BIRDS IN PARADISE

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ABSTRACT

Birds in Paradise

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Birds in Paradise is a novel telling the story of a teenage girl in Idaho who is seduced into leaving her troubled home life with her parents to live with a passionate and charismatic religious zealot in his house on the banks of the Snake River. The main character, Janice Evans, has recently moved to the small town of Meade, Idaho, in the wake of an event in her family—her father has had an affair and has left his university teaching position to start over in this conservative, rural town. Her parents’ marriage continues on, full of turmoil and anger, and in the midst of this, Janice meets Dan, a twenty-five-year old man who has taken up residence in an abandoned old house. Dan, and two other people, George and Amber, live in this house near the river and survive by growing their own food and by running a meth lab. Dan continues to pursue Janice and one day, she gets in his truck and goes with him to his house, telling no one where she has gone. She finds herself enmeshed in her new life and stays with Dan, participating in the primitive religious rituals he has instituted, and becomes his wife, in a ceremony performed by Dan himself. When a new young woman, Zinnie, arrives at the house,
through a series of strange circumstances, Janice has to face the fact that Dan is becoming interested in her, and must choose whether to continue on there, in her life with him, and his new second wife, or whether to go back home, to the difficulties of life with her parents.
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PROLOGUE

*Faith Christian High School, 1995*

Janice steps up close to the plate and taps the bat on the dirt. *Hit it near, hit it far, hit it to the parking lot. Hit it high, hit it low, hit it out of Idaho!* The chatter of the girls on the bench grows louder, and the breeze lifts her hair off her face. “Come on, girl, you can do it. Swing, baby. Swing hard,” Coach Williams shouts. She grips the bat tightly, the rubber near the handle slightly sweaty under her hands. Bending her knees, she tenses her muscles, lifts her elbow out from her body, and swings, a straight cut across the plate, smooth and even. She straightens up for a minute, then grips the bat again, taps it on the plate, and resumes her stance. Ready, she thinks. I’m ready. The pitcher moves her throwing arm back and forth, then pauses for a moment, holding the ball in front of her. Finally, whipping her arm in an arc, she snaps her wrist and the ball flies toward Janice. She swings and connects, and it’s a solid drive that shoots between the first and second basemen. She throws the bat aside and runs, making it easily to first, then stands, one foot on, one foot leading toward second and watches through the dust that’s been kicked into the air, her heart still pounding, as her friend, Kelly, comes up to the plate.

Kelly takes a few practice swings, then squats into her stance as the pitcher winds up. “Hey. You’re going home. Hey beautiful,” a man in the crowd on the bleachers calls out, and Janice glances up and sees long hair sticking out awkwardly from under a baseball cap and an untucked denim shirt. The man is looking at her. “All the way home,” he shouts again. It’s him, she thinks, staring for a second before
she forces her attention back to the game. The pitcher winds up again and throws hard, but it’s high, and Kelly ducks as the ball whizzes past her head. *Come on Kelly, you can do it, if you put your heart into it*, the girls chant fiercely. Crystal Jacobson, her modest knee-length shorts snug around her chubby legs, is almost screaming.

“Watch it, Kelly. She’s just trying to throw you off!” Janice grabs her ponytail and jerks the rubber band tight. Something seems to depend on this moment, as if an important matter is being decided, right here, right now, a permanent mark is being etched into the sky. But maybe that’s how all seventeen-year-old girls feel, at every moment, she thinks. The thought flits through her mind, then fades, almost before it registers. She jumps up and down a few times, trying to keep her legs loose. “Get ready. Be ready,” shouts Coach Williams. “Let’s go, Faith!” All Janice’s concentration is focused into one point now, somewhere along the nerve pathways and muscles of her legs. Kelly squats down again and the pitcher winds up and throws. Janice pushes away from the base before the swack of the ball on the bat even reaches her ears, but when she hears it, she knows it’s good and just keeps running.

**

She prepared the sentences in her head, glancing around as she pulled open the front door to the main building. I left something on the baseball diamond, she said to herself, as she hurried down the stairs. That’s what she would say if someone asked her why she was there so early. She glanced at the office as she passed, her footsteps echoing down the stillness of the early morning hall. But so far there was no one, not even Miss Stephenson, the school counselor, who was almost always in
her office, it seemed like, huddling at her desk, sometimes thumbing through the papers in her file cabinet. *I'm nervous about the game.*

The school felt different at this time of day, the smell of floor cleaner and lunch hanging in the air like pale ghosts. Hugging her softball glove to her stomach, she slammed the door of her locker, feeling suddenly as if something loomed behind her, something large in the empty space of the hall. Even after glancing back and seeing nothing except rows of closed metal lockers, she couldn’t stop herself, something rose up in her, and she ran suddenly, her feet pounding against the concrete floor.

She pushed out through the heavy back door and found herself blinking in the bright sun. Lately, she often found herself feeling this way, panicky, breathless, as if some unknown thing was sneaking up behind her. Her arms prickled up with gooseflesh, and she rubbed them, trying to smooth away the shivery feeling that had come over her, suddenly remembering the other day, when she’d first seen him.

“The window’s broken,” he’d said, pulling up beside her, a faint smell of stale cigarette smoke wafting toward her. He leaned across the passenger seat, cocking the door slightly. He held up the silver handle so she could see. “Gotta get it fixed.”

