks, they had the time of their lives. They hitchhiked, stole cases of beer out of the back doors of bars, lied to girls about how much they liked them. And before falling asleep, Vinny recalled the time he and Mitch had gone fishing in the middle of the night. They’d caught one large catfish and decided, for prank’s sake, to transport it to the controlled fishing pond in the town park. Three weeks later, on the cover of the city’s newspaper, was the headline, \textit{Foreign Catfish In Local Fishing Pond}. The bestial fish had depleted the pond of trout. When interviewed, the wildlife official called for the arrest of the unknown pranksters.
and called the ruse an environmental genocide. Mitch and Vinny had laughed themselves into tears when they saw the article.

Life was good back then, thought Vinny, as he sunk to sleep.

The hum of invisible insects gently urged morning along. Early birds still tossing and turning in their nests chirped and whistled intermittently for the light. As the sun flushed the horizon pink, distant rims of granite converged with light and became definite, obsidian, the same slow way an echo meets red rock and becomes a voice.

Something startled the men awake, a gentle clopping of hoofs beyond the circa of pines that bordered their camp. The buzz from beneath the bark's skin ceased, squawks from the high branches were buried in the heights. There was a mighty presence near. The men grabbed for their rifles and made amateur blunders with their voices, kicked cans, ruffled rayon, and snapped twigs, all of which agitated Vinny to no end.

Then another hush. The warm morning glow on the skyline cleaved night and day and, as it extended towards a dark sky, the crest of dawn lit up the tops of vista pines. The dark curtain had been lifted. Shadows darted in the new light, exposing the three deer.

Quick gestures, throaty coughs and wet sniffles were all momentarily suspended as the men poised themselves for a kill. They looked to Vinny for direction and he knew that once the orange light filtered down between the branches, the deer would see them, and they the deer.

A fawn sharpened its stare in the direction of their camp, and then, as if it could hear the thoughts of its eventual killers, it bounded behind a robust figure, a six-point buck that stood motionless and wide-eyed as a mantle trophy. The commotion confused Greg
and Peter, causing them to jolt out of their statuesque poses. No one got a shot off. All thumbs released the hammer.

“Goddamit!” Vinny said. Hollow knockings of hoofs quickened then disappeared. “You can’t move a muscle! Especially when the buck’s entire goddamn ribcage is smiling right at you!”

“It’s early, man. We’ll track ‘em after breakfast,” said Peter. “After I get rid of this headache,” he added.

Greg, who wasn’t completely conscious yet, curled up like a cub at the base of a majestic pine, said, “I’m right behind you, Vinny. I’ll be right there.”

Vinny pushed himself up using the nose of rifle. He burrowed his hand in a blue duffle bag and removed a cartridge for himself. “Sweet dreams, boys,” he said, departing from the camp’s circle and heading east, the way the buck and its family had gone.

Ropes of sunrays stretched past pine trunks and lazy-armed branches. As the light flashed on Vinny’s vest, he became conspicuous and in need of shelter. Because the deer were surely in search of a morning drink, he’d find them near a stream, though one far from camp. He shuffled quietly along a path of glittering shale, compact enough as to not sink and crush like snow beneath him. With his rifle over his shoulder, he sat and shimmied down the face of a tumescent boulder, arching his back over the rock’s solid urgings, stretching his toes for earth. As his feet hit the bottom of the shallow canyon, a powdery plume of sandstone marked his landing. He compassed the stream and saw he was alone. The deer would arrive soon. He decided to find a spot on a shelf so that his shot could more easily nail the buck between the withers. Back up the shelf he went, jamming his boot into crevices on the way. He strained to test the strength of a sage’s
root for leverage. When he found it too weak to hold him, he faced the rusty stone to briefly rest his neck. Sweat started to drip down the bridge of his sharp nose by then, so he used the warm rock as a tissue.

On the outcropping of a thin shelf that had been carved saucer-like by the lateral forces of erosion, Vinny bellied up to its jutting edge to investigate his quarry. The only flaw in his spot was that if his first shot missed, he would not be able to chase the deer by foot. He would have to hope for a sunny lane of canyon and the deer’s failed attempt at evasion. From maybe thirty feet up from the foot of the canyon, he could see across the shady divide, which was crucial in case the deer descended from up above down a narrow path of stones. Where the stream bulged, water pooled and churned in several distinct circles, which Vinny knew would draw the deer. They preferred the calm waters to the tumbling riffles. He aimed at a stone. He practiced following nothing with the point of his rifle. Silently, he made a crashing shooting noise with his mouth—bacccao! He was ready. Though the meat would not be breakfast, he felt his stomach shiver with the anticipation of a kill and the sound that emanated, a dirge of something other than hunger rankled his mind and body.

Moments later, knockings of hoofs tumbled into the canyon. Vinny looked across, below and beside himself without moving anything but his eyes. He saw boughs of pine oak wafting in a high canyon breeze, a thin iguana bouncing on a far sandstone rock and the white tail of a tawny rodent disappear into a tangle of bush. The rumbling continued. He was wide awake, circumspect in his course. He waited, sure they were descending from his side of the canyon, sure any moment he’d spot a mess of ungulates kicking up russet sand near the stream.
And soon he did. The animals arrived discreetly, and he admired them for a moment as they scanned the narrow gorge, listening with erect ears for metal clicks, all the while sniffing for danger. This reminded him of his companions. He hoped they wouldn’t show and botch his hunt. It seemed neither the buck nor Vinny smelled visitors. The stoic animal swung its head up and down the shady defile as its doe lapped water like a kitten, crouched and chary. Reacting to something Vinny could neither hear nor see, the buck displaced its stance by stomping at the ground near a copse of dry bush. It faced the inconspicuous peril with stiff ears and a graceful poise that seemed unencumbered by the weight of antlers.

Nice try, Vinny said to himself.

The buck thrust again, this time smacking a cluster of wet granite stones before its front hooves splashed into the bank’s alluvium. Once at rest, the wet pelage along its hocks shone like dark oil.

Vinny burrowed his thick shoulder into the butt of the rifle and took aim at the buck. If he shot him first, Vinny knew, the fawn would not abandon its father, could not evade the subsequent bullet. He adjusted the stock against his jawbone and stared down the barrel.

All three deer turned simultaneously. They spotted him. He was crouched above them against the red rock, the dark eye of his rifle staring down. He hadn’t moved or made a sound, though he wondered if they could hear his visceral devices, his internal swearing, his heart thudding through bone and steel. Fuck ‘em, he whispered aloud, irreverent, insolent. They continued to stare, still as rocks. The buck’s side was to Vinny, exposing a perfect shot near the shoulders.
Vinny took it. The discharge seemed to shatter the air into tiny pieces of glass, each reverberation a prick on flesh; at the same time, the buck’s front legs collapsed. Its hocks beveled in the powdery sand. The blood sluiced from the wound as it knelted further towards the ground. As the rest of its trunk gave in and thudded with a low splash into the stream, shards of stinging air crashed against the canyon walls then erupted over the cragged edges. The other two, the lean doe and the fawn, took off as if chasing the sound of tumbling metal upstream. They disappeared into the noise, darted and bounded over pale thickets and wet rocks and were gone by the time the dimples in the puddles had settled. Vinny didn’t even bother taking aim at them.

He scuffled down the canyon towards his kill. His boots scraped against rocks and roots. At the bottom, he could hear the distant guffaws of his two companions. Their laughter seemed to tumble from the sky itself. With the buck now shot, clamor was inconsequential to Vinny so he tilted his head and shouted up canyon at them about how he’d gotten one, and shot one, and nailed the summabitch.

Moments later, their capped heads appeared from a shady cluster of pines. Peter and Greg stood on the ledge of a limestone promontory in the yellow light of day with toothy smiles and red faces. They waved at Vinny below with one hand and hoisted a can of beer with the other. Their bodies swayed with each arc of their greeting. Vinny motioned for them to climb down, but doubted they’d make it without falling.

Finally, after some dusty slips, they gathered around the stunned-eyed corpse next to Vinny. They’d brought a few beers with them and handed one to Vinny. They clanked foaming cans of cold beer over its hide and prated about its size, muscle, rack. The white froth vanished into its dark coat, which was streaked black and brown like the skin of an
almond. While Vinny recounted the hunt—he exaggerated the story by adding to it a fierce rattler snake, which was in striking distance of his face, and made his shot more complicated and graceful—Peter and Greg scuffed their booted feet against the shore of the stream and turned over rocks with their toes.

“She’s a beaut,” said Greg. “No doubt about that.”

“Sure is,” echoed Peter. He brushed his hand over his crotch of his jeans and shifted his weight. He held his beer out for a toast.

“I think you’d make a great roofer,” said Greg. “What’d you say? You could give it a try, see how you like it.”

Vinny scratched his forehead with the knuckles on his hand. Somehow, by shooting a buck, he’d proven himself as roofing man. And though there was no logic to Greg’s offer, Vinny wasn’t one to question a job opportunity. He liked these guys and thought that working side by side with Mitch might get too claustrophobic. He’d at least give it a try.

“Why not?” he said.

“Cheers,” Pete said, changing his stance.

“Yeah,” said Greg, raising his drink once again. “Cheers to working with you. And what a damn good kill.”

The gravel of stones crunched beneath them like packed ice as they dragged the buck upstream, where there the bank lengthened up and out of the canyon. There the dirt crept uphill with an ascent shallow enough for them to haul up their prize over the lip of the ravine.

Vinny decided the trip had been worth it. A new life was close, he could smell it.
CHAPTER 8

While Vinny huddled in front of a campfire, Lacey woke up in Boulder City when Nina, whispered her name. “What?” Lacey whispered to her sister. Lacey was half asleep and slowly rising to consciousness, like a swimmer up from the depths.

“Listen.” Nina lay on her side with her large eyes open fearfully. Lacey could see the whites of them in the faint light of the room.

“I don’t hear—” And then there was a stony click on the window. “Crap,” she said more to herself than to Nina. She tossed the covers away from her thin body leaped out of bed. “Nate.”

Since Nate’s dad had left for the hunting trip without him, Lacey and Nate had planned on sneaking out and camping in the desert behind her house. She’d set the alarm clock, or so she thought, until she realized that she’d set it for a.m. instead of p.m. It was 11:40 p.m and she was only ten minutes late.

She stood in between the dresser and her bed, one knee resting on her pillow, and held the curtain aside as she split the thin blades of the blinds. She didn’t see Nate anywhere. She assumed he was waiting at their rendezvous point, which was on the other side of her mailbox, just out of reach of the streetlight and in the shade of her neighbor’s ficus. She rushed around her bedroom and gathered all that she needed, including a bag that was stuffed in the back corner of her closet. She filled it with a flashlight from her father’s workbench in the garage, a large bottle of water, two chocolate bars, a pack of gum, cards, a small gray fleece blanket, and a book of matches. With that ready, she tied
her tennis shoes in the dark and knotted a long-sleeved shirt around her waist. As she clenched the tie at her mid-drift, she squinted wearily against the slices of light in her eyes. She was wearing a red tee-shirt that wrinkled tautly at her armpits, stretching slightly the large, iron-on decal of a sparkling unicorn flying over a stream and a pastel rainbow. Lacey wore her favorite denim shorts as though they were a summer uniform. She could wear them only during summer vacation because they violated the finger-tip dress code regulation at school—all shorts and skirts had to at least reach the tips of the student’s fingers when they put their hands to their sides. They showed off her sinewy legs that had been bronzed by sunny days of playing in the street and desert. The only thing that troubled her about her shorts was that her leg hair was quite noticeable. It was too hot to wear anything but shorts all day and night, so she’d finally resigned herself to furry legs, though in situations like this, when she’d be alone with Nate, it made her nauseatingly self-conscious.

She lifted her bag around her shoulders and was ready. She didn’t bother sticking pillows under her blankets to fool a suspicious parent, because she and Nate had decided to be home by sunrise, before anyone was awake. And if they were caught, the two of them would pitch their sacks and sleeping bags and tell their parents they went on a sunrise lizard hunting expedition. With Nate’s father gone until later the next morning, they weren’t too worried. Lacey told him that she could handle her parents if he could handle his mother.

At her bedroom door, Lacey whispered goodbye to Nina, who’d already fallen back to sleep, and then held the knob securely in her hand and turned it all the way to the right, as slowly and quietly as she could. Once the tongue of the door was out of the lock, she
opened the door and slid out of her room, shutting the door in the same manner in which she opened it. She’d completed the first obstacle without a click or squeak. At the opposite end of the hall, her parents’ bedroom door was ajar, as it normally was four or five nights out of the week, and the darkness within was black and lusterless as charcoal. Lacey continued down the hallway. She passed two bedrooms, one of which was a spare room of no function, and in it there was a twin bed, an ironing board, a broken exercise bike and a dresser. The other was a small room her mother had renovated into a nursery three years ago, though it had not yet seen a soft-skinned occupant and wouldn’t, her parents said, until dad got a raise. Lacey turned left at the end of the carpeted hallway and descended the stairs in slow motion, as if each step might crack the foundation beneath her.

At the front door, Lacey pressed down on the thumb-release handle in one heavy gesture. A swift and deliberate move was the only way, she’d learned, to avoid making a sound when sneaking out.

The night sky was cloudless and deep, a sensation offered by the varying levels of radiance in the winking light of stars. With her head back, Lacey let herself fall into a minor spell of vertigo.

“Pssst,” she heard from the bushes. “Pssst!”

“Okay. I’m coming. I can’t hardly see you.”

Walking across the bare dirt plot of her front yard, Lacey heard something ahead of her, rocks rubbing against one another and crackling dried leaves in the process. She turned the corner at her mailbox and saw Nate crouched on smooth, fist-size rocks of various gray tones near the cinder block wall that separated the properties. Dead leaves,
balled up like crumpled notebook paper, were scattered about the yard. He had two sleeping bags and a backpack with him.

"What took you so long? I've been out here forever," said Nate with irritation. He stood and started arranging his bag over his shoulder, the sleeping bags in his arms.

"I set the alarm clock wrong. Sorry."

"Let's just go," he said, handing Lacey a rolled up army-green sleeping bag. The strings must have broken, because the sack was tied tightly with a fraying piece of rope.

Nate Dolan was a shrewd, good-looking boy—copper freckles across the bridge of his nose and along his high cheekbones, muddy brown hair that curled behind his ears when it got too long, and thin lips so red you'd think he was wearing his mother's lipstick. But it was his mossy green eyes that Lacey could never get out of her head, and her sympathy for him that made her want to love him even more than she already did. His father was rough with Nate, though not with Georgie, who happened to be about the same age as Nina and as in love with her as Lacey was with Nate. Sometimes, Nate would play outside in a dress shirt, with the collar up like the good-looking television stars, and the sleeves all the way down to his wrists to hide the bruises. Kids had started to make so much fun of him that he didn't play outside very often. And when Lacey didn't hear from him for days or see him standing on her front porch on Saturday mornings after cartoons, she knew things were bad at home. Such circumstances toughened him on the outside but shriveled his insides, so much so that he had few friends who would put up with his aggressive attitude and emotional fits. Few friends that is, beside Lacey.

Before getting to the main cross street of Birch Avenue and Sorrel Boulevard, there was a short left-hand turn off Birch Avenue that dead-ended straight into the desert. At its
conclusion were a warped guardrail and a yellow street sign that had been pocked with stones during a game the kids in the neighborhood called Stone Throw. The protective rail wasn't long enough to block off the road completely, so Nate and Lacey squeezed by, lifting their sleeping bags overhead to avoid catching them on a loose nail or a jagged edge.

They walked a few hundred feet on flat desert land, maneuvering between clumps of sagebrush and prickly thorn bushes, until the earth became a crusty blanket of limestone. Some minutes into their hike, Lacey looked over her shoulder at Birch Avenue. She counted along the band of glowing coronas over every other house or so and finally recognized hers. It was the eighth light down from the dark gap of the dead-end. She recognized the orange cast around her house. Other lamps were neon white, pale green, yellow.

Lacey followed Nate up a steep incline she couldn't remember ever having climbed before.

"Have I been here?" she asked, panting up hill.

"Probably. It's not the same in the dark, that's all," he said over his shoulder. "Good spot for iguanas and whiptails."

He was right about the darkness, Lacey thought, as they neared the limestone and granite precipice. The desert valley behind her house was a different world without the sun. The blackened mountains were indiscernible, mere silhouettes against an equally dark sky. The desert floor seemed fragile and hoary in the moonlight. But it was hot, the sun's heat still rising off the stone and sand.

"I'm hungry," said Lacey.
“You’re always hungry.”

“I know.”

“What d’you bring?”

“Chocolate. You?”

“Chips. Which first?” he asked.

Lacey ignored his question and started a new conversation. She did this sometimes when she thought indifferently about the topic or believed she had a more exiting one in store.

“This stuff’s getting heavy. We almost there?”

And before he could answer, the valley opened up below her.

“Wow,” she said, dropping her sleeping bag and backpack.

Things she couldn’t see from ground level were now visible. The dry lakebed in the west, the one high school kids would go to in jeeps after a rainstorm and come back into town covered in clay-like mud, like a mosquito hive. The two-lane highway to Searchlight, which was lit up with red and white car lights, ran straight through the dry lake.

“Look,” said Lacey, pointing to it. “They drive right through it. Have you ever been there?”

“Sure,” Nate said. “It’s hard and bare. Nothing big.” He put down his load and jimmied the knot loose around his navy blue sleeping bag.

“I think it’s cool that there used to be water there and now people just drive through the dry sand like it was never there at all.”
“I like it here ‘cause it’s quiet,” said Nate. “You can’t even hear them cars on the road. Listen.”

She did and all she heard was the hum of electric cables that were strung across the valley along enormous electrical posts. Neither of them said anything for a moment, they both listened and observed. Once the beauty of the landscape faded for Lacey, fear emerged like a sudden dawn.

“What about snakes?” she asked.

“What about them? They won’t bother us.”

She was neither eased nor persuaded by him.

Nate yanked on the string around the other sleeping bag, the one he brought for Lacey, unzipped it completely and then spread it on top of a flat area of lava rock a few feet from the edge of the overhang. Lacey helped him by pulling the corners taut. Then Nate unraveled his sleeping bag and spread it over Lacey’s.

“Question,” said Lacey, with her hands on her hips.

“Shoot.”

“How will we wake up in the morning?”

“The sun, of course. You know, it’s called waking up at the crack of dawn for a reason. That’s how hunters do it.”

Lacey felt sorry for Nate and was furious with Vinny for taking his seat on the hunting trip. Nate must have seen the concern in her eyes.

“I’m kidding. It’s no big deal,” he said, arranging a sweatshirt for a pillow. “My watch has an alarm on it.”

Lacey hesitated to sit down until Nate assured her that the snakes were more afraid of
her than she should be of them. He reminded her how much time she’d spent in the desert without ever seeing one and said it was because of real estate. They don’t like people, he said. Lacey exhaled, blowing out all of her anxiety and fears, and acquiesced.

They sat on the slick side of the blue sleeping bag and were glad to have the second one beneath them, because, even with it, they could still feel the sharp jabbing of the rocks on their legs. Nate opened the bag of chips and placed it between them. They lay back and looked at the stars, chomping hungrily on the chips.

“Go ahead,” Nate said, when their hands met at the opening of the bag. He held his out of the way.

“Thanks, sorry,” said Lacey. She placed a handful of chips on her stomach and ate one at a time.

The same thing happened several more times, but eventually, neither of them retracted their reach, letting their hands and fingers barely touch one another’s.

Lacey knew that if they’d just kiss, moments like this wouldn’t be so awkward. If they could just get that one gesture out of the way, she thought, maybe things would be different and they’d hold hands all the time like a true couple.

They finished the bag of chips and started on the chocolate bar. It was soft and deformed from the heat. She peeled away the thin foil wrapper and saw that the ingot-like divisions had disappeared.

“Just break a piece off,” she told Nate.

He bent the bar at its corner and pulled away a triangle wedge of malleable chocolate.

“Shit,” he said, realizing it was too big to fit in his mouth.

Lacey giggled at him and he smiled back helplessly, chocolate melting in his fingers.
She tried folding a corner away from his piece so they could share it.

“Just like Thanksgiving,” she said quietly, watching the chocolate separate.

Nate ate his smaller piece and asked what she was talking about. He made loud chewing sounds with his mouth. Lacey put hers in her mouth, licked her fingers and started to say, “You know.” But the chocolate had coated her tongue and the roof of her mouth, making it difficult for her to speak clearly. “The wishbone, you know?”

He shook his head.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never split the wishbone with Georgie.”

“No, I guess not,” he said, dropping his head. “What is it?”

“When you’re done eating the turkey, there’s this bone and you and someone else hold it at the same time and pull. Whoever has the most of the bone gets their wish.”

“My dad doesn’t like turkey. We eat ham on Thanksgiving.”

Lacey wasn’t sure if she should laugh or not, so she waited and searched his face. Finally, he looked up, and in those dense green eyes, Lacey saw the glint of a smile. With the permission she saw in his eyes, she started laughing. He followed and soon they were in hysterics.

Nate pulled away another piece of chocolate and ate it. Lacey still had a thin morsel left, which she compressed between the roof of her mouth and tongue, moving it along the rows of raised skin behind her front teeth. He reached for another piece, this one slightly bigger than the last.

“You finished the first one already?” asked Lacey.

Chewing, he nodded and said, “Huh-uh.”

“You chew yours? I’ve never seen anyone eat chocolate like this before.”
"Like what? I’m just eating it."

"I mean chew it so fast. You’re supposed to suck on it a little, let it melt. Like this," she said. She closed her eyes and finished melting the piece in her mouth, all the while humming, *mmmm, mmmm.*

"So, I like chewing it. What’s it to you?"

She had no rebuttal. Nothing she could think of could make Nate’s eating habits her business. "It’s not, I guess," she finally said and sat up. Crumbs from the chip pile on her stomach fell into her lap. She brushed them off herself and the blanket. Lacey gulped water from her jug and handed it to Nate.