She turned, clutching at the hem of her skirt.

“You want a ride somewhere? It’s kind of windy,” he said.

“No thanks.” So that was it. She walked on, her heart beating in her throat. He drove slowly along beside her, the door still open. “You a senior?” he asked, looking pointedly at her chemistry book. He gunned the engine. “You go to the good school, right? Going to college, huh?”

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She looked at him. "Probably," she said, then felt her cheeks flushing. "My parents—I mean—I just moved here. Last fall."

"Hey, you want to go for a walk or something?"

She shook her head.

The truck sputtered to a stop. "Shit." He shook his head as he cranked the engine. "Overheats if it idles too long," he said, glancing over at her. "I bet your hair's nice and warm, from the sun. Isn't it? Right there, on top?" He revved the engine, then laughed, sounding embarrassed. "See ya," he said, driving off down the street.

Now she felt herself reaching up to touch the top of her head. It was a brown Toyota. Or a Nissan, she thought. With a blue door. We have some serious fucking to do. He hadn't said that, had he? Why couldn't she remember?

It was oddly cloudy and intense at the same time, those few minutes, and ever since then it had been like there was something bubbling up inside her, that blurred her memory, made her thoughts jangle noisily inside her head. And if he did say that, shouldn't she be scared? She should tell someone. \textit{You should tell someone.}

She started as Russ, the janitor, roared by on the school's riding lawnmower, heading toward the courtyard. Pushing away from the door, she ran again, through the grassy lawn behind the school, into the outfield of the softball diamond. She wasn't going to tell anyone. She didn't even know if he'd really said it, so what was there to tell? It was nothing, it was just a big nothing that didn't even matter.

She leaned against the backstop and rubbed her fingers over her breastbone, trying to smooth away the pounding of her heart. The game, she thought. It's just the
game. Throwing her glove on the ground, she squatted and used her large plastic comb to claw at the dirt, digging out two spots where she thought her feet would feel comfortable. She stood and placed her feet wide apart. They felt good, and grinding her heels into the dirt, she swung, the invisible bat hard and heavy in her hands.

**

She doesn’t even look to see if the ball has been caught—she just runs. The muscles, strong in her legs, propel her forward like wound springs, past second, then third. She steps firmly onto home plate and hears voices shouting for her, one particularly, a male one, resonating with some sort of urgency. “Jan-ice, Jan-ice,” he shouts, and her heart pounds, her cheeks and forehead hot with the blood underneath the surface of her skin. Even though it seems like the top of her head will shoot right off, she forces herself to walk, in front of the backstop, all the way to the bench, but then he whoops again, loudly, and calls her name, and she smiles, she can’t help it, and she can’t help looking either, to find the man’s eyes in the crowd. One hand is stuck in the pocket of his faded jeans, and with the other, he waves again and gives her a thumbs-up. Even after she quits looking in his direction, she feels his eyes on her, and turns once more before she sits down. He smiles this time, a big, full-out grin, over the heads of the people in front of him, as if she’s the only one there, or the only one who matters.

She gets two more good hits, and even when she’s on the bench or just standing in the outfield, her knees flexed, her glove between her thighs, she hears his voice. It’s all around her, somehow, and she can’t quite tell whether it’s inside her head or outside, in the air—a trick, she thinks, some sort of magic. But after they
win, he sits waiting as the players trickle off the field—doesn’t even pretend to be
talking to anyone, just leans back against the seats behind him, a lone body in the
stands. She fiddles with her duffle bag, then finally, when the other girls have
trickled away across the field, heaves it over her shoulder.

“Hey, good game,” the man says, as she hurries past the bleachers. He jumps
onto the ground, and she sees his blue eyes and dark eyelashes and the darker stubble
on his cheeks and chin.

“Thanks,” she says, then touches the corner of his mouth, feeling self-
conscious.

“You’re Janice,” he says. One of his teeth, an eye tooth, is twisted just
slightly, giving him a boyish, naive look, as if he’s in motion, somehow, as if he’s
waiting for someone to tell him to sit down, be quiet, hold still. When he takes off his
baseball cap, and pushes his hair back, the small silver rings in his eyebrows gleam
and wink in the sun. “Hey, you know what I found earlier?” He grins at her. “A
bunch of baby rabbits.” He gestures with his thumb. “Over there underneath the
bleachers.”

“Yeah?”

“You want to see them? They’re cute, with these big ears sticking up.” He
holds his eyes on her just a moment too long, and she feels a shiver of excitement or
apprehension, she isn’t sure which. She wants to run after Kelly, quickly, run inside
the locker room and collapse, laughing, on the cement benches. But instead, she
follows him to the far side of the bleachers, near the old train car.
"Those are cool," she says, pointing to his piercings, to have something to say.

"Where did you get them done?"

"The eyebrows, in Mexico," he says. "This one—" He pointed to his nose.

"It's supposed to bring a heightened state of perception. I used a porcupine quill. Did it myself. I had a rabbit bone in it for a while."

"For real?"

They pause just underneath the edge of the bleachers. It's so dark, she can hardly see. Her mouth feels dry, and she swallows.

"Why, don't you believe me?" He leads her to a heap of tumbleweeds in the corner, squats and pushes them aside. She peers in, but all she can see is darkness and the faint outline of something that looks like a pile of rags. He sticks his hand in and brings out a tiny naked rabbit, cradling it in his palm. "You can hold it if you want," he says eagerly.

"It's warm."

"There's a bunch of them," he says to her. "Rabbit meat's good. Have you ever had it?"

"No!"

He grins at her, then fishes something out of his pocket. "Want a drink?" He holds out a silver flask.

She looks at him, hesitating, her leg muscles quivering, suddenly, as if she's been squatting under the bleachers for a long time.

He edges closer, leaning toward her so their knees are almost touching.

"You're not scared, are you?"
She stands quickly, almost bumping her head. “Actually, my friend is waiting for me,” she says, even though when she peers across the field, Kelly is nowhere in sight. Then something about the way his eyes are fastened on her makes her pause, her stomach tightening. “Do you want to come swimming?” she bursts out. “A bunch of us are going. Out at the Snake River.”

“No thanks,” he says. He touches her glove, which she’s still clutching under one arm. “You’re good.”

“Thanks,” she says, turning to go.

“Hey, my name’s Dan. See you later. Maybe I’ll see you around,” he calls after her, but she’s walking away now, and then she begins to run, her bag banging against her side, and runs clear across the field without stopping once.
CHAPTER 1

April, 1995

Outside, the door of her father’s ‘72 Impala screeched as she yanked it open. The windshield was covered with spidery, spreading cracks, that, when Janice sat in the driver’s seat, made the world look like it had broken into a thousand shifting pieces, a crazy kaleidoscopic view of the Elijah drain ditch, the Pfenninger’s pasture fence, the lilac bush that spread its dark, seedy, blooming branches over the side of their front yard. She climbed in and stared gloomily out through the cracked glass. Mr. Pfenninger was feeding his goats, forking shovelfuls of hay into a trough by the fence. The mother, a furry black and white Alpine, trotted over and begin nibbling at the hay, and the two tiny black kids, who had been curled up in the dirt, leaped over to her and began jerking and pulling at her teats.

Janice opened the glove box and pulled out a baggie. She was practicing getting high, so Kelly wouldn’t look at her like she was some kind of a moron, the way she had the first time they hung out together, not long after Valentine’s Day. “You’re from Boise, right?” Kelly had said, giving her a knowing look, as she handed her a joint. “The big city?” She laughed, pulling Janice down on the half-frozen grass behind the gym.

“Yeah.” Janice laughed, then took the joint and fiddled with it, rolling it between her fingers.
“So how do you like Faith? Ha ha.” Kelly was wearing cowboy boots and kneesocks and a short black and red plaid skirt. She’d showed Janice the rolled waistband, lifting her torn wife beater just far enough so Janice could see the ring in her belly button, as they walked out onto the lawn together. She stuck her legs out on the grass. “Sucks, huh? Compared to Boise?” She held out her lighter.

“Yeah,” Janice said. “Pretty much. Aren’t you cold?” She handed the joint back to Kelly. “We’re so going to get in trouble.”

“Take it,” she said, lighting it and sticking it back in Janice’s hand. “If I get two more demerits they’ll suspend me. That’d piss my mom off.” She smiled. “So I heard you played softball for Boise High. What position? You gonna play here?”

Janice shook her head. “I don’t know. I think my eligibility got all screwed up when we moved.”

“Shit! For real? I pitch. Maybe I could talk to the coach for you.”

“Yeah? That’d be good,” Janice said. Something wet landed on her cheek and she looked up at the snowflakes starting to drift from the sky.

“You gonna try that? So how come you moved?”

Janice choked as the burning smoke filled her lungs. From the corner of her eye, she could see Kelly grin. “Oh,” she said, still coughing. “My parents. My dad got a new job. That kind of stuff. That’s what they said, anyway.”

“So are you mad? That you had to move senior year? I mean, did your dad get fired or did he quit?”

Janice glanced at her. “He didn’t get fired. Where’d you hear that?”
“Oh fuck, was that the bell?” She pulled Janice to her feet, then grabbed the joint and sucked on it. “Do it like that, see? It’s not so hard.” She blew a stream of smoke into Janice’s face.

Janice coughed again, the heat rising in her cheeks.

“Next time it’ll be better,” Kelly laughed. “You’ll see.” Halfway across the lawn, she turned around. “Meet me after school,” she shouted. “We’ll hang out. Crash the FFA meeting.”

“Yeah, okay,” Janice called back, shivering as she followed her slowly across the grass.

February 19th, she’d written in her journal when she got home that day. Someone talked to me at my new school today. Now she peered out the window of the car. Where was the billy goat, she wondered. He was usually the first one to the food, butting everyone else out of his way with his hard head, his one curly horn. Mr. Pfenninger—the goat-man, she called him—finished forking in the hay and turned back to the house with his wheelbarrow, then spotted her and lifted his hat. He had a ring of white clear down to the top of his eyes, the rest of his face red and coarsened from the sun. She waved. She and he had this sort of thing going, which consisted of him waving to her every day when she sat outside in the wrecked car. Sometimes his wife was the one who fed the goats, but she just gave Janice a hard look, then went back to work, bending over the hay, digging weeds from their patch of garden.