"Snakes love chips," he said, before taking drink.

"Shut up."

With the help of the waxy white moonlight, Lacey noticed a smudge of chocolate at the corner of Nate’s mouth. She wiped her lips before mocking him, just in case she’d had some on her mouth, too. He pushed himself up from a reclined position and sat close to her, their knees barely touching. Lacey’s flushed hot and smiled with the shock of being touched by Nate.

"What’s so funny?" asked Nate.

She shook her head and changed subjects. "Are we sleeping under this blanket here?"

"If you want. Are you ready?"

"It’s getting late," she sighed, looking around as if the landscape itself supported her contention. She avoided looking Nate in the eyes.

"I guess," said Nate in a gentle voice. His face was near her shoulder, so close that
she thought the warmth on her neck could be his breath. She refused to face him, she was too nervous now.

Lacey rubbed her arms and yawned.

“Cold?” asked Nate.

“Kind of. Mostly tired though.” It wasn’t cold, but there was something chilling about the vast darkness around them, and because it was late summer, a scarce nip in the air could be most keenly sensed late at night, far enough away from the heat of car engines and the warmed tarred streets.

Disappointment sunk on Nate’s face.

They arranged their sweatshirts for pillows, folding and patting and tucking like bakers with their dough, and then lay down. On her left side, facing Nate, Lacey shifted around on top of sharp rocks, searching with her body for comfortable furrows in which she could nestle her hipbone and shoulder. The most agreeable spot happened to be close to him. Once Lacey was still, laying inches away from him, Nate gathered his fists under his chin and smiled blithely at Lacey.

“What?” she asked, of his suspect grin.

His teeth gleamed wet in the moonlight. “Nothing,” he said. “Just close your eyes.”

This is it, she thought, the very moment she’d dreamt about, practiced, fallen asleep thinking about. She swallowed once and did what he asked. Lacey’s body went into an anxious frenzy—her thigh muscles contracted, her stomach felt hollow as a drum, her eyelids quavered. Then she remembered the smudge of chocolate near Nate’s mouth and had to bury an imminent giggle, which only made it worse. She sensed him getting closer to her face, and not by the heat of his breath, but by something even less tangible and
more instinctual. And before his lips met hers—the tip of his nose was touching hers—she burst into a convulsive chortle. Nate jolted and fell backward. Lacey put her hands to her cheeks and laughed uncontrollably. When Nate repeatedly asked her what was so funny—his tone became more and more infuriated each time he questioned her—she could barely make out the word “chocolate” in between chuckles.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Nice,” he said, sardonically.

“I know, I’m sorry. I just couldn’t help it,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes. The stars were smears of light through the wetness in her eyes. “I don’t know what happened there.”

“I do,” he said. Nothing.”

And then Lacey realized her mistake. “You’re being sensitive,” she said, touching his shoulder. “I’m sorry, okay? I wanted to—”

“Forget it.”

Those were the last words between them that night. Before falling asleep, Lacey marveled at the hood of stars overhead and felt sad thinking of Nate, because he was the loneliest person she knew. And she’d just made it worse.

The morning rushed in as though a lid had been lifted from the valley, revealing a pale dawn within. The morning dawn remained sunless for sometime, though bands of pink sky broadened over the basin’s jagged rim.

“Wake up,” urged Lacey, pushing Nate’s shoulder. “We’re late. Sun’s up.”

He rubbed his eyes and blinked rapidly, adjusting his eyes to the morning sky. It was already hot.
“Let’s go,” said Lacey. “Shit.”

“Give me a sec will you?” His voice was deeper than she’d ever heard it before.

“We don’t have a sec, Nate. Come on!” Lacey packed her bag, gathered the litter of chips bags and chocolate wrappers.

“I can’t get up right away. Hold on."

She finished tying her tennis shoes and stood up at the foot of their bed.

“No,” she shouted, pulling the blanket off him. “Now! So much for your watch alarm!”

Nate rolled over onto his stomach and yanked the blanket back over him.

“Sorry, okay? I’ll be up in just a sec!” he yelled, his pubescent voice like an off-tune bugle.

Lacey walked away and stood at the edge of the promontory with her backpack over her shoulders, looking contemptuously at the scene before her. The splendor of the sunrise was lost on her. How dare he, she thought. He sounded like his father, though she’d bitten her tongue when the thought of saying so entered her mind.

“Sorry,” she heard him say behind her. She ignored him, pleased to also hear the zipping up of sleeping bags.

Soon they were hiking home, Nate in front of Lacey, and in complete silence. Once her house was in sight, Lacey became paranoid about getting caught and asked Nate what she should say.

“Remember, early morning hike. Parents love that stuff.”

She nodded her head, like an athlete listening to a coach’s instructions.

Lacey traversed the lava rock landscape of her front yard in loud, crunching steps. At
the front door, which she’d left unlocked the night before, she pressed her right shoulder against the door as she clicked down the handle. The house was still, though she smelled coffee and heard water running through the pipes. Her father was up, surely showering for work by now. She’d have to sneak past their bedroom—praying the door was shut, which it might be as to avoid waking anyone with their voices—and dive back into bed.

Lacey walked in slow motion, rocking her feet down in noiseless heel-toe steps. The fifth stair beam creaked despite the pressure or placement of one’s foot, so Lacey avoided it altogether and covered two stairs in the stride of one. Over the edge of the staircase she saw that her parents’ door was shut. She continued her ascension with some relief and had just started to turn the corner of the hallway when she heard a noise from behind the closed doors. With her hand resting on the end of the banister, Lacey listened as her father breathed heavily, as if through his mouth. She also heard the subtle squeaking of their bed, skin smacking, and a licking noise that reminded her of Georgie eating a Popsicle. Lacey’s entire body pulsed at once, she was afraid to move, to breathe. She had only a vague idea about what was happening on the other side of the door and it was unsettling, disturbing in its elusiveness. She couldn’t stand there forever and risk being caught sneaking in and, even worse, eavesdropping, so she rushed down the hall to her bedroom and shut the bedroom door behind her with a light thud. Nina stirred in her bed, but didn’t wake. Lacey stepped out of her tennis shoes and shorts and climbed into bed.

Morning had already filled her room, but she was drowsy nonetheless. She fell asleep thinking about Nate, whether she and he would ever be like her mom and dad.
In the shank of a full morning, Lacey woke to the sound of Mr. Dolan's rust mottled Chevy hacking its way up the street. Its rumblings became more distinct: tinny pops of loose screws, the clank of the muffler against the underbelly of the truck. Lacey bounded out of bed and ran down outside—she saw her parents drinking coffee at the kitchen table when she rushed by—and sat curbside to see if they had shot anything and maybe, if she was lucky, she'd see Nate once more. The truck appeared as a small dot on the distant and blurry-hot horizon of the road.

The pale concrete upon which Lacey sat was already warm, too warm, in fact to sit on comfortably, so she adjusted herself, lifting each thigh when the surface beneath her became too much to bear. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the shoulder of her white tee-shirt which, with summers of sweat and dirt, had turned the pasty color of dough.

Nate waited too, rocking on a plastic porch swing, fiddling with a palm-sized leaf from the overhang of foliage near their front door. He and Lacey waved to one another, lifting a hand and breaking a shy smile that seemed to shrink with embarrassment from the night they'd just spent together. Georgie sat next to Nate, thrusting his short legs in the opposite direction of the swinging motion. He didn't appear to be bothered by the jarring sways.

Despite the lace-like cover of shade from an olive tree, which was set back in the yard and stretched its shadow to the sidewalk, Lacey’s body pulsed from the inside out. She watched her heartbeat thump in her ankle and was distracted by a red ant heaving its food over the arch of her bare foot. She couldn't feel it, though once she noticed it she tried as
hard as she could to sense the weightless tickle, but was left with only what she saw. As the red insect took its last tiny steps off the slope of Lacey’s right foot, food still intact, the loud truck advanced. It approached with a deliberately slow pace, which reminded Lacey of Fourth of July floats in the downtown parade. But instead of inspiring spectators to bray with enthusiasm, Mr. Dolan’s truck made those around it cover their ears.

Lacey saw that they had caught a bird in the rusted grill, probably a blue jay, since they always seemed to be either attempting suicide or playing dive bomb games with the cars near the Utah-Nevada border. She assumed it was the latter, since she’d never heard of an animal committing suicide. Humans, she was certain, were the only animals who considered their own death. The jay’s wings were a tangled crush of charred feathers, a blue-black stain smeared like an ink-spill across the nose of the truck. The thunderous hum of the pickup and the distorted blare of hard music rushing out of open windows droned as it slumped heavily into Nate’s driveway.

The incline of the driveway allowed Lacey to see into the truck’s bed where there was a mangled deer’s carcass. Its hind legs, thigh and neck were wrenched into the most unnatural, stiff poses. Eyes open blankly.

Lacey cringed and her ears burned—the onset of nausea. She turned her head and put her hand to her mouth. A moment later, a desperate curiosity took hold of her eyes, bringing them back to the gore in Nate’s driveway.

The straw colored mut, Shorty, who roamed the streets and desert and whom nobody appeared to own, suddenly turned the corner onto Birch Avenue. This dog must have regularly fought coyotes, because he had scars and scrapes near his face and a bad hip that made him walk like an old time gangster. His right hip gave in a little and sloped just
enough so that he looked full of purpose rather than condemned to a lame existence. As he rounded a crag of dry weeds the same tint as his coat, his nose wiggled with excitement. He huffed with every exhalation. He traced the source of a scent, it seemed, to the somewhere beneath the quavering waves of heat that danced on the street. He sniffed. He coughed. He licked hot gravel with a round tongue the color of bubble gum. Lacey watched the dog sniff again and take off like a racing greyhound following its plastic bunny around the track. Shorty’s nose seemed to skim the street so closely that with one misstep, one jolting slip of the hip, he was bound to sear his wet nose on the skillet of the street. He followed the trail of blood to the end of Nate’s driveway, and finding nothing, he turned around and headed down Birch Avenue. He passed a dilapidated housing sign that read Canyon Hills-A Desert Community, until he rounded a scantily shady comer of sage on Arroyo Circle. Lacey shook her head at the misdirected dog that would have to run hundreds of miles to Moab, Utah in order to find the end of the scent trail, which would surely be marked by a small crimson pool in the wet shale of the canyon.

Across the street, a truck door slammed.

“Son,” shouted Nate’s dad, “get on over here!” He was standing at the driver side door.

Vinny and the other man were on the other side of the truck-bed, lifting out equipment. They seemed to be eavesdropping, too.

Nate and Georgie had been waiting at the top of the driveway, away from the hustle and bustle of the unloading, and Nate rushed to his father when he was called. Lacey saw Nate’s mouth move, but she couldn’t make out his quiet words.
“You think that’s funny?” she heard his father say, before slapping Nate across the face. It sounded like a quick pop from where she sat. Vinny and the shorter man looked away as if they hadn’t seen or heard a thing. Georgie’s shoulders began to shake. Lacey guessed he was crying.

Nate touched his palm to his cheek. His father said, “Apologize to him!” and pointed at Vinny.

Stunned as if hit herself, Lacey watched Nate walk around the truck towards Vinny. Before he got to him, Vinny turned to Greg and said, “Man, I didn’t mean to get him in no trouble. He was just kidding around. This is un—”

“Bullshit. He’s my boy and I say it’s unacceptable. Let him talk now.” He folded his arms and waited.

Lacey saw Nate looked at Vinny. She was certain he apologized then, because afterward Nate’s father nodded his head and expressed his approval. “Lesson learned. I gotta take a leak.” Mr. Dolan walked into the shady garage and disappeared into the house. The other friend hung rifles on the peg board wall, after polishing them then sliding them in their insulating cases.

Lacey wasn’t sure if she should walk over there and give Vinny a piece of her mind, tell him that he had lied about not tattling, tell him that it was his fault Nate got hit. But she didn’t. She waited in the dry gutter feeling so guilty and sad she couldn’t move.

It appeared Nate and Vinny continued their conversation, though in voices so low and gestures so minimal that, as far as Lacey could tell, they might as well just have been staring at one another. Then she saw Georgie walking across the street. He stopped at the edge of the bone colored gutter and the tar patched gravel and looked both ways. Lacey
waved him over, gave him the okay to cross. He ran to her and sat close to her on the
curb. He nudged his shoulder against her arm and put his chin to his head. She
maneuvered her arm around Georgie so that she could comfort him.

“Hey, Mr. Georgie. You okay? Pretty rough over there, eh?”

He nodded then inhaled a snotty breath through his nose.

“Is your brother okay?”

Georgie shrugged and wept, “Dunno.”

“Oh, sure he is. He’s pretty tough.”

“Yeah.” Georgie sat up and wiped his eyes. He seemed hot and scared. His cheeks
were red beneath a layer of freckles, which, like Nate’s, spread across the bridge of his
nose and lightly over the thin skin beneath his eyes. Wisps of his honey hair gathered in
wet clumps of curls at the hairline near his forehead and ears.

Nate summoned his brother by shouting his name through cupped hands.

Georgie ran carelessly home, not checking both ways as he dashed across the heat
waves that swam on the street. Nate and Lacey watched him. And when they looked at
one another, their expressions immobilized with helplessness since Georgie reached his
yard, Nate rustled his little brother’s hair and smiled reassuringly at him.

Meanwhile, Vinny finished packing his bag then zipped it up. He slung it over his
shoulder and stopped half way down the driveway to say something to Nate—Lacey
couldn’t make it out— and instead of responding, Nate protectively pulled Georgie closer
to him and ignored Vinny altogether.

Lacey was walking back toward the house when she heard quickening steps behind
her and Vinny calling her name.
“What?” she snapped, turning to face him. She stood on the sidewalk while Vinny stood in the street. The few inches of height offered her a boost in confidence. “You promised! That was all your fault!” She pointed her finger at the ground when she spoke and sliced her arm through the air.

“I didn’t mean for any of that. The story slipped out late last night. I didn’t mean for him to get in trouble. I told Greg I wasn’t mad about it.” Vinny licked his lips and squinted against the sun in his eyes.

“You didn’t mean to?” Lacey stepped a few inches closer. She felt infinitely bold. “So, what? Nate got hit because of you. It doesn’t matter what you meant to do.” She turned and stomped ferociously up the step to the front door.

Vinny followed her inside.

At the foot of the stairs, Lacey turned around and said, “What did you say to Nate?”

“I told him I wasn’t upset with him and that I didn’t mean for him to get in trouble,” explained Vinny. He shrugged as if to say he was sorry and that he had nothing left to defend.

Lacey exhaled and looked at him. She could tell he was sincere about not trying to get Nate in trouble, she sensed that when he was talking to Nate on the driveway, but that couldn’t change enough of what had just happened. Intention did not, as far as she was concerned, pardon guilt.
While Vinny soaked in the sun—Nina was out of earshot playing in the sandpit, which was now dark in the afternoon shadow of the house—Mitch had been telling him that this was the second year of the worst drought they’d had in Nevada in the past thirty or so years. Vinny looked around the yard and saw the arid proof. Deadened cypress branches, with nodule-like leaves that were yellow and copper at the tips, canted away from the column shape of the tree. Small weed-like bushes of indistinguishable character shuddered in the slightest breeze, and the earth, like the thin arm skin of an old woman, had shriveled and cracked into a mosaic of wrinkles.

"The lake’s sinking every day,” Mitch said, his eyes closed tightly at the sun.

"Doesn’t look like it affects you any,” Vinny said. “You’ve got a job, a wife, kids. Rain’s your last concern I suspect.” The ice in their whiskey cocktails clinked lightly.

“Yeah. I suppose.”

Vinny looked at his one-time best friend. Mitch had not changed much since high school. He still wore his cotton tee-shirt and old Levi’s like a uniform. He was completely unadorned, save for a black rubber digital watch and the occasional presence of his wedding band that he said he wore only when Jillian got on his case about it. He still smoked cigarettes, though they were the lighter version now, drank beer and whiskey like he was seventeen, and looked at his wife with the same dumb and droopy eyes he had before they were married. He’d told Vinny that his job as a metal plant manager paid the bills and protected his family, and other than knowing a few big-wigs in town, it was
boring and mindless, replete with mundane duties, switches, pressure gauges, clocks, and levers. When Vinny told Mitch that such a life, the kids and the marriage, the small town simplicity, all sounded admirable and gratifying, Mitch replied by saying that he couldn’t complain.

After several quite moments, Mitch spoke again.

“How about you, man? What happened with you?”

Vinny closed his eyes, too, and faced the sun. The heat felt good, his entire body pulsed as though it were one, giant heart. He didn’t want to talk about Carol, but knew owed his friend an explanation for why he showed up at his house after all these years.

“Just went to shit.”

Mitch didn’t respond. Vinny interpreted his muteness as an encouraging silence. As he considered what to say, he watched sun spots flash on the inside of his lids like fireworks, some mustard yellow and some charcoal black.

“I don’t know,” Vinny continued. It was all he could manage.

“You cheat?”

“Hell no.”

Mitch swallowed the last sip of his whiskey and chuckled.

“No kids?” asked Mitch, stretching the knee he’d had bent.

“Nothing ever came out of it. We probably should have done more, tried harder, you know? Things might have been different.”

“It’s that serious, eh? Sounded like you were just taking a break for a while.” Mitch ran his fingers through his bark colored hair, which was wet with perspiration, and exhaled deeply. “Jill and I almost did once, but you’re right, kids complicate leaving.”
“Hah,” Vinny laughed sardonically, his third drink finally beginning to hit him.

“There was nothing very complicated about this one.”

Mitch nodded sympathetically, though Vinny was certain his point was lost on his friend.


Vinny had asked himself the same thing while driving for seemingly endless hours on dark, two lane highways. He hadn’t come up with anything much more concrete than wanting to see someone whom he’d known—but no longer really knew—when life was different, when he was happy. He hoped that seeing an old crony from high school would help him rediscover himself, the self that had once been vivacious and spontaneous and somewhat reckless.

“Just a new start with an old friend is all,” answered Vinny. “I’m seeing someone right now,” he said, though his intentions to see her again were flaccid as the skin around his throat. Nonetheless, he raised his drink in a self-congratulatory manner. “And she’s a spring chicken if I’ve ever seen one. What the hell, right? It’s my turn.” He nodded as if accepting his own toast, then drank.

“Hell yes,” Mitch exclaimed, lifting his glass. “Now, how spring is she exactly?”

They were looking at one another now, each man wearing a pernicious grin. Vinny thought Mitch was fascinated and maybe even a bit jealous of his new freedom.

“Let’s just say I cracked the shell.”

As though twenty years apart wasn’t but a moment lost between them, Vinny and Mitch high-fived like teammates after a touchdown. Their hands were wet and warm when they slapped, calluses in each man’s palm.
Vinny faced forward and saw Lacey was walking toward them, drinks in hand. She wore short jean shorts and a red and white striped tank top that revealed an inch or so of her abdomen. Her skin was tanned, the color of coffee with a dash of cream. She scratched her cheek against her shoulder, which made her seem bashful. Vinny sensed she was uncomfortable with being watched. That was a shame, he thought, because she’d be worth watching. Then he realized he was watching her at that very moment. It must be the booze, he thought. He redirected his eyes and let his stare fall into his dwindling drink, where the ice had melted away and watered down his final swig. He finished it by the time Lacey arrived, then he reached for a cigarette.

In the kitchen, Lacey had leaned on top of the faux-oak countertop watching her mother prepare another round of drinks. She’d arranged the stout tumblers in a row, each rimmed with two gold bands on the lip of the glass. Jillian dropped small handfuls of ice into each glass. She poured the amber alcohol down the line then back again, winking at Lacey when she was finished. She’d stopped pouring once the ice lifted like toys in rising bath water. She slid two glasses toward Lacey, who then carried them to her father and Vinny.

They were sitting in the sun, reclined in plastic chaise lounge chairs wearing nothing but shorts. Their bellies dripped with perspiration and their dense chest hair glistened with beads of sweat. Vinny’s upper body was deathly pale, his neck and arms colored slightly with normal exposure, and Mitch was tan from head to toe after days of working in the yard, building fences and planting cypresses. Both men squinted red-faced against the bright bareness of the sky and wiped sweat from their brows so it wouldn’t drip into
their eyes and burn salty. They smiled comfortably around one another, like old friends. Lacey hadn’t seen her father wear an expression of sincere contentment in a long time, and when she did see it, she realized how much she’d missed it.

“Here,” she said, offering the two glasses simultaneously. Vinny had just lit a cigarette and pinched it between his lips as he took both glasses from her. Mitch was preoccupied adjusting the back of his chair. Each of them already had a brown bottle of beer nuzzled in between his thighs, but Mitch had suggested it was time to move on to a different drink, or at least take a whiskey reprieve.

“Piece of shit,” Mitch said to the chair as he struggled with a release latch. “It’s like this shit melts out here,” he said, taking the glass from Vinny.

Lacey stood in between the sun and the men on the chairs and cast a dark shadow across them as they sipped their drinks.

“Now, that’s refreshing,” Vinny said to Lacey, licking his lips.

“God love it,” agreed Mitch.

They clinked glasses in a celebratory toast and drank again.

Across the yard, Nina was playing in the dirt. Yellow dust hung like steam around her and coiled in gentle wisps over her head. She was digging for bugs with a red plastic shovel and seemed to have found something, probably a roly-polly beetle. She picked it up between her thumb and forefinger and placed it in the palm of her other hand. She examined it, rolled it, blew on it, and then dropped it back into the hole. Though Lacey was bored and restless, she was relieved that Nina was being entertained by something other than her big sister, and so returned to the kitchen where the air was cooler.

The wild smell of steak filled the room and cleaved to her mother’s long dark hair.
Lacey caught a whiff of it when she passed her mother.

"Is the grill on?" Jillian asked Lacey. She was busy at the counter and spoke over her shoulder.

"How should I know?"

"What's the attitude for?"