Janice flicked the keys back and forth, staring at the swinging gold keychain. No one had ever bothered to bring them in the house that day, after her mother’s accident. It didn’t even matter, in this lame little town, if you left your keys in the
Her throat felt tight and she tried to swallow. She felt tears coming into her eyes and blinked, then stared up at the ceiling of the car.

Last Wednesday, when Mr. Langford was talking about their research paper, she’d started to tear up in class, too, and after a few minutes, when she realized everyone was staring at her, she raised her hand and told him she didn’t feel good. She tried not to look at anyone while she walked out of class, but she could feel them glancing up at her as she passed through the aisles of desks. “My stomach hurts,” she told the nurse, who looked at her skeptically, then waved her over to a cot, which sat on a raised platform in the corner of the room. Janice lay there, hoping no one would walk by the door of the office and see her. “Can I just go home?” she asked finally, sitting up. “Not unless you have parental permission,” the nurse said, bending over at her desk to tighten the lace on her shoe. Janice lay back down, imagining the nurse’s appraising glance if her mother, with her disheveled hair and smeared make-up, were to present herself in the office. “Your mom’s hot,” Kelly had said, the first time she saw Janice’s mother, through the front window of Janice’s house. “Is she all right?” She was wearing an old swimming suit top and a pair of shorts, one arm dangling over the side of the couch. “I have to go,” Janice said quickly, then ran inside before Kelly could say anything else.

Lately her mom was always taking a nap. Sometimes she barely got up in time to eat dinner and then the three of them would sit at the table, the only sound the ticking of the clock, the scraping of knives and forks on chinaware plates as they ate the roasted chicken her father had picked up at the grocery store again. Say something, she wanted to scream at her parents. “Could we have spaghetti
tomorrow? Or hamburgers?” she’d asked the other night. “Just for a change?” She stabbed a green bean. “They look kind of like dog turds, don’t they?”

“What?” her mother said.

Janice sighed. “Nothing,” she said.

She slumped back against the seat now and flicked the keys again, listening to them clink together. She’d overheard her mother telling someone on the phone that she felt like she’d been swimming in an underwater cave since they’d moved here. Her voice had a frantic note to it and it made Janice’s stomach tense. She squinted at the joint in her hand, then slammed shut the glove box. Maybe that’s because you won’t get up off the couch since we moved, she said, speaking into the silence of the car.

Her father had been the one to tell her, clapping his hands on his knees, as if he had just called out a football play. “So we’ll go as soon as school’s out for the semester. Okay?” he said, standing up, to indicate the conversation was over.

“Just like that?” Janice had cried. “Couldn’t we wait until I graduate?”

Her mother’s hand had gone to her hair, then, the way it always did when she was nervous, then she shook her head, a tiny, almost imperceptible movement, and Janice knew, suddenly, that something was going on, that something had happened, and they weren’t going to talk about it. “I only have half a year!” she said again, but her mother had looked away, fumbling with a cigarette. “Who transfers for their last semester? What about softball?” She tried to swallow the lump that was building in her throat. “What about my friends?”
Janice’s father came over beside her, jingling the coins in his pockets. “Try not to make a big deal about this. People move sometimes. You can make new friends.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “I’ve got a job lined up at the college there.”

“I can’t believe this! Why did you wait until now to tell me?”

Her father rubbed the side of his neck. “We just didn’t want you to worry about it,” he said. “And we’ve got you into a good school there. I bet you’ll like it.”

“Mom!” She looked at her mother, but she didn’t respond and Janice ran down the hall to her room and slammed the door.

She couldn’t get herself to tell any of her friends, even Sunny, until the day before Christmas break. Finally, at school, five minutes before the bell rang, she wrote I’m moving. Will you help me tell everyone? on a piece of paper and passed it to her.

To a different house? Sunny wrote back, looking at her.

To Meade. So I guess senior year isn’t going to be quite like we planned. She made a frowny face at the bottom with teardrops coming down and passed it over.

Sunny read it, then crossed her arms, staring straight ahead at the back of Andrew Spackleman’s head, at his short brown hair.

“I don’t want to,” Janice whispered, leaning over. “My parents are making me.”

But Sunny crumpled the note into a tiny ball, then threw it at Janice as the bell rang and ran out of the classroom.
Janice had spent the evening in her room, ignoring the empty boxes her father had piled in the corner of her room, until he made her come out so he could load her bed and dresser into the moving truck. "You haven't packed anything?" he said.

"I told you, I'm not going!" she said, brushing past him, then ran out to the truck and dragged her bike back down the ramp. At Sunny's house, she rang the bell, but the house was dark and silent. She sat down on the front porch to wait, her hands pressed underneath her legs, then after a while, when she was too freezing to sit still any longer, rode slowly home again through the cold air. Her parents, wearing coats and gloves, were still packing, in the light that spilled from their house onto the front lawn.

A few weeks later, after they were settled in Meade, an envelope came in the mail. It had a small scrap of paper in it, torn off around the edges. Sorry! it said. Hope you're having fun in your new life. Sunny.

Janice called her and they talked on the phone on and off for the rest of Christmas break, but once school started, Sunny didn't seem to be home much. Dear Sunny, Janice would write as she sat in her desk at school. Everything sucks. You can't believe this school. There are only seventeen kids in the whole senior class and the dress code is so lame. And my English teacher kept me after class the other day, to talk to me about a poem I wrote. Yeah right! (I think he was hitting on me. HAHAHA!) Love Janice. The front pocket of her notebook was stuffed full of letters she'd written to Sunny. Dear Sunny, Remember how we used to walk down the hall at school and never smiled at anyone because we didn't want them to think they were better than we were? Well here, everyone smiles at everyone, like a bunch of big
dorks. Except me, I don’t, cuz I know I’m better than them. I miss you! Love, Janice.

And then she scribbled out I know I’m better than them, and wrote cuz I don’t care about a bunch of big dorks! Meade, Idaho, population: 15,000 BIG DORKS!

She’d decided she’d wait until Sunny’s birthday, then mail them all at once, with a present. But when February came, she didn’t really feel like it.

Janice slammed the car door and walked across the front yard. It had rained a few drops earlier, and the smell of damp hay and manure and warm, matted fur floated though the air. She could still summon up Sunny’s narrow face and floaty blond hair in her mind, but it was starting to feel like a series of photographs, rather than real memories, which seemed sad to her, as if Sunny had become one of those people whose face was frozen flatly in a yearbook. She shook her head. Sunny was probably friends with Erin now, anyway, she thought, had forgotten all about her.

Inside the house again, the gray hum of static, and then a series of high squeals and howls from her father’s ham radio drifted from the basement. Her father crouched by the back door, his toolbox beside him, fiddling with the deadbolt. “Kelly says people don’t even lock their doors in Meade,” she said as she came into the kitchen. She rubbed her hand across her cheek, so her father wouldn’t notice that she had been crying.

“Ohmm?” he said, absentmindedly, his voice blending in with the rumble of sounds that floated up the stairs. She could hear voices from the ham radio, but the words were indistinguishable, as if someone had turned the volume on just a little too low. Something about her father made her feel vaguely anxious, the way he always seemed off in his own world, as if nothing that was happening outside of him could
really affect him. Even when they sat in the same room watching TV together, he always had a book on his lap and pretty soon, he'd be glancing at it, idly turning the pages, looking up only occasionally at the television. It was as if she couldn’t press herself into his interior, couldn’t really make any sort of impression on him. Sometimes she had the impulse to jump around in front of him, waving her arms and legs, just to see if he’d notice.

He pushed the two sides of the lock together, holding the pieces on with his hand, then twisted one of the screws, trying to tighten it.

Out of corner of her eye, she saw a mouse pop its head up out of the burner on the stove. She rapped on the kitchen counter and it disappeared again. “Dad,” she said.

“What?” The lock clunked to the floor.

“The mice are everywhere. There was one in my room last night. And the stove’s starting to smell bad.”

He picked up the lock again. “Yes, I know that.” She watched him as he drove the screwdriver, twisting it around.

“Why don’t you do something about it?”

He looked at her.

“I was just wondering.”

He shook his head.

Of course, she thought. His usual response of nothing. “I’m leaving. I’ll see you later.” She started toward the door.

“Wait a second. Where are you going?”
“Kelly’s.”

“I thought you were just over there. She still dragging you off to church every five minutes?”

She felt something tight in the back of her throat. “You’re the one who made us move here! Who am I supposed to have for friends?”

He peered at her over the top of his glasses. “So when will you be home? After you get high and make out with some boys in the church parking lot?” He turned to the door, fitting the lock into the round hole above the doorknob. The back of his neck was red, the way it always was when he got angry. “I’m kidding,” he said, twisting to look at her. “Isn’t that how it always works in the movies? You know, kids at a Christian school, the stereotypical response? They go off the deep end, take drugs, have sex, all that? Go wild?”

_I got to him_, she thought, feeling slightly triumphant until the sting of his words began sinking in. He must have seen her sitting out in the car smoking. That’s always how it was with him. He’s say nothing forever, then suddenly make her feel like her skin had been peeled off. “Oh,” she said, trying not to reveal any sort of reaction to his comment. “Yeah, I guess. Actually, if I stay overnight, Kelly and I can go straight to school in the morning. She and her mother were going to pick me up, anyway. We have a game tomorrow.”

He turned back to the door, picked up a small tube of graphite and squeezed puffs of black powder into the keyhole, then began testing the deadbolt, flipping it in and out. “Tell Mom, okay?”
So that was that. End of discussion. His usual indirect way of letting her know when she’d done something wrong. “Fine,” she said, as she grabbed a can of her mother’s Diet Coke off the counter, then walked slowly down the hall to her parents’ bedroom. She hesitated in the doorway. Her mother was sitting on the edge of the bed, her back toward Janice, her hands pressing into the rumpled sheets on either side of her.

She hadn’t been out of her room since dinner last night, when she’d meandered down the hall toward the kitchen, yawning, a cup of cold coffee in her hand. She sloshed the coffee into the sink, then peered at the window. “Look at this crack,” she’d said. “It’s that newspaper boy. You’ve got to do something about it, Del.”

“What do you want me to do? It could have been a bird,” her father had said, not looking up from the papers he was grading. “I don’t want to call up some poor kid’s parents if it was just a bird.”

She sat down at the table. “I looked outside earlier. A bird would have been out there on the ground.”

Finally he glanced at her. “Not necessarily. It could have regained consciousness and flown away.”