Lacey ignored her mother and feigned deep concentration about which bag of chips to take off the shelf. The attitude, Lacey answered to herself, was because no one thinks about anyone else. Vinny didn't think about what would happen if he told on Nate, her father didn't think about asking her if she'd like to stay home all day for a family barbecue and play servant, and her mother didn't care that Nina barfed on her favorite shirt.

"Thanks," said Jillian. She folded the yellow Styrofoam meat package, which had been bloodied by the raw steaks, and crushed it on top of a full heap of garbage. "A real help you are today," she said, packing down the pile in the wastebasket with both hands. Trash oozed and snapped and cracked from within.

"What?" called Lacey. At an adjacent counter area, she clawed several handfuls of barbecue chips into a clear plastic bowl. She turned to see her mother wiping a paper towel over drops of steak blood that had dripped on the beige-brown linoleum. "What do you think I'm doing right now? I'm getting chips for Dad and his friend. I am helping."

Still bent over, Jillian looked at Lacey and said nothing. Lacey recognized the look on her mother's face. The sharp glare, the raised left brow and the tight lips all added up to a silent warning, which Lacey swallowed acquiescently.

"Okay. Sorry," said Lacey. And with some residual petulance in her voice, she
answered her mother’s first question robotically. “I-don’t-know-if-the-grill-is-on.”

“Just get your father for me, would you?” Jillian asked. Her voice was flat and uninterested.

“Mom wants you,” Lacey announced. She stood at the foot of her father’s chair with her right hand on her hip. “Something about the grill, I guess.”

“We’re not done with this conversation,” Mitch said to Vinny, getting up from his chair. Mitch slipped his feet into a pair of worn, blue thong sandals and took his and Vinny’s empty glasses with him.

“Why don’t you grab him a beer while I see about your mom and fill these up, Lace?” he said, taking a chip from the bowl before he left. “The cooler’s right there in the shade.”

Lacey was several steps behind her father as he walked toward the porch and by the time she opened the cooler, the screen door was smacking to a close behind him. She reached into the ice and water bath—it was painfully cold, a contracting burn against her skin—and pulled out the first can she touched. She brought it to Vinny and handed it to him while it was still dripping. A few drops landed on his chest, and he flinched against the cold.

“Sorry,” said Lacey. “I didn’t mean to—”

“No, it felt good. I’m burning up out here. Not used to it, I guess. Why don’t you sit?” She sat at the foot of the chair with the bowl of chips on her lap.

“May I?” he asked, pointing at the chips.

“Oh, yeah. Barbecue.” She offered him the bowl.
She repositioned herself and sat where her father had. She balanced the chips on the armrest between herself and Vinny and used her right hand as a visor against the sun’s glare.

Nina scurried over yelling, “I want some, I want some!” She climbed on Vinny’s chair and sat on his lap sideways, facing the chip bowl. She lifted one piece from the top of the pile and said to him, “I like deez ones best, so does Georgie.”

“The burned ones,” Lacey said, clarifying and decoding for Vinny.

“I like those too,” said Vinny.

Nina looked at him with perplexity in her eyes, as though she weren’t certain if she was supposed to share with him now that she knew he also liked them. Lacey watched her little sister consider it and then decide against it.

Lacey relaxed on the chair, her legs crossed at the ankles, a clump of hair wrapped around her fingers. She was looking for split-ends and thinking about how to bring up the subject of Nate. She wanted to tell Vinny that Nate was a nice kid even though he played a trick on him and that he was her boyfriend, and that Vinny shouldn’t have taken Nate’s spot on the hunting trip. And when she finally got up the nerve to say something, he beat her to it by asking her if her little boyfriend was coming to the barbecue.

“What do you care?” She snapped off a frayed strand.

“ Wanted to talk to him.” Nate reminded Vinny a little of himself when he was young. A punk, though too shy to be a true bully. Vinny wanted to rile the kid, see what he was made of.

“And scare him or tell on him again?” Lacey asked accusingly. She was nearly cross-eyed looking at her hair.
"No," he said, before stealing a chip from Nina's fingers. She jumped and laughed with some unease at the fright he gave her. "Tell him I'm sorry. Maybe give him some of the meat I got. I don't know."

"He's gonna kill me for saying this." She waited a moment while she looked up at the white-hot sky until it burned her eyes to tears, which she blinked away before they fell. She changed the position of her legs by lifting her right knee. "He was scared," she said, as if that were the crime itself. "He was going to apologize for the prank the other night, but before he could you told on him and his dad hit him. So, he's still scared of you and mad at you at the same time. He'll probably never come over when you're here."

"Come on, I didn't tell on him like that. I thought the whole thing was funny." As Vinny crunched the last handful of chips in his mouth, Nina eyes widened in appall. "And he'll come over. I'm sure of it."

"Oh? And what makes you think that?" Lacey quipped, as though trapping him with a question she knew he didn't have the capacity to answer. She was amused with Vinny's brazen attitude, his cool presumptions. She tried to be as stoic.

"Trust me. I've seen kids like him before. He'll show because he's no chicken and even if he is, he won't want me to think so. Or you. You're too pretty of a girl." Vinny used his tongue to clean away scraps of chips from within the folds of his mouth.

Nina's chin started to quiver, her bottom lip swell into a pout. Lacey could read her sister's face as if it were a billboard—My Chips Are All Gone, it said.

"I'll be right back," said Lacey. She drew one straight leg back in the air and hurled it downward for momentum that helped her sit up. "More chips," she said to Vinny, whose eyes had shrunken with inquiry. Nina's face settled with relief.
At the doorway, she dragged her fingertips along the screen and guided the door shut behind her. It barely made a sound, which she appreciated. As she walked down the hall toward the kitchen, she could hear Nina’s ebullient giggles.

Lacey turned right and the end of the hallway and into the kitchen. But when she saw her father standing behind her mother, his arms coiled around her waist and his face buried in a cascade of dark hair, black as water beneath a night sky, Lacey hid behind the corner of the separating wall. Once she was certain her presence had gone without notice, she peeked at them, her left eye the only witness.

Her father’s right arm snaked his way inside the front of her mother’s skirt—his face straining with the reach—and his left arm held her around the chest, like a lifeguard would a drowning child. Her mother’s mouth opened gently and her eyes closed idly. She put her hands on the counter and leaned back against his chest. Her head rested on his shoulder. His forearm had disappeared deeper beneath the elastic waistband of her flowery, gauze skirt, leaving nothing but his elbow and bicep exposed. The ligaments in his arm flashed under his skin, her knuckles went white. Suddenly, her mother’s legs seemed to weaken, to give on her at the exact moment that her face, her mouth mostly, flexed open. She let out a noise Lacey had never heard before—the sound of strain converting to relief.

Lacey pulled her head out of sight. She waited in the shady hallway feeling her heart thud in her ears, throat and cheeks. Fearful she might be spotted, she tiptoed toward the screen door and, once there, pushed it opened and yelled to Nina, asking if she really did want more chips. Vinny and Nina looked at her as though she’d lost her mind and nodded.
in affirmation. Lacey raised her hand and gave them an assuring wave then let the door slam in its frame. She stomped down the hallway toward the kitchen shouting, “I’ll be right back with those then!”

Before she turned the corner into the kitchen, she heard the light clamor of running water, tinkling silverware, and bare feet walking on linoleum. When she finally entered the kitchen, her father was at the sink, washing his hands and smiling broadly, while Jillian lifted a pair of aluminum tongs out of the utensil drawer. She snapped them close to Mitch, as if snatching his spoken words out of the air. He looked up, chuckling, and saw Lacey.

“Well, there you are,” he said. He took the platter of steaks and the tongs from Jillian, then smelled the meat. “Mmm. Venison. I think you’ll like it.”

“Gross. No way.”

“This is Vinny’s prize. You should at least taste it.”

Lacey rolled her eyes. It wasn’t the meal that bothered her, it was an enigmatic resentment and anger over what she’d just seen that vexed her so, and that Nate had been slapped by his father didn’t help her mood either.

“Don’t bother with her, Mitch,” said Jillian. “She’s in one of her attitudes today.”

Before Mitch exited the garage door and headed to the grill at the side of the house, he asked if she was hungry at all. Lacey gave a nasal huff as a way to let her parents know that she was not answering their questions. The door he left through shuddered the walls of the kitchen when it clicked shut behind him. Seconds later, another door, the one leading out of the garage to the yard, slammed loosely in its frame.

Jillian had begun cleaning the cutting board by rinsing the blood and fat trimmings
into the sink. Her hair draped over her left shoulder.

"Your little sister, is she—"

"Fine. She’s sitting on Vinny’s lap eating chips. It’s too cute." Lacey struggled with the crispy foil-like packaging of a new bag of chips and let out a thin grunt.

"Bring it here," Jillian said, drying her hands on the same blue and white-checkered dishtowel Mitch had used. She drank from her half-full tumbler before helping Lacey.

The sight of the towel reminded Lacey of what she’d just seen. Embarrassment rushed over her like hot, shower water. At any other moment, Lacey would have refused help with opening the bag—she was obstinate as her father—but she was stunned with the recollection of where her father’s hand had been on her mother’s body. Lacey stood mute and defenseless and more conscious of her body than she’d ever been. Her thin rail of a collar bone. The beginning of breasts, a mere swelling of the skin and, between them, a small mole the size of a peppercorn. A dark sprout of hair had recently begun to emerge, as if from within the very depths of her body, but never, never had she felt the great swelling and contracting of her insides as she felt at this moment.

Jillian took the bag from Lacey and yanked it open at the seams. "Voila!" she exclaimed. "Your heroine." She bowed, raised her right arm and rotated her wrist in a tumbling gesture toward the floor.

"Thanks," said Lacey, holding back a smile. She took the bag from the counter and said she was bringing the chips outside.

When she pushed open the screen door with her free right hand, Nina ducked by and ran to the kitchen yelling, "Juice, Momma, Juice."

"Figures," Lacey said, handing Vinny the bag. She reclaimed her seat and settled in to
the same position she’d been in before. With the toes of her right foot, she slid down the heel of her sandal, letting it fall to the ground. She did the same to the other foot.

“So where were we?” asked Vinny. He put two large potato chips in his mouth and chewed with his mouth open.

Lacey shrugged. She was trying on an indifferent, apathetic demeanor.

“Nate.”

“Right,” she confirmed. “You tattled on him and got him in trouble.”

“I told you I wasn’t tattling. I was thinking of pranks me and your dad used to pull. It just slipped out. And I’m sorry about the trip. Greg told me to pack and be ready in twenty minutes. I didn’t even see Nate there to tell you the truth, didn’t know he was supposed to go.”

She looked at him suspiciously and, because of his apologetic tone, decided he was being sincere enough.

Vinny took a pull from his beer and inhaled deeply and curiously, as sniffing out his prey at dinnertime. “Now that’s meat,” he said, turning around as if to see the scent itself. But there was nothing but a row of dry cypress trees lined up equidistantly along the sidewall and a thin layer of haze. Lacey and Vinny both watched a bundle of bluish smoke drift by from the side of the house where Mitch was grilling and, in an imperceptible breeze, climb the cinder block wall at the back of the yard and dissipate over the edge.

Vinny shoved another handful chips into his mouth and several scraps fell to his chest then toppled on to his lap. With a mouthful of food he said, “So I don’t want to make any trouble for you two. That you’ll do on your own someday. Trust me.”
He laughed at the prophetic and ironic truth in what he’d said and then swished beer
around in his mouth.

Lacey sensed a disquieting doom in his words, as though he’d said something too
close to his own truth. She wanted to ask him things like why he was here, where he was
going, but she didn’t go that far. She wanted some clarification on his last comment.
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Lucky for you,” he said in a low voice. “You’re too young to really get it.”

In the small patch of blue sky in between the porch’s sandpapered canopy and the
high back wall, Lacey spotted a large black crow circle the yard. Its feathers were glossy
in the afternoon sun, its caw grainy and contemptuous, as if agreeing with Lacey’s inner
thoughts that she wasn’t too young for things anymore.

Vinny searched the sky when the crow called, but he was too late. It had already
vanished from his view. He wiped his mouth on his bare shoulder and said, “I don’t mean
to be so negative. You’re a nice girl, he’s nice boy, I’m sure. There shouldn’t be any
trouble.”

“Okay,” she shrugged, not wholly persuaded. She inhaled and felt eased, relaxed now
in the heat of midday. Without saying another word, Lacey sat up and flung her hair
behind her shoulders and then reclined again. She pointed her toes, then scratched her left
shin with the heel of the opposite foot.

From the side of the house, they heard Mitch’s voice shout, “Lace, get me a cold one,
eh? I’m dying over here.” And then, “Vin, my man, how’d you like your meat?”

Lacey got up right away to get her father’s beer but, before she took a step, Vinny
grabbed her right wrist. The gesture startled her, though his grip was not at all painful.
“Tell him medium-rare, very pink,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, leaning away from his wrist. He wouldn’t let go. His large hand could have held two of her wrists at once. When she pulled away from him once more, he surprised her by letting go. Lacey lost her footing and had to stumble in order to catch her balance.

“Funny,” she said, pointing at him as she walked away. The sun flashed hotly on her face.

At the grill, her father’s cheeks were red from the flames of the barbecue, his forehead slick with sweat. Before he spoke to Lacey, he took his beer from her and opened it. She waited a few feet from the grill, just to the left of her father, and coughed against the billowing smoke. Her father flipped the steaks, and when she saw the blackened grill strips on the meat, hunger arrived.

“You’re standing down wind,” he said. “Stand on the other side of me. There you go.” He drank his beer with his left hand, which was dry and cracked, and held the aluminum tongs like a sword in his right hand.

The smoke followed Lacey. She waved it from her face as she repeated Vinny’s meat order. She had to shout over the crackle and fizz of the steaks.

“Good man,” he said, obviously in agreement with Vinny’s preference. “Food’ll be ready in five. Go on in.”

She hurried back to Vinny, the sudden shade of the porch covering her like a blanket when she walked beneath it. Nina was there, standing in front of Vinny and wearing an excited expression, her smile accented by the purple juice mustache above her lip. She was showing him pictures she’d drawn and colored in her cartoon sketchbook.
In the sun again, Lacey looked at the bare blue sky and tilted her head and cambered her back for a better view of the clouds she hoped to see. She liked watching them float by, but on this afternoon there was not one in sight. She looked in Vinny’s direction and saw that Nina was gone—the screen door was clattering to a close behind her—and that Vinny had been looking at her, staring at her while she observed the sky.

She shivered visibly and then wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s hot, isn’t it?” she said, as thought to rationalize her chill.

Vinny nodded. “Why do you shiver in the summer?”

“I just do sometimes,” she replied. “I can’t help it.” She walked closer to where he was still resting on the chaise lounge and told him the food was almost ready. He dropped his head back against the chair and held his beer straight over his mouth. Lacey watched his preternaturally large Adam’s-apple move under his sagging neck skin, and, following each swallow, was a diminutive plunk that sounded like coins being dropped down a well. She offered to get him another drink and he accepted.

“I’ll follow you inside,” he said, grunting as he pushed himself up from the chair.

By the time he’d gotten up, Lacey was already at the cooler getting him another drink.

“Come fix your plates,” Jillian’s voice sang from the kitchen.

Lacey handed Vinny his beer as he waited for her with the screen door open.

“Madame, after you,” he said in a British accent.

Lacey blushed and then ducked by him quickly. Nate never did things like that for her.
"I've got potato salad, green salad, baked beans, corn on the cob," said Jillian, pointing to each dish as she introduced it. "What'll it be?" she asked Vinny, who was pulling a t-shirt over his head.

He replied genially by answering, "All of it!"

Mitch approached Vinny with a plate and knife in hand. He'd cut a one-inch slit into the steak and brought it to show him. Bloody juice emerged and swelled to the surface like in a wound. "Tell me that ain't the prettiest pink you've ever seen?"

Lacey waited next to Vinny near the counter, as her mother circled the table with all the dishes on it and started a plate for him. While she fixed him a plate, Lacey and Vinny listened and watched as Mitch attempted to arrange Nina's food on her plate so that nothing touched anything else. She was being very specific with her requests, making her father tilt her plate by placing a knife on the underside of the top crescent. That way, all the juice from the meat pooled neatly. It proved to be a successful plan, until the butter from her corn melted and streamed into the pile of potato salad. Nina began to whine and cry. Vinny and Lacey looked at one another and smiled over the incident.

"We go through this every meal," she whispered to Vinny, so that Nina wouldn't overhear.

He shook his head in disbelief and said he had no idea kids could be so much trouble. Changing subjects, Vinny pointed at a morsel of food sitting on the edge of the cutting board behind him. "What is that?" he asked. "I've never seen anything like it before."

"Oh, this?" said Lacey, picking it up between her thumb and forefinger. She held it so Vinny could get a good look at it. "It's my favorite. It's called hearts of palm."
He looked addled. “From those palm trees that grow out here?”

“I don’t know, I guess. Mom puts it on salads. You should try it.”

He squished his face with disgust and let his voice trail as he said, “I don’t know.”

“It’s just a vegetable.”

“What the hell,” he said.

Vinny leaned forward and took the small white slice into his mouth. Instead of pulling away, he held the tip of her finger and thumb, sucking them gently against the warm mush of his tongue. Lacey felt the tip of Vinny’s tongue as he removed the hearts of palm from between her fingers then concealed it somewhere in the back of his mouth. She tried pulling away, sure now that she felt disturbed and frightened. Another shiver scattered over her skin. She stared at him and saw nothing in his eyes, nothing that either confirmed or denied the root of his intent. His tongue swirled over her fingers in slow, wet rotations. She was bewildered and afraid. Quickly, she shifted her eyes toward her mother, who was buttering a corn on the cob, then her father, who was hunched over Nina helping with her plate, his back to Lacey. If she could just say something, she thought, he’d stop, but she couldn’t bring herself to breathe or move.

Vinny was transported to his wedding day with Carol, when she fed him their vanilla-raspberry wedding cake. Oblivious to his present, Vinny remembered every detail of some twenty years ago: the blisters on his heels, Carol’s hair falling in ringlets around her ears, their trepidation about cutting the cake together and having it topple over, the dazzling shine of their golden wedding bands and his own sense of awkwardness with suddenly wearing a ring for the first time in his life. There were more than fifty people gathered around him and Carol, snapping pictures and rooting for one of them to smash
the cake on the other’s face. But they couldn’t be persuaded. Vinny held Carol’s wrist, keeping the tip of her freshly manicured fingers in his mouth as he sucked and licked the frosting from under her nails. He gnawed teasingly on one finger, and Carol look at the crowd with dramatized disgust in her eyes, before laughing with her head back as Vinny persisted. And when it was his turn to feed her, she slid his index finger out of her mouth so slowly and seductively that bridesmaids and groomsmen starting hooting and hollering. The guests found it hilarious, funnier than a cake-smashing, and for the rest of the evening they made comical remarks about Carol and Vinny needing to get to their hotel room. As it was for most couples, the wedding day was a joyous one with no hint of doom.

“Can’t forget the napkin,” Lacey heard her mother say. At that instance, Vinny released his hold on Lacey.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, chewing sloppily. He shook his head as though dazed or tired.

“That’s not bad,” he said loud enough for anyone in the room to hear.

Lacey’s wet fingers felt cool as his saliva dried and evaporated from her hand.

“What is?” asked Jillian, turning around. Her hair followed her like a skirt in a dance. She carried Vinny’s plate to him and had a prideful elevation to her chin. While Jillian explained the various servings to Vinny, Lacey wiped her fingers against her bare thigh and heard a hum of voices around her. She concentrated on her father’s voice.

Apparently, he and Nina had just finished haggling about the geography of her food. They’d come to an agreement that the butter was allowed to touch the potato salad since there were eggs in the recipe and Nina ate eggs on top of her buttered toast.
Mitch invited Vinny to the porch to eat. Lacey watched them leave the room. Neither looked back at her.

By the time Lacey reached the top step of the staircase, she heard her father holler an invitation to everyone to come outside. She moved faster now, down the hallway and toward her bedroom, the way firefighters had taught her class to do in case of a school fire. Walk, don’t run. Stay calm. Lacey swung her arms at her sides to gain momentum as she neared her bedroom door. She threw open the door and dove onto her bed, landing rigid as a two-by-four being tossed in a truck. She covered her face with her hands and tried to make sense out of what had just transpired. It had all happened so quickly. She couldn’t believe no one saw a thing, couldn’t understand why she just stood there. She smelled his breath on her hands. It reeked of tobacco and alcohol and there, lingering somewhere among those two stenches, was the faint scent of the hearts of palm. She turned over on her back and gagged dryly.

Three knocks rattled her door.

“Who is it?” she asked.

And with no response, her mother burst in. “What in god’s name is going on with you?” She waited just inside the room with the door still open.

Lacey couldn’t look at her. She buried her face in her pillow while her mother continued asking questions and making accusations that Lacey refused to acknowledge.

“You don’t just storm out of a room right before a meal, especially when we have a guest. This attitude of yours has gotten out of hand. And I’m about—”

Lacey sat up, hoping her mother would see her face and know everything without needing an explanation.
“What’s wrong now?” Jillian asked, more sympathetic than before. “You look terrified.” She moved to the end of Lacey’s bed and sat at the corner, stroking her daughter’s calf.

The air-conditioning unit on the roof thudded on, the push of air rattling through the vents as it poured into the room. The flow of air sucked the door closed. White-wooden blades of the ceiling fan revolved ever so slightly in the breeze.

Lacey felt calmed by the cold, wafting air, eased by her mother’s hand on her leg.

“He’s gross, Mom.”

“Who?”

Lacey tried to say the rest with her eyes, tried to give her mother the chance to see Vinny’s name on her face. But after hours of drinking, Jillian’s retinas bobbed and swayed like lifeboats out at sea.

“What did he do?” Her mother’s voice was flat and indifferent, absent of belief in its tone.

Lacey tried explaining what Vinny had done with the heart of palm, how he’d taken it from her fingers and sucked on them as he did. She demonstrated part of the scene, but stopped short of putting her fingers in her mouth. When she finished, she sobbed. Her face was hot and salty, swollen with anger and shame.