Janice had shaken her hair forward into her face, peering through the curtain of it at her parents.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. You’ve seen that boy. When has he ever thrown the paper on the front porch where it’s supposed to be?”
“I just don’t want to jump the gun. Make enemies here before we’ve even made any friends. When I have to call my students’ parents they—” he started, but her mother had shoved her chair back and gone back down the hall to their bedroom.

Janice’s father followed her, still holding his fork. “The guy at the car place said the one of the parts came in for the car.”

“Great. Maybe about a year from now it will be fixed.”

Her father cleared his throat. “Why don’t you get out and look for a job? There’s stuff to do here. You could try to make some friends at least.”

“I tried that. You didn’t seem to care much for that, either.”

Janice followed them down the hall. Her father seemed to Janice as willowy and bendable as a small sapling, his narrow shoulders thin under his short-sleeved white shirts, his belt tightened snugly. He always looked to her like he should be wearing elf shoes and a red felt hat. She sometimes wondered why her mother had married him.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, desperately. “Some real friends. Some women friends, for God’s sake.”

“Like who? That woman next door with the goats?” her mother said, flopping down on the bed. Pulling a magazine out from under her legs, she tossed it onto the nightstand, knocking the phone off the receiver. “Listen, Angie,” her father said. “I’ve apologized about a thousand times. What else do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know, Del,” her mother said, as if his name made a bad taste in her mouth, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. As she grabbed the phone off the floor and plunked it back on the table, a mouse skittered across the floor.
Janice’s father flung his fork at it, but missed, the fork clattering against the wall. “What, are you waiting for her to call? You think she’s going to call me? Is that why you sit here, day after day?”

“Don’t say ‘her’ to me like that, Del, like she’s some real person that matters!”

Her father burst out of the room then and brushed past Janice in the hall. She watched him push through the swinging door into the kitchen, the door whapping back and forth.

Now Janice looked at her mother. Her hair was sticking up and as she turned toward Janice, the black tank top she wore stretched tight around her breasts. “I’m going to Kelly’s,” she said. “Dad said to tell you.”

Her mother scritch-scratched at a spot of old polish on her toenail. “What time is it, anyway?”

“After three.”

“Well, tell Kelly’s father hello for me.”

Janice looked at her. “He’s never there, Mom. I never see him. I never, ever see him.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well.”

“There’s some pizza left. If you want some. Do you want this?” She held out the can of Coke.

“No, thanks,” her mother said again, shortly. “If it’s all the same to you.” She reached onto the bedside table and grabbed her cigarettes. She lit one and blew a thin stream of smoke from the side of her mouth.
Janice set the can on the dresser and walked to the window. “It’s nice outside,” she said. Under the forsythia, which was spreading its yellow blooms over the front of the wrecked car, she could see the bumper hanging down below the crumpled hood, the car’s broken headlight dangling from the front like a dismembered eye. She turned to the bed again.

Her mother was fiddling with the foil wrapper from a piece of gum, folding and refolding it. “You know how when a place on your arm itches and you scratch it, and you can feel that spot for a while after, even when you aren’t touching it anymore? That’s what it’s like to be in love.”

Janice came over by the foot of the bed. “So who are you in love with now?” she said slowly.

Her mother flopped her head back against the pillow, sighing. “Never mind.” She tapped her cigarette in the ashtray, then came around the bed and smoothed Janice’s hair. “Bye sweetie. Love you. Okay?”

Janice sucked in her breath as she went down the hall.

“Fuck,” she whispered, into the stuffy air of the garage. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” It seemed unbelievable to her, the way her father’s affair hung over their house, casting a pall over everything. Her mother had always seemed to feel free to do whatever she felt like, as if it were her right somehow. But now that her father had done something wrong, it was as though a terrible crime had been committed, the worst crime. Her father’s old duck decoys, dusty, sat up on a high shelf, stared at her from their flat black eyes.
When she was a little girl, and her mother was gone for the evening, she used to drag the decoys around on a long string through the grass in their big back yard, quacking loudly with his duck call, so her father could practice his aim. She remembered the fearful wild thrill that ran through her when he raised the gun, how fast she would run, the duck tumbling along behind her. "Boom!" he’d shout, after the crack of the gun. One morning she’d found one of the decoys on a chair in the living room and began pulling it through the room. Her father came into the room and leaned back, pumping rounds of bullets into the duck with imaginary guns in both hands. "Run, geese, run!" he said, grinning, then picked up his real gun, which was propped on top of the fireplace and aimed it at the duck.

"Del," her mother said, coming into the room, a towel wrapped around her. Water dripped from her legs onto the floor. "What in the world? I thought you were on your way to work." She grabbed up the decoy and shoved it at him. "Why don’t you go hunting for real instead of scaring her to death! Are you okay, sweetie?" her mother said, turning to Janice.

"They’re just blanks," he said, showing her mother the empty cartridges. "You know I don’t keep real cartridges in the house."

Janice started crying, ran to the couch and hid her head under the pillow.

Her father’s voice was cross. "Janice, cut that out!"

"Daddy hurt me," she wailed, kicking her feet against the living room floor.