For a few moments, Jillain paced the bedroom. She walked from the bed to the closet—son of a bitch—to the dresser and back to the closet—motherfucker. Lacey had never seen her so enraged before and it frightened her more than Vinny did.

There was a rumble up the stairs. It was, by the sound of the feet and the interval of
the steps, her father. The loose banister shook when he let go of it and the slack screws wobbled in their holes. Lacey knew he'd just reached the top of the stairs.

Lacey whispered, “Dad,” to her mother and Jillian stopped in the center of the bedroom.

The rush of air ceased with a metallic clunk. The blades of the ceiling fan soon slowed to a complete stop. Everything was still—the light, the floating dust that was illuminated in a shaft of afternoon sun.

Mitch opened the door without knocking.

“What the—” he started to say. Jillian put her hand up like a crosswalk guard telling the crowd to wait, it’s not safe to cross.

“Come in and shut the door, Mitch,” she instructed.

After he closed it, she asked him where Nina was.

“At the kitchen table. Why are you—”

“And Vinny?” she interjected.

“Out back.”

“Okay, listen,” she said in a slow, sinking voice. She stepped closer to him and told him everything Lacey had told her. While she spoke to Mitch, Lacey watched them both with the silent anticipation of a crowd waiting on a referee’s final call. She imagined a fight between her father and Vinny, pictured her father punching him in the face so hard it would blow teeth from his mouth. She saw blood.

Mitch filled his cheeks with air then exhaled, fanning Jillian’s hair off her forehead. He turned and looked at Lacey.

“Did he touch you?” he asked her.
“Well, his tongue was all—”

“I mean like your chest or your…” he gestured awkwardly near his belt buckle.

“No, not there. But he took the hearts of palm out of my fingers with his tongue sort of. It was disgusting.”

“Do you know how long I’ve known him?” he asked.

Lacey shrugged and thought about what that had to do with anything.

Mitch smiled to himself and sat near Lacey on her bed and put his hand on her bare ankle. Jillian stood a few feet away with her arms folded, her weight resting on her right leg.

“Since we were kids, Lace.”

“Come on, Mitch,” said Jillian. “You haven’t seen the guy more than twice in the past fifteen years. Don’t give me the ‘since we were kids’ speech. It’s absurd. I want him out of here.”

Lacey’s father itched his scalp and stared at Jillian, blue veins in his temple and neck swelled like tiny rills “He’s not leaving, Jill, and let me finish for Chrissake.” To Lacey, he said, “I’m sure it was a misunderstanding. You fed him something, didn’t you, and he took it out of your fingers. Maybe it slipped or something and then his tongue tried to get it.”

Lacey was shaking her head, looking at her father then her mother, who was staring at the ground.

“I’m sure it’s not worth getting this upset over. You’re both over-emotionalizing this, I’m telling you.”

His breath reminded Lacey of Vinny’s, stale, consumed by smoke and beer. She’d
leaned away from him when he spoke and now she was disgusted by him and wanted him to leave. Her mother was of no use either. She was drunk and enraged, and utterly ineffectual in enacting a decision. Talking to both of them was as futile as digging a hole with a fork.

“Fine,” Lacey said, with the force of a hammer. “Discussion over. You guys can go.”

“Good girl,” he said with a wink, as he squeezed her ankle. “And listen, we’ll be out of your hair tonight. Your mom and I, and Vinny, are going to the Stagecoach. You can play with Nate if you want, have him and Georgie over for leftovers or something. We won’t be home until after dark anyway.”

“Whatever,” she said, folding the corner of the bed sheet into small triangles.

“No more tears then and no mention of this to Vinny,” he told Lacey. “And that goes for you two, Jill,” he said, pointing at her.

It was sick, thought Lacey, the way her father spoke to her mother like she was a child. She wished her mother would give as well as she got and then, maybe then, her father would only dare point his finger at her. Lacey promised never to be like that when she was married. Her husband would be benevolent and gentle, like Nate.

“Let’s go,” Mitch said to Jillian. “We’re being rude.”

Jillian’s eyes were blank and unblinking, as though she were seeing something no one else was. When Mitch grabbed her forearm to lead her out of the room, she pulled away from him.

When the door was shut, Lacey heard her parents arguing in low voices at the end of the hallway. Her father’s voice was too low to be audible, but she did hear her mother say to him, “Don’t touch me!” Then Lacey heard nothing but footsteps on the stairs.
Lacey cried on her bed. At first she lay sprawled on the mattress like a starfish, then, when the disorientation and fear swirled like acid in her gut, she folded herself like a crab returning to its shell. She had tears for everything—Why had Vinny done that to her? Why hadn’t Nate shown up? Why wouldn’t her father believe her? Why did her mother give in so easily? She cried hard for thirty minutes on her bed.

The afternoon sun still beamed into her room, most resolutely in an oblong stretch of golden light that reached across the sandy-brown carpet. The bright intrusion raised her from her listlessness. She sat up and looked at her fingers, hoping any sign of Vinny had vanished. She couldn’t bring herself to smell them again, so she went to her white, four-door dresser and decided to put perfume on them until she could wash her hands with soap. She picked up a two-inch vial of perfume from the pink wicker basket in which she collected all of the sample scents—over fifty of them by now—she’d received from free handouts at the cosmetic departments in the Arroyo Hills Mall. She removed the translucent, plastic stopper and emptied the fragrant liquid over her fingers. Excess eau de toilet leaked between them and sprinkled the top of the dresser. She coughed against the overwhelming aroma that soon flooded the room, but was relieved to have replaced the old, dank smell of Vinny’s mouth with the pungent sting of—she searched the glass vial and saw pink, cursive letters—Love’s Blossom.
CHAPTER 10

In the middle of the night, Vinny woke up still drunk from shots at the Stagecoach Saloon. The dark spare bedroom in which he slept rocked like a boat, so he flopped one leg out from under the covers and put it flatly on the floor. It was a futile move and did nothing to stabilize his head or the spinning nausea. He needed a tall glass of water and a sandwich. He pushed himself up from the bed.

He put on his jeans and left the room quietly. He didn’t want to wake the girls who were sleeping in their room across the hall. With his left hand lightly on the hallway railing, Vinny managed to keep his balance, taking each step with caution. At the bottom of the stairs, he noticed that the television was on in the family room by the way the light flashed on the walls and floor leading into it. When he entered, he saw Jillian on the couch with a blanket and a bed pillow. She was sitting up, pouring herself vodka.

“Hey,” he said quietly. He ran his hand over his chest, somewhat embarrassed that he hadn’t put on a t-shirt. He’d been where she was so many times before and seeing her there reminded him of Carol. But he pushed the thought of her out of his mind, which felt like shutting a door against a fierce wind.

The bottle clinked against the glass when Jillian looked up. He seemed to have startled her when he came in. She said nothing and finished her pour.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said. He stood at the end of the couch, hoping she’d offer him a seat and when she didn’t, he pushed her comforter aside and sat down uninvited. And though there was plenty of room, Jillian readjusted herself, the way most
people do when a stranger sits next to them on a bus.

Vinny watched her and saw by the way her eyes drooped and wavered that she was beyond drunk. When she began laughing at herself and whispering incomprehensibly, Vinny knew that something was wrong. She wore a black, thin-strapped tank top with her hair in a loose knot, strands falling around her face and barely sweeping the ridge of her collar bone. Jillian drew the blanket up her left shoulder, as if suddenly chilled by his presence.

"Jillian, what’s wrong? Are you and Mitch—"

"Fighting? Yes," she said. And then a moment later, she said something that shook Vinny. "Do you still find me attractive, or have I gotten too old?"

He sat up and reached for Jillian’s drink without asking. "You’re still beautiful," he said. Vinny took three long sips, fogging up the inside of the glass as he drank. With each sip, he wondered if Mitch knew what he had. He set Jillian’s drink on the cover of a *Redbook* magazine, which lay on the pinchbeck and glass coffee table in front of him.

"And my daughter?" slurred Jillian. Her voice trembled as if with rage or despair—Vinny couldn’t tell.

"What about her?"

"You don’t want her, do you? You would never—"

"You’re talking crazy now. Of course not."

He nodded and rubbed his hand over his three-day growth of beard. He had noticed Lacey, it was impossible not to. But want her? That was absurd.

Jillian shrugged and leaned towards her drink. She couldn’t reach it, so she edged onto the middle cushion and placed her left hand on Vinny’s knee for leverage. The
blanket fell from around her body, exposing the rest of her pajamas—blue, sateen shorts. She finished the drink and poured another, her bare leg touching his thigh while she drank.

Her legs were tanner than Carol’s and even longer, but they were less muscular, and when Vinny looked at Jillian, her eyes were closed so tightly wrinkles burst from her canthus. She reminded him of someone in earnest prayer. When she opened them, her eyelids trembled.

“Jillian,” said Vinny.

She put her finger near his mouth to quiet him. Then everything changed and started to happen with little intention and seemingly no propulsion on his part. His detachment was becoming dangerous.

Jillian was deliberate and clinical, giving him no choice in the matter. She moved on to the floor and sat up on her knees, so that she faced him. She pressed her hands on his thigh and ran them the length of his upper leg to where his pockets were, letting her hand slip down the fold of his crotch. He was already aroused, and had been so since the moment she touched his chest, but he felt disconcerted when she didn’t react or even look up at him as she touched him.

“What about Mitch?” whispered Vinny. “I thought—”

And her finger was near his mouth again, so he stopped talking.

With ease, Jillian snapped open his button-fly crotch. Then she put her hands on the side of his pants, and he knew to lift his lower half so that she could pull them down, which she did. All the way to his ankles. She didn’t kiss him or caress his inner thighs or trickle her nails down either side of his ribcage. Jillian took him into her warm, wet
mouth. She gagged once, as though she hadn’t done this before, and then recuperated.

As he stared at the top of Jillian’s head, the door in his mind’s eye ripped open. Carol was at the threshold. Morally, there was nothing right about what he was doing, and even less so for Jillian, but it felt good to be the cheater and not the cheated. He didn’t want Jillian, didn’t even find her as attractive as he did when he first arrived, though it was clear she wanted him and was excited by having an old boyfriend in her house. Who was he to fight her? He knew she’d never tell Mitch and neither would he. This was a romp for past’s sake, for reclaiming a little bit of an old self. Feeling guilty about it was as futile as pouring soapy water over a mortal wound, though not nearly as painful.

Vinny let his head drop against the couch cushion behind him and blocked out the television infomercial about knives. She’d been stabilizing herself by keeping one hand on his knee while she held him firmly with the other. Vinny clenched Jillian’s hair and guided her motions by pressing her closer and closer to him. With his right hand, he reached for her chest, groping for her tank top and fumbling with the straps. She squirmed some, but Vinny was still insisting with his hand on her head. When he finally had his hand cupped around one of her breasts, Jillian grabbed him by the wrist, with more strength and authority than he would have expected from her, and flung it aside.

“A little rowdy, are we?” he said.

Then a rumble came from upstairs. It sounded like the shaking of a door, then a creaking from the stairs.

“What was that?” whispered Vinny, his eyes attentive to the base of the staircase.

“Probably the air-conditioning. It shakes the doors and frames when it goes on. Old house.” Jillian was also watching the staircase and, like Vinny, surely, hoping no one was
coming. They waited quietly and still for another moment until the house felt full with sleep.

“Almost done?” she asked, just before recommencing.

Vinny nodded and quietly said, “Yeah.”

She held him with both hands and finished him quickly. Instead of swallowing, she made a neat pool of ejaculate on his belly. She pulled several tissues from a box on the end table and handed them to Vinny like she was passing him the salt at dinner.

“Gee, thanks,” he said, with a sudden disdain for her.

Jillian didn’t respond. She rearranged the blanket around her and wiped her mouth repeatedly.

“Had I known in high school you’d turn out like this,” he joked.

Jillian glared at him, then started to cry.

“I’m just kidding, Jillian. God, you’re still the most beautiful girl I know.”

She shook her head. “You should go,” she whispered. Then, in a voice more forceful, “This never happened. Just stay away from my daughter. And if you think you need something, you come to me.”

Vinny stood up and said, “I don’t know what you and Mitch are fighting about. It’s none of my business, but it has nothing to do with me, so you better quit talking nonsense. You’re drunk, Jillian, not seeing things straight. Go to bed.” Vinny turned to go into the kitchen for a drink, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw her fall back into the couch. By the time he came back with a glass of tap water in hand, Jillian had already passed out with her hands clenched around a corner of the blanket, which she had bundled beneath her chin. Vinny thought he heard her whimper, but when he looked at
her closely, her eyes were shut and her breathing slow and deep.

He should have just gone straight to bed, but instead, something brought him back to his seat on the couch. He felt sorry for her, he did, despite how much he wanted to loathe her for cheating on Mitch. Though none of it allayed his involvement. Jillian stretched her legs, pushing her feet against Vinny’s hips and thigh to make more room for herself. When she settled, Vinny noticed that her right foot lay outside the blanket near him. He caressed her ankle, pressed his thumb into the soft groove beneath the round bone, and watched her toes contract when he squeezed tenderly. He missed this kind of closeness and wanted to sit with her all night—not Jillian, just a someone—his hand comfortably resting on her without her knowledge or consent. Husband and wife on the couch, the kids upstairs sleeping. He sat for a few minutes and watched television, rubbing her foot and stealing glances at her open mouth, at the hair that draped under her chin and across her chest. This kind of harmony was all he’d wanted and all he’d never gotten.

Go, he said to himself. Get up and go to bed before Mitch stumbles downstairs. It seemed to him, if he didn’t leave at once, he’d wake up with Jillian in his arms and Mitch staring down at them both. Vinny stood up and tucked her foot beneath the blanket and left the room with unrequited hunger. In a moment, he was in his bedroom and sinking on top of the sheets and comforter. He thought he heard crying coming from the girls’ room. He ignored it and stared into the darkness as he drifted back to sleep.
CHAPTER 11

The next morning, the house was dead quiet, save for the whines and screeches and crashes coming from Nina’s cartoon show downstairs. Lacey opened her bedroom door and poked her head out and saw no one. She left her room, which, like her, still smelled like a crushed garden on a balmy morning.

In the living room, Nina lay like a board on the couch, a blue and white baby-blanket near her chin. Lacey walked in between the couch and the television to where her jelly-sandals were tucked halfway beneath the recliner chair.

“Looks like the Wizard of Oz,” said Nina, pointing to her sister’s sandals. When Lacey didn’t respond—she didn’t think Nina was speaking to her—Nina said, “You know, when the house lands on the witch.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Lacey, pulling her shoes out from under the chair. “Where’s everyone?”

“Dad and Vinny went for bloodied mary’s and to watch the game. Sounds gross.”

“It’s a drink. What about mom?”

“She didn’t want to go, but Dad wanted her to. I’m s’posed to tell you they won’t be home until after the late game. That’s what he said.”

Lacey cackled like a witch and pounced on the couch, standing straddle-legged over Nina with her hands in the hair like claws. Nina laughed and screamed, shielding her face with her arms. Then, as if the spirit of pretending had abruptly died, Nina said, “You smell good. I want some?”

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Lacey climbed down from the couch, her face blank with memory. She told Nina the perfume was all gone and that it was for big girls, anyway. As she slipped on her sandals, she asked Nina not to move from the couch until she returned.

It was a beautiful, warm morning. The sun was behind an adjacent row of houses when Lacey closed the front door behind her. As she walked across the street toward Nate’s, to tell him everything, she saw bright bands of sunlight reaching around the sides of houses and slanting off rooftops, making Lacey feel as though they were reaching for her. She walked into them, and past them, and felt flashes of light warm her shoulder, then her cheek, then her arm, her hip. The mantle of the sky had not yet become a color above the red sun and the streets were empty. Lacey listened to the rhythmic clicking of sprinklers watering the yellowing green grass in the front yards of those tenants who refused to surrender to a more water-conscious landscape of lava rock and barrel cacti. And Lacey was glad they hadn’t, for the mist off the lawn cooled the air around her and sparkled ethereally in the morning light. Tiny water droplets clung to her face like dew as she stepped from the street to the sidewalk in front of Nate’s house, which, to her satisfaction, had the greenest grass on the street because their house shaded the yard in the hottest hours of the day. The lawn was wet beneath her and glazed by water drops that were round as pearls. When she lifted her feet with each step, the grass tickled her ankle and sprayed wetly on her calves. The morning was so pretty and clean that Lacey felt guilty for how the things she was about to share with Nate would tarnish it.

Lacey knocked three times on the door. No one answered. She thought it might be too
early, so she decided to waste some time by strolling through the desert. Wads of high
clouds followed her like a procession.

In the rough plains of the desert valley behind her house, Lacey walked and sat and
walked some more, all the while recounting what had happened and thinking about how
the constitution of her family had forever been changed or, at least as far as Lacey was
concerned, exposed. Mothers and fathers were supposed to be a team of guards over their
children. Family was supposed to come before anything.

The valley floor in front of her had once been the bottom of the ocean—her dad had
told her that—deep and cold and still and like she’d once imagined her family, whole and
constant. But now there was nothing more than a dry lakebed, a bare plot of sand with a
two-lane highway traversing its edge. The stripped land at Barrel Mountain’s escarpment
was nothing but hard, cracked sand baking in the sun. To Lacey, it marked the land’s last
gulp, like a ring of dirty water left around the bathtub drain. It was a permanent sight of
the undone. It unnerved her terribly.

The sun was over the peaks, casting a fresh light against the westward facing
mountains and shading the eastern ridge in a rosy pink or, depending on the kind of rock,
a livid purple. In the distance, she spotted jackrabbits. They darted, then froze, then
hopped away straight-eared, their bushy white tails bounding among the creosote and
sage.

Soon, she walked the ten or so minutes back to Birch Avenue and, in one single step,
went from desert sand to street cement. As she walked up Nate’s driveway for the second
time that morning, she squinted wanly at the sun and caught too much of its glare. Her
eyes watered, but she blinked them back. When she rang his doorbell, she heard the slap of bare feet inside on the tile foyer.

“Hi, Mrs. Dolan. Is Nate here?”

LuAnne Dolan was a petite woman who smoked more than she did anything else. On any given day, she wore a lavender house robe, gold hoop earrings the size of half-dollars, and had a cigarette snug between either her lips or her fingers.

Without saying anything, she stepped aside and dropped her chin, inviting Lacey inside. The living room was dark and hazy with smoke, but it was as cold as a supermarket. There were two brown and beige throw rugs on the floor and wood paneled wainscoting. The vertical blinds on the sliding-glass door to the backyard swayed in the breeze of the air-conditioning, letting in daylight slivers at a time. The television was on, the volume low. A large mug of coffee steamed on the end table next to the maroon couch.

“Do you see Nathan anywhere?” LuAnne asked, opening her arm toward the living room.

“Nate? Um, no I don’t.” Lacey was never sure LuAnne liked her, though she had never given her any reason not to. For as long as Lacey could remember, LuAnne spoke to her with a slanted sarcasm that made Lacey’s cheeks burn. Lacey scanned the room then leaned her head to look down the hallway where the boys’ bedroom was. “Is he in his room?”

As if on cue, little Georgie came out of his bedroom. He wore red tennis shoes and an oversized tee-shirt—it must have been Nate’s—that draped him like furniture cover. He had a soda can in his hand and stood in the hallway, gulping grape pop—his usual

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breakfast beverage. His face was round, his eyes small with the pain of the bubbles exploding down his throat. When he was done drinking, Georgie licked his lips, drawing his stained tongue around the border of his mouth.

LuAnne stepped in front of Lacey and said, “The thing is, Nate can’t come out of his room today.” She took a deep drag from her cigarette and exhaled through her nose like a dragon. Her eyes were red and puffy.

“Why?” Lacey asked, though she knew LuAnne would feel it was none of her business.

“Ask his father.”

Lacey’s face burned in the cold home as she stared unwaveringly at LuAnne.

“You look like you’ve got something to say,” she said.

“No, ma’am. I’ll just see him later. Thank you.”

She looked at Georgie one last time, hoping he’d see in her eyes that she had a plan, a plan that would require his quiet alliance, but he just lifted his hand and waved goodbye as he drank again from his can of soda.

As she had many times before, Lacey sneaked around to the side of Nate’s house where his bedroom window looked out over the ground-unit air conditioning system. She propped her right leg at the edge of the metal grill that protected the blur of rotating fan blades and pushed herself up with her hands pressed against his dusty windowpane. She put one ear close to the glass and listened for his mother’s voice, but heard nothing except slight movements. The rumble of a closet door. The opening and closing of a dresser. The clank of coins into a ceramic or glass container. He was cleaning his room, she deduced. Once balanced, she tickled her fingernails on the window, fearful a knock
would alarm his mother. She whispered Nate’s name several times until she saw a twitch in the curtain and a tap from inside. It was their signal: *I heard you. I’m coming.* She hopped to the ground and wiped her hands on the sides of her denim cut-off shorts. The dusty residue on the window held her two splayed handprints. They looked ghostly in the flaxen haze of dirt.

She waited for a moment, then saw Nate’s hand pull open his bedroom window without a noise. He kept it well oiled so that, in times like these, something like a window screech wouldn’t be the reason for getting caught.

The heavy curtain wafted out of the window frame, billowing like laundry sheets drying in the wind. He drew back the curtain and threw one leg over the ledge. He stopped and spoke to Georgie in the room.

“Just come get me if Mom knocks on the door,” he said softly to Georgie, though the hum of the air-conditioning distorted his voice. “And whisper to me, don’t yell, okay? I’ll be right here.”

“Nina?” Lacey heard Georgie say. “Where’s Nina?”

“Sshh,” Nate said, his finger at his mouth. “You can see her later. Just wait and be quiet.” And with that he dropped from the window, barefoot, in shorts and a shirt, landing firmly in the dirt. He left the window open for his return. The vacuum effect of the open window and the whirling air-conditioning sucked the curtain outside in a stiff waft.

They moved to a strip of grass that lined the brick wall. Nate’s mother had planted three rose bushes there last spring, but they had already expired into nothing more than wiry branches and shriveled bulbs. The grass where they sat was short and prickly. To avoid looking Nate in the eye, Lacey fiddled with the grass, tying together two pieces,
then adding another, and another, until soon it was one long rope of grass, no longer single short blades. She did this for the duration of their small-talk, until the chain of grass was as long as her shin bone. Meanwhile, Nate rubbed his eyes, rested his head in his hands, and answered all of Lacey’s surface inquiries.

“Why are you grounded?” she asked.

He exhaled deeply, the way someone who is frustrated does. “That friend of your dad’s. Shit,” he said, shaking his head.

“A slap wasn’t enough?” she said quickly.

Nate seemed to ignore her comment and continued talking as if to himself. “I knew I should have apologized first. He might never of said nothing—” Nate interrupted his own point and asked Lacey what her problem was. “You’re here before 9 to ask me that? Couldn’t it have waited?”

She shrugged. Her tear ducts contracted and flared behind her jaw bone.

Sprinkler heads in various yards gurgled and spat, then kerplunked back into the ground. The engine of a car or a truck hummed from up the street.

The reference to Vinny made Lacey shudder inside. For a moment, she could smell his saliva on her hands again, and see his thick hand on the back of her mother’s neck, forcing her down on him.

“Jeez, what’d I say? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“He told your dad, but not to tell on you. He wasn’t pissed. He thought it was a funny story.”

Nate cocked his head, the way a dog does when it hears a perplexing noise. He appeared to be considering the new information. He looked directly at Lacey and said,
"Too late now. My dad found out. It doesn’t matter what that guy thought. What an asshole anyway."

"You could say that again."

"Why?"

She put her grass link down in front of her criss-crossed legs and started to sob.

"Don’t get mad," she said, wiping her eyes.

"Um, okay." Nate placed his elbows on his knees, his head resting on the folded fist of his joined hands. The warming day seemed to enhance his amber freckles and contrast a white scar, thin as thread between his unruly eyebrows.

Lacey looked at Nate and was eased by his presence, daunted by the beauty of his imperfections. She told him everything, gesturing what she could to help clarify what he’d done to her and her mother. She wiped her face with her hand when she stopped speaking.

"And your dad?"

"He said it was a misunderstanding. I haven’t told him about mom and doubt she’s told him herself. She’s probably scared to and scared of Vinny."

He nodded in agreement. "What did he do to her? How was he holding her again?" "God, I don’t know! Why are you asking me that?"

"I was just—" he began.

"Fine. He had his hand on the back of her head, right near her neck, like this, and her hands were on his knees, and it was like she was trying to push him away but he wouldn’t let her. I just ran back upstairs." She covered her mouth and cried with her eyes closed, her shoulders shaking violently.
"Sorry," Nate whispered.

They sat in silence for a few moments while Lacey calmed down and regained her breath. She’d felt like she was drowning in her own words, in the ugly picture they painted, in the disgrace they named and the only way out was to gasp for air and swallow it whole.

“They left this morning to watch some game and get wasted on bloody mary’s. They told Nina they’d be gone until after the late game.”

“That’s not till dark. I’ll sneak out and come over,” he said.

She nodded then said that she was afraid for Nina.

“He won’t do anything if I’m there, trust me.”

Nate’s eyes were sharp and impassable. He sat up straight and told Lacey that he and Georgie would come over later and that she and Nina would never be alone with Vinny and that he’d take care of everything. He reached for Lacey’s hand and held it carefully in his. Every nerve in her body flared, even the tips of her toes felt as though someone were pricking them with pins. Lacey closed her eyes as she inhaled and leaned forward to kiss him. When their lips touched, Nate breathed out of his nose like his mother did with her cigarettes. Lacey could feel his hot, stale breath against her cheek. His lips were dry and red, yet ample and warm on hers. When they pulled apart, they both smiled shyly and wiped their mouths.

“I’ll see you later,” said Nate, brushing blades of grass off his legs. “I promise.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“Hey, it’s what boyfriends do,” he said nonchalantly then winked.

Lacey returned his cheerful smile. She stayed seated on the grass and watched Nate
lift and hurl himself onto the window’s ledge. He was so strong, she thought.

Once in his room, he leaned out the window and told her that Georgie wanted her to say hi to Nina for him. Nate waved to her before quietly sliding the glass pane along its track. Lacey sneaked out the side gate and walked back to her house to keep an eye on Nina. The susurrus of cicadas intensified the closer she got to her house. They screamed from the olive trees in her front yard and from the dried cypress trees that lined the cinderblock like Greek pillars. Overhead, the sky was an uninterrupted blue.

On its way down, the sun set in banners of lavender and pink above the western ridge of the mountains, casting a warm light on Lacey and Nina, who had been playing together in the backyard most of the day in a small pool of mud. They had positioned the green watering hose so that it would flood directly into the shallow hole in the corner of the yard and they left the spigot slightly opened to let the water burble continually. At the edge of the puddle, where the sand was damp and not wet, Nina built sandcastles with plastic pails and shovels as though she were on a beach vacation. She wore a red bathing suit, which fell off her right shoulder whenever she reached for something, and white buckle sandals that were caked with mud. Sometimes, Nina wouldn’t bother fixing the strap and simply left it drooping over her upper arm.

The ground absorbed the water at such an incredible rate, that Lacey joked to Nina about needing a stopper like they use for a bath. She walked to the spigot and turned the hot metal handle it to the left. The snaking hose swelled and tightened, shooting water at Nina’s feet. She laughed and screamed and said, “More, more!” Lacey watched until the pool reached leveled land and then closed the valve. As she returned to Nina, she heard...
the side gate creak open and scrape across the hard sand.

"Georgie, look!" shouted Nina, grabbing a handful of mud and holding it up for him to see. It dripped between her fingers and splashed in the water. Georgie rushed over to Nina and squatted next to her. He, too, reached both hands into the pool and held up fistfuls of goopy mud. He squeezed it tightly in his hands and looked at Nina with exaggerated disgust. They giggled and grabbed for more. Then Nate appeared. He stood with both hands behind his back and waited for Lacey.

"Georgie," Lacey called. "Why don’t you take your shoes off and your shirt. You can get messier that way, okay?"

He turned to Nate for an answer and Nate shrugged. Georgie sat back and looked around helplessly. He lifted his hands to show his brother that he couldn’t touch anything, not even his shoes with mud on his hands.

"Here," said Lacey, kneeling to help him. She removed his shoes and socks and lifted his shirt over his head, though the collar was tight and scraped and squished his face when she pulled. She poked at his bugling, white belly and joked that he needed a tan.

He giggled and held the spot that she’d tickled.

As Lacey stood to talk to Nate—finally—she heard Nina say to Georgie, “These are my pails and shovels, but you can touch them. But no splashing me.”

The low, red sun was directly behind Nate’s head, shadowing his face.

"Is he here?" he asked, his focus darting over the yard.

"No, not until dark probably." Lacey was flattered by his arrival. She wished her parents would never come home.

"Oh, soon then?" he said, looking at the sky.
Lacey followed his gaze. A thin sweep of clouds separated like smoke past the
darkening arc of the sky, and in the lighter blueness above the horizon, the moon was a
gauzy, white sickle.

"Won’t be long, I guess," said Lacey. "We’ll just stay outside. He won’t bother us out
here."

"He’s gonna work for my dad," said Nate. "Can you believe that shit?"

Lacey didn’t know what to say. It seemed to her that she and Nate were the only two
people who knew the real Vinny, the irrefutable creep. Lacey looked at Nate, who was
still watching the sky. He smiled as if at something he’d thought to himself or he saw in
the sky.

"What’s so funny?" asked Lacey, ready to laugh. Then she saw the beginning of a
bruise on his collarbone and wondered if she should ask what happened.

"Look," he said, his hands fiddling behind his back. He removed a gun. He had it
tucked in his pants, and now held it flatly in his palm. He pulled Lacey toward him so
that her body would obstruct Nina and Georgie’s view of his hand.

"Isn’t it awesome?" he whispered.

"They scare me. I don’t want to even look at it, alright?" she said, trying to back
away. "Why’d you bring it here? Your dad’s going to kill you when he sees it’s missing."

"So, I get in the same trouble for when you sneak over as I would for taking his gun.
After a while," he said, without finishing his sentence. The gun seemed to demand more
of his attention, as though he were under its spell. He looked as though he might cry.

"He found out I came over this morning? How?"
“Georgie, but he didn’t mean to. He was talking to me about it and my mom and dad overheard him say your name.”

Lacey hadn’t heard Nina approach, but suddenly she was pulling on Lacey’s shirt asking for more water. When she saw the gun in Nate’s hand, she held Lacey’s arm tentatively as though she were uncertain how frightened she should be. Lacey wished she could tell her, but she wasn’t sure herself. Nina hid behind Lacey, her face buried in the small of her sister’s back.

“Come on,” Georgie called to Nina, from the edge of the diminishing puddle. “Before it’s gone.”

Nate stood with his feet apart and held the gun straight out in front of his chest with both hands. He aimed the pistol at the olive trees across the yard, then at the two-by-four posts holding up one corner of the porch roof. Each time he aimed at a new target, he snapped his shoulders back, as if he’d pulled the trigger and sent shock waves up the length of his arms. When he tried to hold the gun perfectly still, Lacey noticed that his hands trembled and his arms drooped under the weight of the gun. In between taking pretend shots, Nate lowered the gun and rested his arms.

By now, Georgie was privy to the commotion and excited by his brother’s antics, shouting, “Shoot the cactus! The rock!” He lifted his arms victoriously over his head and cheered on his brother, mud sliding down his hands.

“That’s enough, Nate,” said Lacey. “You’re scaring Nina.” Though the truth was, he was terrifying her, too.

“That piece of shit won’t come near you,” said Nate, his eyes glazed over, his focus lost.
Lacey bent down and whispered for Nina to go inside and take Georgie with her, she’d come for her in a minute when she and Nate were done talking. Nina marched towards Georgie and said, “Let’s go.” She grabbed his wrist—both their hands were encrusted in mud—and pulled him away.

“No, Nina. I don’t want to,” whined Georgie, after being dragged several steps. He stood in the middle of the yard, rubbing the dirt from his hands and arms.

Nina dropped his wrist and looked at Lacey as if to say, now what.

“Go on,” Lacey said. “Go clean up and I’ll be in soon.”

The screen door squeaked open then bounced shut behind Nina, who’d given Georgie a dirty look before walking away. Just above the neighbor’s roof, three bats circled in the navy blue sky.

“You can’t shoot Vinny,” said Lacey. “You’re being crazy. Put it down and—”

“He should be here any minute.”

“Nate,” pleaded Lacey. “You’re scaring me. You shouldn’t do this.”

“Your dad didn’t do anything did he? Who’s next?”

Suddenly, Lacey felt panicky. Her heart thudded fitfully. Her mouth went dry. Everything was too big, too fast, too much. She looked toward the house and saw Nina standing in the doorway, her figure blurred behind the screen partitions. She was waving to Georgie, inviting him to come inside with her, but he was shaking his head continuously at her.

“There’s got to be something else we can do?” Lacey said to Nate. “We could call the cops?”

Nate looked at Lacey, his eyes alert and aware in a way they hadn’t been since he’d
come over. His head was bent in thought.

"And say what?" he said. "What would you tell them? Would he go to jail?"

"Probably." Lacey stepped closer to Nate and said, as gently as she could, "We could
tell them about your dad if you want."

"No, I can handle it," he said, moving away as if offended by her suggestion.

"I'm sorry, I just thought...."

"Go call," he said, nodding toward the house. "Just ask what they'd do to someone
like Vinny, that's all, and then come tell me."

Lacey nodded and walked away, each step heavy as though she were sloshing through
ankle-deep water. She had absolutely no intention of calling the police for Nate, however
she'd need a few minutes to think of a story to tell him. Once in the kitchen, she saw
Nina standing on a chair in front of the sink, the dishwashing soap at her side. She'd
splashed muddy water all over the counter and the floor, but looked up at Lacey with
pride when she raised her clean, wet arms from under the running water.

And before the words, "What a mess," came out of Lacey's mouth, a sound
perforated the air. She and Nina both jerked. The vibrating crash was deafening, forcing
Nina to hold her wet hands to her ears. She started to scream and shake. The ringing in
the air had not yet dissipated when Lacey shouted to Nina, "Stay there. Don't move!"

Lacey bolted out of the kitchen, down the back hallway and past the screen door to
the porch. The first thing she saw was Nate. He was collapsed on the dirt on all fours,
wailing without restraint. And then, with one slight shift of her eyes, she saw Georgie
lying sprawl-legged in the dirt, his head blown halfway off at the neck. Blood poured
from his throat. It soaked quickly into the dirt. His eyes, which she saw blink only once,
reminded her of the deer’s in the back of the Mr. Dolan’s truck, stunned as if by the horror of his last vision—his brother holding a gun. A gurgling noise came from his body, but nothing moved. Lacey took another step and buckled over. She thought she was going to vomit, but nothing came up, nothing but a heaving moan.

“Oh, my god,” she finally managed to yell. “Nate!” She ran inside again to call an ambulance.

Nate stayed on the ground, his hands over his screaming face.

After telling the dispatch operator her address and that Georgie had been shot, she explained that she couldn’t wait on the phone with her until the police got there. She had to be with her sister, with Nate. She hung up on the woman and ran to Nina, who was balled up like a beetle on the same chair Lacey had left her standing on. Nina clutched Lacey around the neck and buried her face in her hair. Lacey rushed her to the couch and peeled her away, telling her that everything was fine now, that it was all over. She told Nina to wait on the couch while she checked on Nate and Georgie.

Outside, Nate was at his brother’s side. He was screaming how sorry he was, how Georgie had to hang on. Lacey waited on the porch, too afraid to get any closer to the blood than she had to. She wanted to comfort them both, but she couldn’t move from where she stood. Lacey ran inside to wait for the police.

Emergency vehicles blared closer and closer, adding to the volume of the evening. Tires squealed to a stop in front of the house. Car doors slammed intermittently. Footsteps ran on the street’s black asphalt, then her front yard’s packed dirt, then through the tile foyer and out to the concrete porch. While officers rushed by, Lacey stood out of the way. She pointed them toward the backyard. One middle-aged policeman picked up
Nina, who had started crying again—though it was a tearless cry of something more than sadness—when the police bounded in. Nina screamed into his shoulder, and he patted her back, hushing her toward calmness. The thought crossed Lacey’s mind that he was probably a father, and if he wasn’t, he should be. It was something in the way he cradled Nina and spoke softly to her. She was relieved by his presence, until everything around her crashed into chaos.

“Get a stretcher!” an officer yelled from out back. “We need O-2 and a crash-cart!”

When the nice policeman’s back was to Lacey—he was trying to distract Nina by having her show him the pictures on the wall—she left the room and went to check on Nate. She waited behind the screen door and watched the scene unfold, blurry from where she stood.

“I still have a pulse,” one of the emergency men said. “Bag him.”

A woman placed something over Georgie’s face that looked like a clear balloon and squeezed it. Georgie’s chest lifted slowly as the woman pumped air into his chest.

Meanwhile, two officers were picking up Nate by his arms and dragging his limp body across the yard, his feet scuffing the dirt. They urged him to stand, but it was as though he couldn’t hear them at all over his crying to Georgie not to die.

“Bring him inside,” said Sheriff Downing to the officers carrying Nate. The Sheriff stood on the porch and surveyed the yard. “The kitchen’s fine,” he said as Lacey stepped back from the screen door.

Sheriff Downing was tall and overweight, with broad shoulders and a bulbous torso. His legs were surprisingly thin for such a frame, which reminded Lacey of a potato.
growing roots. He had kind, light eyes and red cheeks that always looked near frostbit, despite the season.

For the first time since the accident, Lacey tried making eye contact with Nate when they escorted him inside, but he didn’t seem to know she was there, even when one of the officers said her name and he told her to move. Nate was still crying when they brought him in the house. The guilt and despair on Nate’s face made Lacey want to scream, it was an accident! She wanted the sheriff, the emergency people, the neighbors, and mostly Georgie to hear her.

“Heads up,” a woman said to Lacey. She pushed a stretcher down the hallway and outside to the people helping Georgie.

Lacey noticed they were all moving slower than before. They spoke with their heads down. They pulled bloody latex gloves from their hands. They carelessly dropped instruments in bags, as if disappointed in the tool itself. Lacey read their lack of urgency as an indication of death.

“Hey, now,” said Sheriff Downing, opening the screen door and finding Lacey in the hallway. “I need you inside with your sister. There’s nothing good to see out here,” he said, entering the house. He eased the screen door shut, as though mindful that a sudden noise may startle her. Lacey retreated to the living room with Sheriff Downing’s coarse breaths and hefty stomps trailing behind her, his key ring clinking with each step, his police radio blaring static.

“Sheriff Downing,” said a young officer with a thin, black mustache. He stopped both Lacey and the sheriff before they turned the corner into the living room. “I believe the parents just pulled up, sir. And…” he looked at Lacey and hesitated. She’d been
looking at the blue and red lights flash into her house through the open front door and the
sheer curtains of the main window until she heard the mention of her parents. She waited
for him to finish his sentence, but he pulled the Sheriff aside and, in a voice Lacey could
still hear, whispered, “And, they’re piss drunk, just outside there. Ruiz doesn’t think the
kids should see them like this. And crowd’s forming and I’m not sure what to—”

“Goddarn it,” sighed the Sheriff, wiping his forehead with his hand. “And the boy’s
parents?”

“They live across the street, sir. Johnston went over there to notify them, get them to
the station instead of here.”

Sheriff Downing nodded to his deputy—the name on his tag said Off. Ron Ivins—and said they’d transfer Nate to the station soon. Then he placed a heavy hand on the top
of Lacey’s head and said, “I have to talk to your parents real quick. You go sit with your
sister and I’ll be right in to hear what happened, okay?” Then, he patted her back and
urged her ahead into the living room.

“It was an accident,” Lacey said, turning around to face him. She was eye level with
his belly and had to drop her head back to see his face, and, once she did, she saw wild
hairs sprouting like crabgrass from his nostrils. “He didn’t mean to shoot Georgie, you’ve
got to believe me. He wasn’t—”

Sheriff Downing stooped to her level—his eyes were bright with angst—and said,
“We know he didn’t intend to kill his little brother, hon. Don’t worry about your friend,
he’s not in any trouble, okay?” He grunted as he pushed himself erect. “Go sit with your
sister now,” he said.

Once free from the hallway’s partitions, Lacey looked to her right and saw Nate in the
kitchen, surrounded by uniformed officers, who seemed to be consoling him, though she couldn’t hear their voices clearly. Nate’s arms were folded on the table, his forehead resting on his crossed wrists.

“Go on now,” said the Sheriff, his hand on Lacey’s shoulder. He continued walking past her and on to the porch, adjusting his belt as he introduced himself to her parents, whom she could not see from where she stood. The officer with the mustache walked into the kitchen and leaned down to talk to Nate.

In the living room, Nina sat quietly on the couch hugging a brown, chenille pillow with tassels of fringe dangling from each corner. When Lacey walked in, Nina saw her and started crying again, bawling harder once Lacey hugged her. Someone had wrapped a knit afghan around Nina because she was still wearing a semi-wet bathing suit. After reassuring Nina that she was safe, Lacey turned around on the couch, perched on her knees, and pulled back the curtains. She looked out the front window and saw a fury of lights flashing on the faces of her neighbors. They were gathered behind a barrier of yellow tape, looking over one another’s shoulders toward the house. Several women were crying. Policemen were shaking their heads. Two people had their dogs on leashes—they must have followed the police cars during their evening stroll. Lacey wondered what they thought they would see, why they would come.

“Get up,” Lacey said, pulling Nina off the couch. “We’re going to find Mom and Dad for you.” The blanket around Nina uncoiled, but she dragged the blanket outside with her, shivering in her damp bathing suit.

The moment Lacey reached the threshold, the sounds that had been trickling anonymously into the house suddenly flooded her senses. The difference was like
listening to rain spat on a shingled roof from inside, then standing outside on the sidewalk and feeling each one land on your arm.

“Coming through,” a woman’s voice called from behind Lacey, who felt dizzied by the commotion. She turned and saw the blue-shirt people pushing a stretcher up the hallway, like waiters with a large serving tray. On top of the stretcher was a black bag strapped down beneath three yellow belts. The bag, it seemed, was not made for a child. The head and foot of it lay flat. Georgie’s body, the small bulge in the middle.

Lacey and Nina stepped away from the open door and let them by. Then the girls resumed their spot at the threshold and watched as the stretcher bounced and bobbed over loose stones on the cement walkway. Most of the crowd covered their mouths and stared at one another with large, shocked eyes. Once the stretcher was secure in the back of a white van, the woman shut the doors and tapped on the window. It drove away without urgency.

Lacey and Nina stepped out onto the shadowy, cement porch, where her mother and father and Vinny stood talking to the sheriff. Their mother was sobbing, hugging their father’s arm, and just as Lacey and Nina approached their circle of conversation, Jillian lurched away and vomited in the dirt. Lacey watched as her father went to Jillian and pulled the hair away from her face. The sheriff was shaking his head at the ground and biting his bottom lip as if in restraint, and Vinny, whom Lacey could feel watching her, looked away when she made eye contact with him. She wanted him to know why Nate had come over with a gun, but realized that could get Nate into a lot of trouble. She had no idea what he was telling the police.

While they all waited for Jillian to regain her composure, Officer Ivins stepped
outside and announced that they were ready to bring Nate to the station to see his parents.

“Cuffs?” he asked the Sheriff.

“Hell no, Ivins. He’s not a criminal. Jesus.” He faced his deputy and gave instructions. “Listen, just walk the boy to the car, nice and easy. This isn’t your regular crime scene. We just want to get him to his parents before anything.”