"I’m going to work," he said, letting the screen door bang behind him. But after her mother had gone back upstairs, she heard the front door open and she watched her father’s wingtip shoes walking across the carpet towards her.
“Here,” he said, holding out a coloring book, his balding head bending close to hers. “Why don’t you color for a while. Till Mommy’s done with her bath.” He sat down on the floor, folding his slender legs stiffly up to his chest, then opened the coloring book. *Cows resting in the farmer’s field,* it said underneath the picture. Her father began outlining the grass in green, then handed Janice the crayon. “Tell Mommy I helped you color it, okay?” He forced her chin up to look at him, then went out the door again.

Now Janice dragged her bike out from between the lawnmower and the garbage cans. Her father had never actually been hunting, as far as she knew. She didn’t remember it, anyway. The last time his friend Mick Tillotson had invited him to go, he’d spent the whole day cleaning out the garage instead, angrily tossing out old boxes of Christmas lights, heaps of magazines and a pile of scrap lumber, that he’d told Janice he planned to use as starter material in their fireplace.

She grabbed the tire pump and squatted to check the tires, thinking about the look on Kelly’s face when she told her that her mom had been in a car accident. She knew before the words were even out of her mouth that she shouldn’t have said anything. Kelly was sitting in the back of government class—it had been almost time for the bell and they were supposed to be reading. Kelly’s eyes had been a dead black stare, then they lit up as Janice whispered to her what happened. “She ran into a wall? Is she all mental or something?” Kelly asked.

“No! It was an accident.”

Kelly had pushed her spiky dyed-black hair back from her forehead with a strip of red bandana tied around her head and painted her fingernails black. She
chewed on one finger, seemed unaware that bits of black polish were collecting in the corners of her mouth. “Is that what they told you?” Finally she shrugged.

“Whatever,” she said, letting her eyes go cold again. “So is she going to be all right?”

“I guess so. She seems kind of spaced out, though.”

Kelly’s eyes lit up again. “Maybe she’s on painkillers. Vicodin. Or Lortabs? You should bring some to school. We could make some money.”

Looking at Kelly, Janice had felt conscious, suddenly, of her own neat ponytail, her Roxy backpack with the matching pencil case dangling from the zipper. Not knowing what to say, she nodded, then turned around and stared down at her textbook, pretending to read.

A lawnmower had started up somewhere on the next block, droning dully in the still afternoon air. Picking up a cracked mirror, Janice wiped a clean spot on it and stared into it. “Boom!” she said, but her eyes, dark and serious, just stared back at her.

She sighed, set the mirror down and pushed her bike down the driveway. She wheeled it past her father’s wrecked car, then hopped on and pedaled quickly down the street.

**

At the railroad tracks, where she usually turned to get to Kelly’s, she hesitated, then just kept going straight, bumping up and over, pumped hard for another six blocks, then slowed finally, her chest heaving. They were circled up behind the old Dairy King on Seventh Street—the same place she’d seem them yesterday—two old buses, one yellow with a turquoise stripe down the side, and the
other one white with a stove pipe sticking out one window. And besides that, a
couple of vans, and a Vespa, with a man squatting beside it, his arms flopped over his
knees, and a battered brown pickup with a blue door.

The group of people standing there were having some kind of a meeting, it
looked like to her, as she pedaled slowly by. Yesterday, she’d circled the block
several times, then felt her cheeks flush when a man gestured at her, elbowing the
man next to him. She clunked her bike up over the curb, pushed it behind a clump of
trees, then squatted, her heart fluttering strangely. She liked the way it felt when it
did that, like some living creature, a bird, maybe, or a mouse, was tumbling around in
her chest. She re-tied her shoe, then straightened up, watching, as the man standing
in the middle pulled a small, gleaming knife from his pocket.

“Right on, brother!” a man in the crowd called out.

Their voices wafted through the air. A piece of paper lay on the ground,
shifting a little in the breeze. Snake River Ministries, it said, above a picture of a
cross with vines twisting around it, green leafy vines.

She folded the piece of paper and stuffed it into her pocket, then stood up, still
half-hidden behind the tree. The voice of the man in the center was urgent. “What do
you think that means?” She watched as he held the knife up, gesturing with it. “Jesus
Christ never said anything about democracy, did He? Jesus proclaimed himself
GOD!”

A man in the crowd tipped a bottle back, his Adam’s apple chugging up and
down, then punched his fist in the air. “Yeah!” he shouted.
Glancing over, she saw that the man crouching beside the Vespa had crept forward. It was him, she realized with a start. *Dan. That’s what he said his name was.* The green bandana wrapped around his head was dark with sweat, and he had an expression on his face that reminded Janice of a picture she’d seen at church a few weeks ago, pigs, a wild look in their eyes, scrambling around each other to get to the edge of a cliff, a dark ravine gaping below. *Jesus Casts the Demons into Swine,* it said along the bottom in small print. She watched as he edged toward the front of the crowd.

“Praise Jesus,” a woman wearing a long skirt cried out. She held her hands up in the air, swaying back and forth.

“When Pilate asked him if he was the Son of God, what was his answer? He said I am a king! Right, people?”

“Right!”

“You can’t get much farther away from a democracy than that, can you, people?”

“No!” someone shouted.

The man held up the knife, began jabbing lightly at his forehead. Thin trickles of blood ran over his eyelids, down onto his cheeks. “Christ suffered and bled. He died!” he called out. “He wore the crown of thorns. But he rose again, didn’t he!”