Nina ran to her mother, who was wiping her mouth and apologizing profusely, though no one seemed to acknowledge her. She picked up Nina and held her tightly, petting the back of her head to soothe her. Lacey was waiting alone by the door when Nate stepped outside, his chin on his chest.

“Folks,” Sheriff Downing said to Lacey’s parents, authority resonating in his voice. “Let’s step inside First, let the boy get by now, that’s it.” He seemed to be directing everyone like a crossing guard, arms out to his side to form a blockade, wrists waving in the obligatory direction. Everyone, including Lacey, shuffled back a few steps, making room for Nate to exit the front door.

In the quiet flashes of light, Lacey noticed a wet sheen to Nate’s swollen eyes and cheeks. She said his name, and he looked up and met Vinny’s eyes before hers.

“Take him to jail!” shouted Nate, as he stepped out of the house. “He’s the one who deserves it!”

“Son, you’re not going to jail,” said the Sheriff, who was clearly trying to keep the situation under control. “Now, move along, folks. Inside.”

The adults stayed on the porch. Lacey and Nina had been the first ones back in the house, leaving the front door open behind them. They waited near the foot of the stairs and watched their parents on the porch.
"What's he talking about?" asked Mitch. He looked at Vinny, who shook his head and said he had no idea.

"Like you don't know!" Nate yelled. "Lacey told you what he did to her and you didn't listen. And your wife, too," he exclaimed.

The Sheriff lifted his chin at the officer who was holding Nate and said, "Get him out of here. Ruiz and Ivins, wait outside and get that crowd to go home. Everyone else inside."

As Nate was led away and the adults scuffled into the house, Lacey realized this was her only chance to speak up, to say that Nate was right, but she didn't know how to say any of it. Then she heard Nate scream her name before the slamming of a car door cut him off.

"He's right," she said, standing on the first stair step. In a half-circle in front of her stood her mother and father, Nina, Vinny and the Sheriff. They were quiet, expectant, and still taller than Lacey. "He attacked my mom, after me. I saw him. Dad, I saw him."

All eyes were on Jillian, then Vinny, then back to Jillian, who began trembling and crying, shaking her head as though indicating that she couldn't speak.

"What the hell are they talking about?" Mitch asked Jillian. Her muted reaction seemed to be the answer he was looking for. Mitch, reddening in the face, glared at Vinny.

"Jillian, are you kidding me?" asked Vinny, his hands up in front of him. His face contorted, almost in a drunken smile. "You're the one who—"

"Dad," begged Lacey. "I swear."
Mitch stepped close to Vinny, their noses almost touching. “If you laid one finger on her, I—”

“This is bullshit, Mitch. Seriously.”

But before anyone could speak up or throw a punch, the Sheriff slammed the front door. He instructed Lacey and Nina to sit on the couch, Vinny to wait in the foyer and Jillian and Mitch to go into the kitchen. “We’re going to settle this right now,” he said, walking into the living room. He turned toward the kitchen and said to Mitch and Jillian, “I have your permission to talk to your daughter, don’t I? She claims she was a witness and I don’t want her to be influenced by any of you.” He said all of it as though they owed him at least that. They consented.

Lacey sat on the couch and the Sheriff sat directly in front of her by pulling the recliner close to the couch. She told him about the hearts of palm and about seeing Vinny’s hand on the back of her mother’s head. Sheriff Downing asked for clarification as he wrote down her statement, so Lacey pointed to her lap and said Vinny was holding her mother’s face there. He nodded and spoke in deep whispers, telling her that she was a good girl for speaking up. He patted her knee and stood up.

“You piece of shit,” they heard Mitch yell, followed by a thud that shook the nearby walls. Lacey and Nina ran after the Sheriff to see what the noise was about, and, when they got there, they saw their father on top of Vinny, punching him with both hands. Sheriff Downing tried to pry them apart, but lost his balance in the shuffle and was knocked to the ground. The girls bounded across the tile floor to their mother, who waited at the edge of the kitchen with her hands around her ribcage. Her eyes were black and greasy looking. Nina called for her father to stop.
Vinny soon found his way to his feet, but Mitch knocked Vinny’s head against the wall forcing him to lose his footing on the slick tile. Once he regained enough balance, Vinny rammed Mitch against the partition wall and then pounded his stomach, right under Mitch’s ribcage. He hit Mitch several more times until he buckled, exposing a web of cracks in the dry wall and a smudge of blood behind him. Vinny wiped his nose and saw blood on his hands.

“Fuck you, Mitch,” said Vinny. The taste of blood was now dripping down the back of his throat. “You got it all wrong.”

Mitch pushed himself up with his knee and cringed in pain.

“Oh, really?” he said, as he touched the back of his head and saw the blood on his fingers. “You’re the one who has it wrong. This is my family. Where’s yours?”

Vinny took a step forward.

“You know what,” said Sheriff Downing, who’d gotten back on his feet after getting knocked down. “I thought we could handle this like adults, but I ain’t going to let you two fight it out again in front of the wife and kids. I told you to wait in the kitchen with your wife and you near this door.”

Once her father was in the kitchen, Lacey overheard the Sheriff tell Vinny he needed his cooperation.

“Fuck that,” Vinny said, as he stormed out of the house. The front door smashed against the wall and bounced off it, sending reverberations through the frame of the house. Lacey ran to the front window in the living room to watch Vinny go.

“Goddamn it,” Sheriff Downing declared, his entire face was the same deep red as his cheeks. He rushed out the door. “Ivins, Ruiz?” Lacey heard him call. And then a moment
later, she heard his loud voice. “Yeah, I’m fine. Look, at the very least, that guy’s drunk.
Tall him and bring him in. I have a couple questions to ask him. We can get him on DUI
if he doesn’t feel like cooperating.”

From the living room window, Lacey had watched Vinny nearly trip when he ducked
under the yellow tape at the edge of the yard. The crowd, which had since dwindled to a
mere handful of people, divided and let him by, staring at him as though he were the hero
in an action movie. Smoke roiled from his car as he sped away. There was a part of Lacey
that hoped they’d never catch him and just let him go.

Back in the house, Sheriff Downing, said, “Mr. Walker, your little girls need you.
Why don’t you tend to them while I ask your wife some questions? I don’t blame you for
what you did either,” he said, patting Mitch on the back. “I woulda done the same.”

Lacey and Nina sat on either side of their father with his arms around each of them.
When Nina nuzzled him, he flinched in pain and explained that daddy’s ribs hurt on that
side and that she had to hug gently. Mitch then rested his cheek on top of Lacey’s head
and embraced her closely. Though she felt that he was sorry for never believing the story
about Vinny, Lacey resisted his contrition and leaned stiff as a doll against his uninjured
set of ribs. She supposed that she could count on his ribs the number of emotions she’d
been feeling since Vinny touched her—abandonment, betrayal, disloyalty, helplessness,
and now loss were the ones she felt at the surface.

After about ten minutes sitting on the couch in silence, Lacey’s mother and Sheriff
Downing came out of the kitchen and said that they were done talking. Jillian fiddled
with a wad of tissue, then wrapped her arms around Mitch, who’d stood quickly when
she entered the room. Lacey watched her parents stand in an embrace like people who
hadn’t seen one another in years. They stood there so long, oblivious to anything around them, the sheriff finally had to interrupt by coughing politely. Mitch and Jillian both tried to apologize as they separated, but Sheriff Downing put his hand up and said, “No, no. Quite understandable after today.” And then he and Jillian made sudden eye contact that struck Lacey as odd, not in its occurrence but in its intensity. Something was said between them that Lacey felt was curiously private.

“What’s next?” Mitch asked the sheriff.

“Well, I assume your friend’s at the station,” he said, widening his stance. “I’ll have to talk to him, and then... well, your wife and I thought it’d be in everyone’s best interest for him to disappear forever, don’t you agree?” Before anyone had the opportunity to agree, which Lacey knew they all would, Sheriff Downing lowered his chin and said, “We also think the most important thing is helping the Dolan family deal with their loss.”

“Uh,” Mitch said, glancing quickly at Jillian, then back to the Sheriff. “Don’t you think that’s a bit lax? I mean the man attacked my wife and touched my daughter. I want him to pay for—”

“Of course,” said Sheriff Downing, putting his hand on Mitch’s back and patting him several times as they approached the front door. “We’ll interrogate him at the station and let you know what we find.”

“Thanks. And I’m sorry about knocking you over earlier. We really do appreciate your help with this.”

Sheriff Downing nodded and smiled at Lacey and Nina. “You girls try and get some sleep,” he said, pointing at them. They’d been huddled at the foot of the stairs for some time. “I’ll be in touch, Mitch.”
They shook hands.

When the door clicked shut, Mitch stood in the silence his family offered him.

Lacey and Nina needed no more of an invitation than that to leave. They tiptoed upstairs and climbed into bed together. Lacey stroked Nina's hair as they fell asleep.
CHAPTER 12

Once Vinny found his way to the concrete wash, he turned left. The empty stretch of desert on his right was deep and dark, and on his other side, houses and streetlights crowded the sidewalks. He’d barely gotten to the main road when he saw police lights flash in his rearview mirror. He assumed they were involved with an emergency related to the shooting, or racing to an accident, or another crime scene. He yawed the car to the right so the police could pass him, oblivious that he was their target. But the patrol car veered with him and accelerated, tailing Vinny so closely that he could not see its headlights in his mirror, only the flood of light in his car’s cabin.

“What the fuck?” Vinny said to himself, as he pulled over. He rolled down his window and lit a cigarette.

Two deputies got out of the car. With wavering sight, Vinny could not make out their faces. All he saw were silvery glints—buttons, name tags, keys, buckles—jump off each uniform. A police radio scratched static as they approached. They greeted him by putting a flashlight close to his face. Vinny kept his eyes on the road ahead.

“You don’t know what those lights mean?” one deputy asked, holding the flashlight near Vinny’s temple. Before Vinny could respond, the deputy told him that the sheriff requested his cooperation. “He wants us to bring you in, just to talk is all.”

“This whole thing has nothing to do with me. Jillian’s the one you should talk to,” said Vinny. He took a drag from his cigarette and blew smoke out of the window, smiling to himself as if remembering the night he was with Jillian. Vinny was often a bilious
drunk, especially when confronted. “So you boys can forget it. And tell your fat sheriff I
don’t feel like a chat tonight.”

“Had a feeling you’d say that,” the other deputy said.

Vinny saw him standing by the front tire and thought he recognized his voice. “Move
that light, please,” said Vinny. His speech was clearer than it should be, with the amount
of alcohol he’d consumed in recent hours, sharpened by a rush of adrenaline.

The deputy holding the flashlight tucked it under his arm without turning it off. The
rod of light fell on the door, away from Vinny’s view.

“If that’s all...” said Vinny, reaching for the lever to put the car in “D.”

“No, that’s not all. Sheriff Downing also told us you’re drunk and I can smell you
from here. Now, you either come to the station or we book you on a DUI charge that’ll
stick and cost you. Your choice.”

Vinny shook his head. A DUI would suspend his license and end his journey. And
worse, he thought, he’d be hostage in this town. He decided a conversation about his
innocence in any and all matters should prove painless. He acquiesced.

“Fine, I’ll come. But I’m not leaving my car here.”

“Officer Ruiz can follow us in your car if that’s all right.”

Vinny nodded. He put his pack of cigarettes in his pocket and reached down the side
of his seat to feel for his stash of money. It was there. And better still be when he was
done at the station. Getting out of the car, he stumbled. Then, like a valet offering the
owner his car, he bowed to the deputy and swept his arms toward the car.

“Funny,” said Officer Ivins. “You ride in the back,” gesturing toward the patrol car.

His nametag flashed in the pumpkin light of the streetlamp.
Vinny rode to the station in the backseat of the police car, drenched in abrupt sweat. He was dizzy and thirsty in that same maddening way he’d been when he woke up days ago on the side of the road. The view ahead of him was crowded—hazy plexy glass, rifles, scanners with racing red and green lights—so he looked to his right into the darkness of the desert. The moon was high and alabaster white, casting a chalky glow on the rough sand and still bush. He reached for the handle to roll down the window, but there was none. Suddenly, he felt trapped. He squirmed in his seat and asked how much farther the police station was.

“Just another minute or two,” Ivins called back. “Did you know the boy?” he asked Vinny a moment later, calling over his shoulder through the slit in the plexy-glass divider. “The shooter?”

“No,” answered Vinny. He looked out the window and noticed the moon had momentarily disappeared from his sight. Darkness had stolen the mountains, their outline no longer apparent. He didn’t actually know Nate and felt as though he knew nobody. Jillian, with whom Vinny thought he had an understanding, evaded the truth of her infidelity by perpetuating a lie. And Mitch, Vinny’s supposed friend, the one guy he thought he could still count on, had tried beating him up without giving him the opportunity to explain. Vinny was more alone than ever.

At the station, the deputies escorted him to a white interview room. Because of a residual buzz, his surroundings seemed perceptively in motion. He tried to keep himself composed and balanced. In the room, there was a square table, two metal chairs and a one-sided mirror. Vinny waited for some time without seeing anyone—the square panels
of fluorescent lights induced a sharp pain behind his eyes. There was a small window high on the brick wall and, beyond it, Vinny could see a starless patch of night. He stretched his arms overhead and contracted the muscles in his lower back. He was becoming stiff, losing patience with the police and becoming more and more agitated about what had brought him here in the first place. It wasn’t his drunk driving. It was Jillian’s lie and nothing more. Not hard evidence, just a baseless claim. He lit a cigarette and tapped his ashes in a neat pile on the metal table top, thinking about how he’d lose if it came down to his word against hers.

When he was halfway through with his cigarette, the door opened and Sheriff Downing swaggered in. He seemed unrushed, which annoyed Vinny, who saw himself as the one doing the favor. Sheriff Downing was still wearing the khaki uniform he’d had on earlier. The navy blue stripe down the side seam of the pants was pulled taut about his rotund legs. Vinny hadn’t gotten a very good look at him earlier, but Vinny noticed now that he had considerable gray near his temples and rosacea-blotched cheeks.

“An out-of-towner, uh?” he the Sheriff said, tossing a file-folder on the table. The ashes lifted and scattered, most of them settling on Vinny’s lap or the slick floor. Vinny brushed them off his leg and looked up at the sheriff, who’d remained standing.

“Yeah, passing through. Look, this is bullshit,” said Vinny, snuffing out the cigarette on the table.

Sheriff Downing stared at the black burn mark and said, “Two simple questions.” He put his hands in his back pockets, and after a short silence asked, “Did you sexually assault Jillian Walker?”

“Assault? Fuck no.”
The Sheriff lifted his brow.

"Shit," continued Vinny, running his hands through his sweat-stiff hair. "Is that all she has to do, say it, and I’m in jail? This is the most—" He dropped his hands from his head and rested them on the table. He looked around. The thought of such manipulated power flummoxed him.

“So she’s lying then?” Sherriff Downing rested his hands on the back ridge of the empty chair in front of him.

“Yes.”

“You never had any sexual contact with Mrs. Walker?”

“Well,” Vinny said, unsure how to explain what had happened. “We sort of messed around one night.”

“Consensually?”

Vinny grinned again with the memory of Jillian’s forceful seduction that night.

“Is this funny to you, Mr....” He opened the file. "Parlow, Vincent Parlow?” His eyes were small and red and weighed down by dark circles. He sat down across from Vinny and wrote in the file folder. Vinny shook his head and waited for the next question. If he stayed placid and cooperative, he believed his innocence would be more convincing.

“Had you two been drinking?”

“Yeah, earlier that night at the Stagecoach. Mitch and her were fighting about something, I don’t know, and she was lying on the couch when I came downstairs. She was pretty drunk, sucking down vodka like a fish.”

“So, let me get this straight. You’re still kind of buzzed, she’s wasted, and you find
her alone downstairs on the couch, distressed, and you didn’t have sex with her, didn’t force yourself on her at all?”

“Is that what she said? That I forced myself on her? She’s the one who went downtown on *me*, if you know what I mean. I bet she left that out of her story, didn’t she?”

Sherriff Downing didn’t answer.“Any witnesses?”

“Uh, I’d hope not,” chuckled Vinny. He saw the futility of truth when matched against a woman’s allegation. “But shit...now I wish Mitch had found us on the couch. Shit.” He reached in his pocket and asked the Sheriff for a light.

“Actually,” said Sheriff Downing, after lighting the cigarette. His eyes fell to the documents front of him. He sat back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest.

“Seems like we do have an eye witness.”

“What?” The smoke swirled around Vinny’s face.

“The daughter, Lacey. She watched you two from the staircase, said you had your hand on the back of her mother’s head like you were attacking her.”

“I wasn’t—You can’t force that, Sheriff. You know how it is. I was just holding her head. She—”

Sheriff Downing raised his hand, quieting Vinny. “That’s enough.” He pushed the chair away and stood. He walked back and forth across the room, as if mulling over the possibility of Vinny’s story.

Vinny sat erect and attentive in his seat, legs bouncing. He smoked furiously.

“The girl didn’t seem to understand that she was seeing...” The Sheriff waved his hand as if summoning a word or idea. “She thought it was an assault of some kind and
your account matches what she saw, not what she thought. In fact, I was suspicious when
Mrs. Walker refused to press charges or do a rape kit for evidence."

“See? I told you, man,” said Vinny, raising his hands in exasperation.

“We’re not done,” snapped the sheriff. He’d stopped in his tracks and glared at
Vinny. He ran his tongue across his teeth. “Second, did you molest Lacey?”

“Jesus. No! Can’t you see what’s going on here?” exclaimed Vinny.

“Let me narrow this one down for you,” he said, pulling the chair back in order to sit
down. His voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a well. “Did you at any
time suck on that little girl’s finger?”

“This is insane.” Vinny dropped the smoking butt on the floor and put it out with his
foot. “She’s as crazy as her goddamn mother.”

The Sheriff shot Vinny a reproachful glare. Vinny answered him straight.

“No. Alright? That’s a lie, too. She fed me a piece of food, but I didn’t, I mean I don’t
think I ever…..” Vinny let his statement trail off as he tried to remember that moment
with Lacey during the barbecue. His tongue might have slipped and accidentally touched
her finger while she fed the heart of palm to him, but it wasn’t like he attacked her. She
fed him, stuck her finger in his mouth. But the way his evening was going, that would be
enough to send him to jail. Fucking women, he thought to himself.

“Even if you did,” the sheriff interrupted, scratching his mustache. “There have been
no charges filed against you. But if I could find a way for the law to hold you responsible
for that boy shooting his brother, believe me, I would. Unfortunately in this case, the law
only sees the one holding the gun.”

“Look,” said Vinny, leaning his chest against the table. “Why don’t you ask that
boy’s father about the gun? Or where his parents were? I should be the last person on your goddamn list of blame.”

Downing wrote something in the file then said, “Some don’t see it like that.”

“Fuck ‘em then.” Vinny plumped back in his chair, indignant and defensive.

“Well, the boy says he came over to protect Lacey from you. He brought the gun in case.” Vinny was stunned into speechlessness.

Sheriff Downing, probably thinking he’d bombard Vinny instead of giving time to get his story straight, fired another question. “Your friend, Mitch Walker, he seemed concerned that you’ve got a girlfriend, a young one, too. Wanna tell me about her?”

“Concerned? Two days ago, he was envious. Look, she was old enough, alright? And I’m not sure what she has to do with any of this.”

Sheriff Downing put both hands up in front of him, as if signaling Vinny to back down. Which he did. He inhaled and looked up at the lights, holding in his breath until he felt weak and tingly. He exhaled and the sheriff rubbed his cheek and started to talk.

“Here’s the deal, Mr. Parlow,” said Downing. He stood the file and tapped the edges into a clean stack. “I can’t hold you on rape because it was nothing more than fellatio. But understand, anytime there’s an accusation like rape, we have to investigate. And as for the daughter, well, it’s her story against yours and, again, there are no charges.”

“So I can go?” Vinny put his hands on the edge of the table, as if to push himself back from it and stand.

“Not exactly.”

Vinny scooted his chair toward the table and cocked his head with fuming perplexity.

“See, I do have you on a DUI if I want you, but it seems that the Walker family—
Mrs. Walker in particular—desperately wishes that you’d vanish.” The sheriff snapped his fingers, as though indicating the swiftness by which Vinny should disappear. “You give them the creeps and, to be honest, I don’t blame them. We have a small and normally safe community, Mr. Parlow, and we try to keep it like that. Are you hearing me on this?” He leaned across the table, his own fleshy forehead casting a shadow over his face.

“So, you’re saying, after driving all this way and lining up a job, you want me to leave town. Is that it?” asked Vinny.

“I was thinking bigger. Ever been to California or Arizona?” Sheriff Downing stood up from the table to go. Before leaving, he turned to Vinny and said, “We’re keeping you in the tank overnight. Can’t let you drive now anyway. Before you start fighting me on this, ask yourself how much you want a DUI and a suspended license.”

Vinny slumped in his chair and shook his head. He stayed quiet in fear of anything that would keep him in town longer than necessary.

“That’s what I thought,” replied the Sheriff. “They’ll bring dinner to you. I think it’s bologna sandwiches and pudding tonight. Enjoy.”

When Vinny heard the bailiff’s booted footsteps squeak down the linoleum hallway, he hoped they were letting him out early. He didn’t feel drunk, hadn’t acted up and hadn’t slurred his words for hours. But instead, the bailiff stood on the free side of the bars and counted heads, said he’d be back with the meal. Vinny had already been sitting on a hard bench for two hours with no water and food. He was feeling weak and hungry. He ran his fingers through his hair, which was crisp with dried sweat, and closed his eyes. Already,
he'd grown numb to the mundane sounds of the jail: metal doors slamming shut like cages, key rings dangling against woven leather holsters, rubber sole boots squeaking on the linoleum lined halls, inmates vomiting their weekend libations into the open toilet in the corner, bored guards shouting down the hall at one another about point-spreads and touchdowns.

It wasn't the kind of jail he'd seen in movies. There were no thugs or bruisers, no transvestites or prostitutes, no one rattling on the bars screaming for one more phone call. There were seven men, mostly his age, who had probably been arrested for being foolish drunks, jealous husbands, or poor losers in a pool game. They were minor disturbers of the peace, nothing more. And Vinny, he wasn't even that. He was a simple misinterpretation, the casualty of two women's lies.

Some men picked at their nails, others feigned sleep, and one older man paced the length of the cell, chiding himself in a low smothered voice, his fist at his temple.

The holding tank, which was more like a hospital waiting room than a cell, was warm and fug with two-day old scents of urine, vomit, sweat and tobacco. There were several chairs screwed securely into the floor and a wooden bench that lined the room. Vinny had been sitting on it alone in the corner, close to the bars where the freshest air circulated. When the meal came in seven brown bags, he ravaged the bologna sandwich and drank the two, kid-size juice boxes—apple and berry—through their tiny straws, sucking so hard the boxes wrinkled.

His buzz had faded. His stomach churned his meal, but he still felt woozy. He stared at a crack in the floor to regain his balance, but his focus was tenuous. He decided to lay
down. He extended his legs and brought his arm toward his face so that he could cover
his eyes.

His mind reeled back to sobriety, like a wheel that’s been spinning on nothing but
momentum for some time.

It wasn’t convenient for Jillian to admit her infidelity to Mitch, so she added another
lie to her life. And it wasn’t dramatic enough, or didn’t demand enough sympathy or
attention from her little boyfriend, for Lacey to admit the truth—that she fed Vinny a
piece of food and her finger got in the way. And she couldn’t face the possibility that her
mother wanted him and not her father. Though the worse case of all, he decided, was his
bitch of a wife, Carol. Living in a one-story house with a textile plant manager who’d
loved her for years. She blamed him for their not having any children, and resented him
every day for it. She was the victim.

With his eyes shut, Vinny grinned loathingly at his thoughts. When a memory from
the night he’d left home came to him for the first time with such clarity, he opened his
eyes to avoid reliving that scene. He tried staring at the holes and pocks of the off-white
ceiling tiles, hoping to distract himself from that night, but his efforts were in vain. Soon,
he sank back into his memory like a foot in soft sand.

The night he left Carol, Vinny waited in his Duster, which he’d parked a few houses
up from his own. He smoked half a pack of cigarettes and dropped the butts out of the
rolled down window, letting them sizzle and smoke dead on the warm, wet pavement. It
had rained hard and fast earlier that afternoon and the streets had not yet dried. All day
the air had been bloated with humidity, heavy with the warmth of August, and the low,
fat clouds shimmied with heat lighting above the lindens.
Vinny had told Carol he was going to Akron for a few days to visit a new textile plant and teach a management and machines seminar to the new employees. He said he was leaving the next evening right after work so he could sleep in Ohio and be on time for the early meeting. He packed in front of her, his suitcase at the foot of their bed. Two days' worth of necessities: T-shirts, one tie, boxers, socks, toiletries, razors, toothbrush, deodorant.

"Don't forget your antacid," she said from behind the pages of a book she'd been reading for weeks. Without fail, she picked up that book at bedtime and rejected all of Vinny's advances because, as she told him, the book was too good to put down.

"Thanks," he'd said dully.

The truth was the next day after work, when the rain was just letting up, he had dinner alone at his favorite dive-bar and restaurant, a place Carol refused to go. Lou's Tavern was his home away from home and served the best roast beef and potatoes with gravy he'd ever had. He sat at the bar that night and ate a full roast beef meal, followed by three hefty shots of Wild Turkey, which he drank slowly and with much consideration. He needed a buzz, but wanted to stave off being full-blown drunk. He had to have his head on straight, because he couldn't afford a slip up of any kind.

Funny, he thought, lifting his last shot to his lips. Funny how one day your life is running what seems to be a normal, albeit not exciting, path and then wham—he drank the shot in slow gulps—everything is gone. With no beer chaser left in his glass, Vinny smoked a cigarette to settle the fire in his stomach and clear his throat.

Three younger people a few stools away from him were loud with cheerfulness. It was too much joy for Vinny to handle at the moment, so he moved to a private booth
with torn leather seats, which had been sealed with gray duct tape. There, he drank two more draft beers and smoked three cigarettes, all the while going over his plan and his future. Momentarily, he doubted his instincts and imagined going home to find Carol curled up on the couch with a book on her lap and a glass of wine on the table. But it was a short-lived fantasy. He had a vivid notion of what he’d find at home, but what he wasn’t certain of was what he’d do when he got there.

To avoid thinking about her or their failed marriage, Vinny drank another beer and distracted his mind by bullshitting with a few of the regulars. When his last beer was empty, he paid his tab and waved to Lou as he walked out. Lou called to him and said, “Thanks, Vin. We’ll see you tomorrow, eh?” and waved at him with a white bar towel. Under his breath, Vinny said to himself, “I doubt it, Lou.”

Parked in his car, Vinny slouched when he saw a set of headlights turn the corner. And then another set right behind the first. He reached for the baseball bat he had rested across the seat and squeezed so hard the skin in his hands pinched.

Carol parked in the driveway and pulled up to make room for the car behind her, a black Mercedes. Carol shut her car door and smiled at the man getting out of his luxury vehicle. He wore dark slacks and a dress shirt and had a pretty-boy’s haircut, neat and slick at every turn. After a few steps, he stopped and turned around. Vinny thought he’d been spotted, until the man pointed his key chain at the dashboard. The break lights flashed once, followed by the beep of his alarm system.

In that brief instance, Vinny saw the man’s younger, thin face and remembered him. Vinny’s jaw stiffened. His heart rattled his ribcage like a man locked in a cell, shaking the bars in protest.
“Jeff Larder,” Vinny whispered to himself. And then full recognition hit. “Our goddamn insurance agent!” His intonation rose with question and disbelief.

As Jeff Larder followed Carol into her and Vinny’s house, the place they’d shared for over 20 years, Vinny grabbed the steering wheel with both hands. His face vexed with pain and his knuckles whitened from bearing it. So there it is, he said to himself, there goes everything.

But it wasn’t over yet.

Vinny wanted to time his entrance exactly. He waited until he could see a light on in their bedroom window. He planned on bashing in pretty boy’s face, beating his naked body until he ran out of the house and drove away, bruised, bloody. Carol would hold the sheets to her chest and scream at him. He’d point the bat at her and tell her what he thought of her, that she was a whore, a lying waste. At least, that was the plan.

Shortly after they were inside, the kitchen light spilled out the side door window illuminating bundles of soggy trash piled at the head of the driveway—she probably opened a bottle of wine—and then moments later the window of the master bedroom was doused with light. He got out of his car and carried the bat in his hand like a baseball player approaching home plate, bases loaded.

The side door creaked when he opened it and it was then that he realized he was sneaking into his own house. An intruder at home, a stranger to his life. He walked carefully across the linoleum floor of the kitchen and rested his baseball bat against the lip of the round oak table with claws for feet. With his hand on the metal handle of the refrigerator door, he listened. The bedroom was just around the corner and down the hall, a mere twenty paces from where he stood. The first sound he heard, and the one he’d
remember more clearly than any of the rest, was Carol’s laughter. It was the purest of her giggles, as though she were being tickled unrelentingly. He hadn’t heard her laugh like that in years.

Vinny opened the refrigerator and spotted a row of green beer bottles on the bottom door-shelf. He also saw white Chinese take-out boxes from a dinner he and Carol had shared only two days prior and a Tupperware bowl of his favorite meat ball and sausage dish that Carol cooked on Sundays. He stopped his memory of those times by grabbing a beer. He opened it with the end of the dual function cork screw-bottle opener Carol had left on the counter, next to a burgundy stained wine cork.

He heard a thud from the room and recognized it as shoes landing on the carpet. Then the bed springs squeaked.

Vinny tossed his head back and chugged his beer. With no deliberation, he opened another. He brought it with him to the kitchen table, lit a cigarette, and let his focus slacken.

While he sat there, listening to another man make love to his wife, his mind sought refuge by taking inventory of the things around him, the nick-nacks, the post-it notes, the coffee stain on the carpet, the hair-line crack in the table, the water jug that would soon need replacing, his wife’s galoshes near the front door, the stack of bills in a basket near the phone, the fruit bowl centerpiece on the table. Everything in the house was a fabrication, a false proof of happiness, he thought, as he took a pull off his cigarette. The burning paper crackled like fall leaves.

Carol moaned as if from the depths of herself and when Vinny heard her, it was as though hands were wringing out his entrails like wet towels. He coughed out the smoke
of his final drag and smothered the cigarette in a red apple’s concavity.

With his bat in hand, he entered the hallway and waited several feet from the closed bedroom door. He heard a rhythmic thudding from inside the room. It was the bed frame knocking against the wall. He couldn’t take it anymore. There was nothing but rage coursing through his veins now, but as he stepped once toward the door, he realized that in a few minutes, he’d be the only fool in the room. The jealous husband with a bat, his wife sumptuously naked with another man. No, he refused to give Carol the satisfaction of seeing his agony and stealing his pride. He dropped the bat where it was. The plush carpet silently absorbed its fall.

Suddenly, he was frantic about being found out, worried that they’d hear him and come out of the room half naked together. And still, he’d be the fool. He knew he had to leave. He left his empty beer bottle on the table. She’d see it when she was finished. And she’d find the cigarette butt jammed like another stem into the apple. He wondered if she’d have any regrets.

He left no note and took nothing from the house.

He crossed the slick street toward his car and drove to the nearest bank machine where he withdrew all that he could from their joint checking and saving accounts. There was a limit on withdrawals made in within twenty-four hours of each other, so he only walked away with just under a thousand dollars. He’d stop as often as he could and take out the rest. In his car, he unzipped the white leather seat cushion and stuffed the bills between the foam and the cover. Early the next day, he stopped at a gas station and used a pay phone to call his stock broker. He sold their shares in a major tech stock—Carol had gotten a “tip” a few years ago on a merger— and had the funds immediately deposited to
the checking account and had the bank wire him a check.

Carol, he imagined, was just waking up to the beer bottle and cigarette butt and had not yet thought to consider her financial arrangement. For all she knew, he could return at any minute. Vinny took some amusement in speculating upon how many days, weeks or months she'd think of his return as imminent.

As he drove, Vinny thought about where Carol might look for him, which friends she'd call, which bars. And then he thought of Mitch Walker, the one friend of his Carol had never met. It was then Vinny decided to drive to Nevada.

Vinny had slept stiffly and restlessly for three hours when they released him around 7 a.m. the next morning. One of the officers had parked Vinny’s gold Duster in front of the department. Vinny’s keys were waiting for him at the front desk. It felt as thought he were simply checking out of a hotel room.

It was a pink dawn. The clouds were high and wispy over the valley, the air cooler than the previous day and dry as the desert floor. Vinny got in his car and looked around. Everything was where he’d left it—a pack of cigarettes on the seat, several beer cans strewn on the back seat and a hair comb on the dashboard. Still, most of his things were not with him. His duffle bag was still in the spare room at Mitch’s house, the clothes piled in the corner waiting to be washed. All he had, besides his cigarettes, were his keys and his wallet. He reached on the side of his seat, right behind the zipper of the vinyl cover, and felt the wad of money that he’d hidden there. Sweet grace, he thought.

When he’d left Carol, it was on his own accord, with his own whiskey, his own music and his own reeling torment. But now, as he waited at the edge of the parking lot, after
being confined and then asked to leave, there was no great impetus at the wheel as there once was. His only need was for a shower and clean clothes. He thought of Katie and her connections at the hotel, the cold, dark room in which they had sex. He’d go there and be honest with her.

He smoked three cigarettes as he drove down the hill toward the state border on I-93. Lake Mead was a blue mirror, the mountains around it dark as shadows. Soon, Vinny saw the white plaster building of Miner’s Pass Casino. It was shaded in the deep crease of the canyon, but its neon billboard flashed brightly: Sunday Brunch Special $8.95, including champagne.

Vinny parked near the same entrance as before. He collected his cigarettes and his wallet and took one quick look at himself in the rearview mirror. His skin was dry and red from the sun he’d gotten at the barbecue the other day, and his hair was greasy and stringy. He hoped Katie wouldn’t be repulsed by him. He turned off the ignition, then pushed his shoulder against the door and opened it. With one foot on the white parking line, he froze. The last time he was here, there had been an ease to his actions and thoughts, an indifference that was almost pleasurable. He had simply been in motion, on the lam from betrayal, but now betrayal had caught up to him. Vinny shut the door gently and rolled down the window.

As he considered all of this, he rubbed his face with his hands, pressing hardest at his temples. It had been one thing to escape loss, as he’d done when he left home, but it was another to feel lost in the escape. From leaving an adulterous wife, he was now leaving a town where a boy was dead because of one girl’s misinterpretation and one mother’s lie. He hunkered in his seat, needful of a moment to himself. He smoked another cigarette
and stared blankly at the stucco wall ahead, at cracks and air-bubbles, and the dry top leaves on a row of ficus bushes. He knew this: Women were the origin of his strife, and if he wasn’t careful, their inherent menace would annihilate him. Katie, too. She would reveal her manipulative powers. She would want to get married, and if he didn’t, she would threaten him with statutory rape or some other nonsense. Seeing her again would be a mistake. He started the car and exited the parking lot. He drove across the dam with a lazy, partial revelation.

The same landscape, which he had passed days ago on his way into town, skimmed by. He saw his surroundings with unconcerned swiftness—blurs of roadside bush, interminable red rock, electric cables like floating strands of hair. And again, without notice, he crossed the Arizona-Nevada border. He planned on stopping for nothing but gas and provisions.

Vinny was still heading southeast, the sun bright on his passenger window. By the time he made it to Tuscon, Arizona, it was mid-afternoon. The saguaros were taller, brawnier than hours ago, and the land was crowded with mesquite and ironwood groves. He drove on, never stopping in Tucson.

About two hours later, after taking some car-friendly switchbacks through the Sonoran desert, he came to a road that led directly into Nogales, Mexico. Border patrol officers ducked their heads in his car, looked Vinny over and then one of them wrote something on a pad and said, *Solo un gringo.* He waved Vinny by with his clipboard and repeated a phrase Vinny was sure he’d said all day long, *Buenos dias y buena vida.*

Vinny drove along a red, dirt road. Barefoot children were playing soccer in the
street. Old women carried netted bags of fruit and vegetables. Only a few looked up as he cruised by. Vinny felt renewed by a sense of anonymity.

The sun had begun its descent. Its intense orange filtered through a layer of dust in the city. He turned southeast off the main road—the temperature seemed to drop instantly—and was soon confronted with an uncanny sight. Out of the dusty haze of the Sonoran basin was a white, Spanish-colonial church—not unlike Miner’s Pass Casino in texture and size—the mountains like bastions in the distance. Wrought-iron gates guarded the old church and protected the windows on the first floor. Two bell towers, with white crosses at their crowns, flanked a clay-colored entrance where the bricks bordering the arched doorway had already partially crumbled away. The church seemed to question him by its mere presence. He was not guilty, he told himself, not responsible for any of it. He drove past the church and didn’t look back. The hands on the wheel were autonomous hands and the road ahead of him, he believed, was his to drive alone.

He reentered downtown Nogales on a different main road, this one of sand stone. Even in the stillest of air, its ruddy dust hung like a low fog on the street. Vinny parked wherever there was space along the slanted sidewalk curb. He thought about his money and decided to take it with him. He unzipped the seat and folded a rather thin wad of bills into the heel of his sock. It would be safe there because the uncomfortable sensation he felt when he walked would make him continuously aware of its presence. He locked his car, though there was no longer anything valuable in it, and walked toward the center of town. It was due time for a beer and a meal.

There were any number of bars along the street, but in a country where he knew nothing of the culture or the language, Vinny was intent on finding a restaurant in which
he felt at ease. He passed several restaurant-bars with only two or three stone-faced patrons inside, a dark-haired waitress and a rotating fan. They all glared at him when he walked by, swatting flies from their faces without blinking. Vinny averted his eyes and looked ahead. Finally, closer to the center of town, signs were written in English and bars had names like Houligan’s and Carlos’ Cantina, all lit up in green and yellow neon. Vinny told himself that he just needed the chance to meet some people, learn some necessary phrases and find a place to stay.

On the southwest corner, Vinny spotted a restaurant that didn’t seem to have a sign. Its fish-shack décor of nets strewn over windows and fake fish and starfish mounted on the walls appeared to be welcoming enough and, at the same time, run-down enough that it did not cater to the American college scene. The air inside was stale and dusty, the ceiling high with rotted beams and rafters. The bartender, a skinny man with a mustache as thick as his wrists, was pouring two men a round of shots. Tequila or whiskey, it didn’t matter to Vinny, but he nodded to the bartender as he took a stool at the bar, hoping it would communicate his desire for the same drink. The bartender understood. When he was done pouring Vinny’s shot, he pointed to the glass door cooler behind him and said, cerveza? Again, Vinny nodded.

He enjoyed his tequila and beer, smoking slowly and deeply at the bar by himself. What relief it was finally to feel the beginning of his journey’s end and what liberty he found in the strange tongue of those around him. Buzzed and light headed—he decided against seafood and had not yet eaten—Vinny strolled aimlessly on a back road along uneven slabs of concrete that looked as though an earthquake had unpacked them from an even stretch. He stopped to relieve himself in a small space between a gate and a
building when he heard footsteps behind him.

Shit, he thought to himself. He was being stupid. Walking around Mexico, half-drunk with a wad of savings in his sock. He wished he’d taken his baseball bat with him instead of leaving it at his house.

He tucked himself in his pants and turned around to see a young man leaning against the hood of a red truck. He wore black jeans, a denim shirt and dark aviator glasses. His hair was stiff and shiny, his goatee short and clean around his plump lips. His arms were folded.

“You looking for girls?” he asked, his intonation falling and rising.

Reticent, Vinny shook his head and continued walking. He wasn’t looking for trouble, much less girls. The man’s booted footsteps followed.

“Cheap, ese. You choose, okay?”

Vinny paused. He’d sworn off women, but this proposal was different. Everything about the young man’s offer eliminated the very hassles Vinny was intent on avoiding. He faced the young man—his skin was that of a boy’s, smooth and fleshy—and told him, maybe.

Aqui, the young man said, gesturing with his head for Vinny to follow him.

A short block later, the boy pushed a button near a tall metal door and said something into the speaker. As the door buzzed loudly, the boy leaned into it and held it open for Vinny. In the bright light that seemed to have followed them inside, Vinny noticed that the walls were painted light blue. To his right was a refrigerator of beer, and to his left, was a counter, behind which an elderly man and woman sat. The woman, with loose hair-pins and wrinkles as deep as water-worn gorges, was writing in a ledger book. The man,
presumably her husband, was reading the newspaper. They, too, had a fan. When it
rotated toward the husband, his paper wafted taut like a ship's sails.

The boy and woman spoke quickly. It seemed to Vinny they were disagreeing about
something. The husband never looked up, read his paper in the natural light surging down
from the high windows. When the woman was finished talking, the boy turned to Vinny
and, with his hands, showed him five fingers then a zero and said, one hour. Believing
that to be a fair deal, Vinny nodded. Besides, he was a rich man in this country.

The old woman shuffled to the end of the counter where a brass bell was mounted on
the wall next to a wrought-iron staircase. She reached overhead and yanked three times
on the frayed rope. Vinny squinted against the ringing in his ears. When it dissipated, he
heard commotion on the second floor: Doors opening and shutting, the hasty padding of
bare feet, high-heel stomps, female voices clucking rapidly. A rush of young girls and
women poured down the stairwell, lining up along the counter like soldiers for battle.
Most of them wore strapless shirts and mini-skirts, while others dressed in tight lace
dresses and high heels. They eyed Vinny, winked and rolled their tongues at him. The old
woman stood on a chair behind the girls and introduced them by first name—Nora,
Angelica, Maria, Cecilia, Roberta, Carmina, Josefina, Victoria, Elida.

Vinny pointed at Carmina. She was the least garish of them all, wearing a skirt and a
black tank top. She was undoubtedly several years older than the other girls, which
attracted Vinny to her in a way that surprised even him. Her plain eyes seemed naturally
outlined by a thick cluster of eyelashes, and Vinny liked that her lips were glossed with a
slight pink, not coated with a fat-slick red. The subdued color of reminded him of the
lipstick Carol used to wear.
Carmina smiled diminutively when she was chosen, revealing a jutting eye tooth that made her look both shrewd and foolish. Vinny could tell from her loose belly that her body had once housed a child, possibly two. He wondered if Carol's body would have looked like this if she'd had a child.

Vinny reached into his back pocket, counted out three twenty dollar bills, and handed them to the old lady then pointed to the beer cooler. He splayed his palm, showing her that he'd like to take five beers with him upstairs. The woman nodded, waving him toward the cooler as she repeated, *si, si.* With five beers cradled in one arm, Vinny held Carmina's small hand as she led him up the concrete staircase where, for the first time in his life, he would sleep with a whore. His mouth went dry and his sex bulged. He looked back at the girls waiting in the foyer. Their eyes sagged with envy.

Maybe next time, he thought.

The hallway was stuffy and dark, save for the shafts of light coming from beneath the doors of street-facing rooms. Each door was numbered with a gold and black sticker. Carmina stopped at number 8. Her braid was thick as a spine down her back. Emptying into the hall were the strained and muffled noises of sex.

She pointed to the queen size bed in the windowless room and walked to her dresser. Vinny put the beers on her wicker nightstand, next to bottles of lotions, a hair brush, and a timer. He opened one for himself. He offered a bottle to Carmina—a kind and considerate gesture, he thought—but she shook her head without facing him and said, *no gracias.*

He drank and watched Carmina look at herself in the dull mirror on her dresser. She brushed her hair and braided it again. She touched gloss to her lips, then her eyes became
small and sharp, as though she were looking deep into her reflection and speaking to herself with her eyes. Vinny wondered what she was thinking. Was she was afraid of him or ashamed of herself? Severing her body from her mind, as he assumed most whores did?

He caught himself being drawn to her. He identified with her somehow, though in ways unrelated to Carol. Vinny dropped his eyes, chugged his beer, and unlaced his boots. Without Carmina seeing, he removed the cash from his sock as he undressed and shoved it in the toe of the boot.

The bell rang downstairs. Carmina jolted at the first chime.

She tucked a few loose tendrils behind her small ears and walked to the bed, her high-heels striking the floor commandingly. Her eyes were rheumy. She lifted a small glass bottle from the nightstand and, with one finger over the opening, turned it upside down twice. With a drop of perfume on that one fingertip, she touched herself on the nape of her neck, behind her ears and on her breastbone. Vinny watched the liquid disappear on her skin. She replaced the bottle then pushed lightly on Vinny’s shoulder. Following her lead, he fell back into the soft, springless mattress. She straddled him and rested her torso on his—he was smothered by gardenia perfume and the tail of her braid fell along his neck—as she reached for the timer. She turned the dial to the sixty-minute setting.

For the first fifteen minutes, all Vinny could hear was the ticking of the clock. He tried to ignore it by downing two beers, but the effort was in vain. Finally, he decided to listen to it as intently as Carmina had earlier stared at herself in the mirror, with her same
will, and her same acuteness. Soon, he, too, was without contemplation. He ravished
Carmina like a meal.

When he was done, he gave her an extra twenty dollars and waved at the two
remaining beer bottles, indicating to her that she could keep them for herself. She’d been
cooperative, he felt generous. She said gracias and squeezed the bill tightly in her hand.

She escorted him downstairs, again holding his hand as they walked. Vinny assumed
it was customary to walk clients to the door. Downstairs, the young man who’d brought
Vinny to the brothel was gone. Just the old woman and man sat behind the desk. The old
woman looked at the clock behind her and clicked her tongue at Vinny. As he pulled
open the door, he lifted his free hand to her as if to say, thanks, but she was writing in her
book. He raised it again at Carmina to signal the same thing. She flashed him her foolish
tooth and waved back.

The door shut thunderously behind him. The sky was silver. The air, sudden and
chilled.

All had gone by without a hitch, Vinny thought, as he walked through town. There
had been no misunderstanding, no furtive encounter, no manipulation. No boy shot dead.
And why, he asked himself, because she, unlike Carol or Jillian, knew what she was—a
whore. He left there as much of a stranger to her as he was when he walked in. And that’s
the way he needed it to be from now on. He strolled unmolested through the center of
town, stopping for grilled corn and another beer. The moon was a lone, parenthetical
glow in the sky.

He would stay for years, the inertia of loss ever in motion.
CHAPTER 13

Two days after the accident, Lacey handed Nina a wrinkled, navy-blue turtleneck and said, “Wear this one.” Lacey returned to rummaging in the closet where she’d been opening bags and boxes marked, “Winter Clothes.” After going through their dresser drawers, Lacey realized that they owned no proper attire for a funeral in August, so she decided to search in another season’s wardrobe.

“This is ugly,” replied Nina, leaning against the edge of her bed. She held the turtleneck in front of her with two fingers, as though it reeked of something foul.

“That’s the closest thing you have that’s black. It’s what you’re supposed to wear. Now, we need to find you pants or a skirt.”

Voices were still booming from down the hall, as they had been most of the morning, in stark contrast to the previous day, which had been dead with somber silence. Suddenly, a bathroom door slammed and rattled the walls of the house. Lacey knew if the fight continued, as it seemed it might, she would have to get herself and Nina to Georgie’s funeral without her parents’ help. It wasn’t a far walk, just a few blocks west at the corner of Bronco Road and Adams Boulevard, where, hopefully, she’d see Nate for the first time in several days.

Lacey opened their bedroom door and noticed that her parents’ bedroom door was ajar, exposing the mirrored door of her father’s closet, hazed with shower steam. Lacey could smell vanilla nut body wash and feel the air thick with humidity. Her mother had to be in the bathroom and her father on or near the bed, because Lacey saw neither of them
when she heard their anger-pitched voices. She shut her door and returned to the pile of clothes at the foot of Nina's bed.

"What are they fighting about?" asked Nina. There was uneasiness to her voice, a fear, it seemed, that this fight was more serious than the others. Lacey held up a pair of patent leather mary-janes, which had gray scuff marks across the toe. As she thought about how to respond to Nina, she breathed hotly on the shoe then rubbed the scuffs with a lone cotton sock.

"Adult stuff," she decided upon. "You wouldn't understand."

"Do you?"

"I don't think Mom thinks we should go to the funeral," Lacey said, picking up her other shoe.

"Why not?"

"That's the part you wouldn't understand. It's complicated."

The expression on Nina's face was one of bemusement.

Lacey shined faster and harder, but finally realized her efforts were futile and the shoes would have to do. She handed them to Nina, who'd since let her turtleneck drop to the floor. Nina held the shoes in her hand as though they were an offering. Lacey wondered if Nina were recalling the same scene she was: Nina had fallen in love with the shoes last year at Shoes-4-Less and promised that she'd wear them all winter and dress up for every dinner. But she'd worn them only twice—Thanksgiving and Christmas—and each time she ended up outside with Lacey, Nate and Georgie playing a dusk game of kick-the-can. After that, she said they were too ugly to wear next year.

"I thought these got threw away," said Nina.
“Me, too. Mom must have saved them. Do they still fit?”

Nina slipped them on without nylons and crouched down to fasten the ankle straps. She couldn’t find the hole for the left buckle, so Lacey did it for her.

“Well?” asked Lacey.

“Okay.”

“Okay like you can wear them for a few hours?”

In her cotton underwear and green t-shirt, Nina strutted from one end of the room to the other, pivoting with a flare that seemed beyond her years. They giggled while Nina continued to show her shoes like the models on t.v. until they heard a crash from down the hall that jolted them into silence. After a moment, Nina asked, “What was that?” She stood frozen in mid-step. Her toes were turned inward, her legs slightly bent, like a child who has to desperately use the bathroom.

“The wind. Just get dressed,” said Lacey. She pointed to the turtleneck on the ground. She saw that her hand was trembling.

She wished her answer were true. But the anger she heard in her parents’ voices stemmed from blame, from the desire to place it anywhere but with oneself. This was something she had only just now begun to consider, and the formulation was dizzying.

Lacey then threw Nina a burgundy velvet dress with satin flowers lining the scooped neck.

“For real?” asked Nina, holding the dress up before stepping into it.

Lacey shrugged. She suddenly couldn’t face Nina, because even the thought of her called up images of Georgie. She saw his face, not the way she wanted to remember him,
but they way he looked in the dirt, blood everywhere. She shook her head as if dislodging the image from her mind.

"Is this okay?" asked Nina, standing proud in a winter dress. She’d put her shoes back on, but left them unbuckled. It looked ridiculous, but Lacey told her it was fine and that they had to hurry. For herself, Lacey was left with a too-tight black skirt, a mauve top and a black cardigan sweater. Her only choice for shoes, besides sneakers and jelly slip-ons, was a pair of taupe sandals that criss-crossed at the arch and had solid wood soles. She’d worn them once at a junior high school spring convocation.

The red numbers on the alarm clock read 2:17 p.m.

"We’re going to be late."

Lacey and Nina were halfway down the bright hallway when they heard their mother shout, "None of that matters anymore, Mitch! He’s dead."

They saw her storm past the oak bureau in the corner and into the bathroom. She was wearing a black dress, still unzipped in the back, and her hair was wet, leaving a damp spot on the dress’s wide shoulder straps. She obviously hadn’t seen the girls standing in the hallway.

"Matter? Explain how it doesn’t matter that you didn’t tell me about Vinny. My own wife! Jesus, Jillian, I think it should matter to me whether or not he raped you or you fucking him!"

Something hit the wall. A shoe, a fist. Lacey wasn’t sure. "Let’s go," she said to Nina, pulling her by the hand. As they sneaked toward the stairs, they heard the following conversation as though it were chasing them out of the house:

"What?"
“I talked to Sheriff Downing this morning. He said Vinny denied it and that they had to let him go because you wouldn’t give them proof or press any charges.”

“That’s all he said?”

“Pretty much. Said Vinny left town and will never be back. Now why wouldn’t you press charges?”

“Why tell you at all, Mitch? You didn’t believe your own daughter for chrissake! And—”

“And what?”

“And maybe I just want to forget the whole thing, move on from here,” Jillian pleaded.

As Lacey descended fourteen steps, there was silence in her parents’ room, as though her father were quietly considering the possibility of forgetting. When Lacey’s wood sandal clonked on the tile in the foyer, she heard her mother sobbing—“A boy’s dead, Mitch. Dead! Dead in our backyard.”

“We didn’t shoot him! I want to hear about Vinny. I want to know what happened between you!”

Lacey didn’t wait for her mother’s answer. She shut the front door with a click of the handle. She couldn’t understand why it was so impossible for her father to believe his own daughter and wife, and why, it seemed, he’d rather believe anyone else. She hated him for it, but was relieved to know that Vinny would never be back. Lacey decided that when she returned from the funeral, she’d take whatever clothes and things he left in his room and bury them in the desert, burn them if she could.

Along Birch Avenue, Nina’s flat-soled shoes smacked the concrete sidewalk, while
Lacey’s wood-bottom sandals clunked discordantly. Nina insisted on holding Lacey’s hand even when Lacey tried to pull away with the excuse that their hands were too sweaty.

Since the shooting, which Lacey’s father preferred to call “the accident,” Nina seemed continuously perplexed. She’d asked where Georgie went and what happened to his body, but not until their walk to his funeral did she want to know why Nate shot him.

“He didn’t mean to, did he?” she asked Lacey.

Lacey stopped walking and faced Nina. “No, he didn’t mean to. It was a bad accident, no one’s fault,” she lied.

At the edge of town, the city cemetery was on the corner of two main roads, Bronco Road, which dead-ended east into the desert and Adams Boulevard, which led directly south toward the garbage dump. The graveyard, a square plot of lush Bermuda grass and tall droopy oaks, was protected by nothing more than a chain link fence. It was one of the few places in Boulder City that had not been landscaped with prickly pears and creosote, the one place where the grass was always cool under the shade of the live oaks.

Lacey and Nina entered at the backside of the cemetery through a gap in the fence. The girls turned their shoulders in order to squeeze through two steel poles and saw a crowd of people gathered across the grass. They stood in groups of two or three, blowing their noses and lifting their sunglasses to wipe their eyes. Lacey led Nina past storage units and lawnmowers, rakes and dried hoses. Scattered ribbons and dried flower petals had been windblown along the perimeter of the fence and become tangled in the dried weeds. Sand had crept into Lacey’s shoes, and when the ground beneath her changed from dirt to grass, she tried shaking out the grains and pebbles. They were still at the edge
of the cemetery, where, apparently, the grass was rarely cut. It reached just beyond
Lacey’s ankle bones and even higher on Nina, who, complained about the itchy grass
blades scraping against her legs and leaving tiny, pink and white scratches on her calves.

“It’ll go away,” said Lacey, uninterested. Her focus was on finding Nate.

They walked across the grass as a gusty breeze rolled along the field. Lacey saw Nate
emerge from the cluster of people. He walked with his head down, his hands in the
pockets of black dress pants. He wore a short-sleeved blue shirt, a black tie and black
tennis shoes. Just before Nate and Lacey met one another, halfway across the cemetery,
Nate turned around and waved a low arm at his mother, as if keeping her at bay. She
wore big, round sunglasses and a black dress that had faded to a charcoal color, light gray
at the edges. Even at a distance, her nose appeared red from crying.

“Hey,” Nate said, when he met Lacey. His eyes remained focused on the grass.

“Hey.” She didn’t know what to say to him, so she brushed the sole of her shoe over
the tips of the grass, combing them in the same direction as the light wind. After a few
long moments, Nina asked where Georgie was.

“He’s over there.” Nate pointed to where people were gathered near the coffin.

“Inside the box?” she asked. Nina’s head was cocked to the side and her mouth hung
in a frown. She appeared as sad and confused as Georgie had the night he studied the
dead bat lying in the gutter.

Nate nodded to Nina. A warm and somewhat humid breeze lifted the fringe of bangs
off his forehead, accentuating his blood-shot and teary eyes.

Lacey wanted to hug him, maybe even kiss him like he kissed her the morning she
was so upset, but when she stepped towards him, not sure if she’d touch him or not, he
backed away in a stumble. Nate turned to his mother, who had obviously been watching
them and was already walking towards them.

“Mrs. Dolan,” Lacey began to say, sympathy pulling on her voice.

“What are you doing here?” She folded her arms at her chest and pulled her chin into
her neck, waiting for an answer. But when Lacey tried to speak, to explain that she and
Nina wanted to come say goodbye to Georgie, she interrupted. “I can’t believe you, of all
people, are showing your face at my son’s funeral.”

Stunned, Lacey looked at Nate, who seemed to be intent on avoiding her and
somewhat ashamed of his mother. Mrs. Dolan wiped her nose with a wad of tissue and
leaned toward Lacey. The wrinkled skin around her mouth quivered when she spoke.

“Someday, you’ll understand what a whore your mother is, screwing with her
husband’s friend then calling it rape. Not even the Sheriff bought it.”

Lacey listened and shook her head. Why was it so hard for people to believe one
another? She knew what she saw. “No, he attacked her. I was right there,” she said, then
looked down at her sister’s wide-open eyes and heat-flushed cheeks. “Go wait by the
fence, Nina.”

Mrs. Dolan waited until Nina was out of ears shot before she spoke again. “Oh, that’s
right, he supposedly did something to you, too. Nate told me about it and you know what
I say, I say you’re just like your mother. If it hadn’t been for you…”

“Mom,” said Nate, touching his mother’s elbow. “Let’s go.”

“No. I’m not through here,” she snapped. She glared at Lacey without speaking.
The trees and grass and blue sky reflected off her sunglasses in warped, extended
forms and concealed her eyes. In the reflection, Lacey saw the swaying of trees and an explosion of clouds.

"Why don’t you think Vinny’s in jail if he really raped your mom? You think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you? You and your mom’s stories are nothing but lies. Sheriff Downing said there was no evidence—none. Doesn’t that tell you something?"

"It wasn’t a lie!" shouted Lacey. "I know what he did to us, you don’t."

"Do you? Are you sure about what you saw? You and your mother strut around like you’re something special. It’s sick." She pointed her finger at Lacey’s face.

Lacey looked at Nate again, searching his face for support, but found nothing but fear and disgrace in him.

"I can’t do this anymore," Nate’s mother cried. She walked away with Nate at her side. A wailing sob made her hold her stomach as though she’d been punched. Nate held her arm to help her balance when the heels of her shoes sunk into the soft soil.

Lacey walked to Nina, who was waiting along the side of the fence, snapping leaves off bushes. Lacey stood near her, at the entrance gate of the cemetery, and looked around. She felt swollen inside with rage and thought she might start choking. The full parking lot of sun-beaten cars, glares blasting off the windshields. Serried mourners in the shade of live oaks. The fringe of uncut grass. A mound of damp dirt waiting to be repacked into the earth. The white mortuary with flowers on marbled wall-plots. Heat-bleached and narrow, a line in the sand that led from the back of the cemetery to her house.

"Are we leaving?" asked Nina, tearing pieces from a leaf.

Keeping her eyes on her surroundings, Lacey nodded. Her gesture was slow as one under water.
Nina lifted both arms and pointed the right one toward the gate and the left one in the direction from which they’d come. “Which way?” she asked. “We never walk on the big road.”

“Okay, the road then,” said Lacey, taking Nina’s hand. They crossed the parking lot and continued along Adams Boulevard, past a day care center with a playground in the front yard and the new city library built with ash-gray bricks and purple railings. Lacey sensed a heaviness in the air and wondered if it was just the way of the road, thick with exhaust and the rising heat of the asphalt, or something in her own lungs. Unseen by Nina, who was busy pointing at buildings and talking long-windedly about books at the library, Lacey allowed herself to cry. She thought it might relieve the pressure in her throat, but as she did, other thoughts made it difficult to breathe.

At the forefront of Lacey’s mind was her encounter with Mrs. Dolan. How could she have said those terrible things about her mother? What did she know? But then, questions came that Lacey had no answers for. She wondered about where Vinny was, with whom and doing what. She questioned why her mother didn’t press charges and put him in jail for the rest of his life. She asked herself how, in a matter of days, life had changed so drastically.

“What’s wrong?” asked Nina, who now stared up at Lacey and watched her cry.

Lacey shook her head and kept walking, tears falling for the first time since the accident. At the corner of the old children’s home, which had just last month been converted to a city gym facility, Lacey and Nina turned left and walked one block before the concrete wash appeared ahead.

Lacey knew the thread of blame began with Vinny and ended with Nate, but she also
realized that she’d been a knot somewhere in the middle, every action of hers shortening, if only slightly, the distance between them.

Had it been last summer instead that Vinny came to visit, Lacey’s body would have still been flat and boyish. She would have been less curious and interested in boys and kissing. Maybe then, he would have just fed her chips and tickled her ribs like he’d done with Nina. If, if, if. She’d begun to think that no moment was ever one’s own.

She heard a car behind her. She wiped her face then turned around. A blue sedan was veering toward the sidewalk and slowing down as if to get Lacey’s attention. She saw the hand of a woman wave out of the car, her gold bracelet dropping from her wrist, and the thump of music from her car speakers. Tires crunched over the loose gravel in the gutter.

“Excuse me,” she hollered, waving at Lacey.

She and Nina had already stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. When the car was close enough, Lacey saw that the woman driving was actually a girl. Her skin was pale and smooth behind dark sunglasses and tight at the chest where her necklace dangled.

“Yeah,” said Lacey, her face and nose red from crying.

“Are you alright?” the girl asked, turning down the volume on her radio. “Are you hurt or something?”

“No.”

“Oh, okay. I just thought cause you were crying...Um, do you live around here?”

“Yeah,” said Lacey, her voice flat and distant as the dry lake bed.

“Would you happen to know a Mitch or a Vinny?”

“What?”
Nina started to say something, but Lacey put her hand over Nina’s mouth and told her not to speak to strangers.

The girl in the car repeated the names.

“Why?” asked Lacey. She wanted to know how this cool, pretty girl knew her father or Vinny, but she didn’t want the girl to know her relation to them.

“Well, me and Vinny had a...uh, date the other day and he said he was staying with a friend named, Mitch, so I just thought—”

“Vinny was in jail.”

“What? Are you serious? For what?”

“They thought he did something to someone, but I guess it ended up not being true.”

“Well, Vinny couldn’t hurt anybody,” the girl said, practically laughing at the thought of it. She appeared eased by her memory of him.

Since the incident at the barbecue, Lacey had been steadfast in seeing Vinny as a sex-monger, a rapist. But now...

“Do you know where he is?” the girl asked, reaching for the dashboard and pushing down the knob of her cigarette lighter.

“He left town, don’t know where.”

The girl’s amused expression dropped, her mouth open as if in sad surprise.

“He’s gone?” she replied.

“I guess,” Lacey said, stepping away from the curb. She heard the cigarette lighter pop, though the girl seemed unaware.

“Thanks anyway.” The girl checked her rearview mirror then drove away with her head resting on her hand. Music sailed out of the car.
“Let’s go,” Lacey said, taking Nina by the hand.

The air had changed in the past hour. It now felt denser and cooler. Lacey noticed a bundle of clouds, slate gray ones fat with rainwater, creeping over the basalt mountain ridges in the distance. She knew two things with certainty: school would begin soon and the summer rains were approaching.

Most other things she wasn’t so sure about. Like, who was she if Vinny wasn’t the monster-rapist she’d made him out to be? And who was he if the pretty girl from the car seemed to like him and trust him? If Lacey’s vision had failed her, what had actually happened, what had been her fault, what had been the fault of others? She knew deep down Vinny had treated her inappropriately, in spite of how curious or coy she may have been towards him. He was perverse and it was her parents who should have done something about him.

Had her father truly understood what Vinny had done to Lacey, how he’d frightened her, and violated her, then maybe he would have kicked him out of the house, ending it all before it began. But instead, he remained blindly loyal to a friend rather than his daughter.

Her mother, it seemed to Lacey, had been loyal to no one. Why she had become involved with Vinny, Lacey might never understand. And it would remain, for Lacey, the most irreparable of actions. Had her mother not been with Vinny, Lacey would never have had the chance to misinterpret their union as rape and might never have feared him enough to tell Nate what she’d seen.

Lacey saw now that had she kept everything a secret from Nate, Georgie would still be alive. Nate was the one person who’d tried to protect her from harm, even when he
was living within it at home. Had his father not been a hunter, Nate would have come to
protect her empty-handed. He’d been the only person who believed her, listened to her
and comforted her. And it ended up costing him his brother’s life.

But what if she had ignored what Vinny had done to her in the first place? Would any
of this have happened? Was she to blame?

Thunder rolled down the rims of the valley, crashing at the bottom. Ahead was
Lacey’s house. It looked as peaceful and normal as all the others, though Lacey knew a
pool of blood had soaked into the dirt of her backyard, leaving a stain that had not yet
been cleaned. She wondered if her parents were still fighting, if they always would.

When she thought about all of the people involved, she knew she couldn’t place
blame on just any one of them, their connections were too entangled. She understood that
each person, including herself, was an unfortunate knot along a string of blame that had
caused Georgie’s death, a string, perhaps, with no end. The guilt resided with Nate and
his gun, yet everyone was tied in along the way, herself included. But how close, and to
what extent, she’d only begun to unravel.
VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Jennifer Lynn Bania

Local Address:
1533 Kay Court
Boulder City, Nevada 89005

Degree:
Bachelor of Arts, English, 1999
Northern Arizona University

Thesis Title: In the Hearts of Palms

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Douglas Unger, M.F.A.
Committee Member, Richard Wiley, M.F.A.
Committee Member, Claudia Keelan, M.F.A.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Lois Helmbold, Ph.D.