As Janice watched, Dan sprang forward suddenly, leaping at the man in the center, then grabbed his arm, twisting the knife out of his hand.

“Hey! That’s mine,” he shouted. Holding up the knife, he backed away.

“You gave it to me, remember?” Several men in the group jumped forward and
pulled him away. He writhed, crying out, as the men twisted his arms behind his back, and the knife fell to the ground.

The preacher reached out, trying to grasp the Dan’s shoulder, but Dan flailed at him. “You don’t want anyone messing with you! People around here. They’ll do stuff to you. They tried to throw me in jail,” he exclaimed. Some drops of blood from the cuts on the preacher’s forehead had splattered onto Dan’s shirt and were blooming there in dark splotches. He looked around at the crowd of people

“Hey,” a man called out. “Get out of here.”

“Yeah,” shouted a teenage boy.

“Tell them,” Dan said, looking at the preacher. “You know what I’m talking about.”

The preacher glanced across the street. “You’re scaring off our new friends,” he said to Dan, then gestured to Janice. “You’re welcome to join us,” he called to her.

Dan followed his gaze, staring at Janice, then picked up the knife and held it out. “Never mind. You can have it,” he said to the preacher, then pushed his way back through the crowd.

Janice’s heart thudded. She stared at her hand, which she realized was scraped raw from gripping a branch of the tree, then grabbed her bike, but she could still see him, somehow, as if his image were burned onto her retinas, into the reflection from her gleaming handlebars. Feeling suddenly aware of her thin white t-shirt, the sweat trickling from her armpits, she climbed on.
"Hey!" Dan ran toward her. "Can you believe that guy? I let him use my knife the other day, then he never gave it back."

She stood, one foot on the pedal, looking at him. The bandana had slipped down around his neck, and underneath, his hair was tangled and dark.

"You should come out to my house some time."

"I . . . I don't know where it is," she said.

"It's out by the Snake River," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Do you have a piece of paper?"

"I have to go," she said, and pushed off, wobbling a little as she started, then stood up, pumping hard down the street.

At the corner, she stopped and turned around. He was looking at her and when he waved, she pedaled away, her chest tight, her legs aching as they strained against the pedals.

**

"So are you ready for tonight?" Kelly twirled around so that her skirt flew out from her legs, then fell down on the bed, laughing. "This is going to be so cool. Isn't it cool?"

"I'm nervous, kind of," said Janice. "Are we really going to have to wear those white robes?"

"Tonight," Kelly whispered, sitting up. "The Holy Ghost will come upon you, like a mighty wind."

At church this morning, Kelly had started moaning and waving her hands, then pulled Janice up to the front with the others. The people in the congregation
were praying, then some of them began to shake as the odd, guttural syllables issued forth from their mouths. Tongues of fire, Brother Phelps had said as she stood at the altar. Tongues of fire! He lifted up on the balls of his feet, up and down, up and down, in rhythm with his voice. “Oh God,” he said. “Bless this young lady. This beautiful woman of God. Fill her with Your Spirit.” He put his arm around her shoulder. A shiver ran up the bones of her spine and over her skull. As he gripped her, the blood throbbed in her veins, pulsing so intensely that she opened her mouth to cry out, but instead, strange, bird-like sounds came from deep inside her and she seemed to lift out of herself, to go to some other place. Afterwards, Kelly tried to tell her what it sounded like, but all Janice remembered was a burning sensation in her mouth, like a cigarette had touched it and was stuck there, sizzling slowly. “What a pretty girl,” a gray-haired woman said to her on the way out, squeezing Janice’s hand with her veiny one, and Janice found herself hugging the woman, fiercely, crying into her neck. “Well, goodness,” the woman said. She fished a piece of hard black licorice out of her purse and handed it to Janice. “You’re all right, dear,” she said, patting her arm.

Cory Henrickson and Matt Cooper, two boys from their chemistry class, were standing in the alley near the church’s skate park when Janice and Kelly came down the back steps. “Hey, Janice,” Matt called out. “You rock!” He elbowed Cory and they grinned, then Matt threw his board on the ground and pushed off. They were still wearing their church clothes. “Are you guys going to the Afterburner tonight?” Cory ran after Matt, shoving him in the back so that he stumbled, almost falling.
“Yeah right,” said Kelly, giving Janice a look. “Not with you,” she shouted after them.

Janice had started going to church when Kelly convinced her it would be fun, a few weeks ago, but she hadn’t been able to bring herself to tell her parents. She was afraid her mother would say something mean, if she tried to talk to her about it, like in sixth grade when Janice had told her she liked a boy at school. Randy was his name. “Oh Janice,” her mother had laughed, when she told her parents that she wanted to go over to his house, as if she had suggested something ridiculous. _Brother Phelps is hot_, she’d written in her notebook a few weeks ago, the small spiral one she kept in her desk at home, then scribbled the words out, furiously.

“Kelly,” Janice said now, looking at the traces of blood on her palm. “The weirdest thing happened on the way over here.”

“What?” she said, then pulled Janice down onto the bed with her. “Hey! You know what we should do? We should go out to the river to prepare ourselves for the baptism. A ceremonial cleansing.” She sat up and hugged her arms around herself. “The virgins shall prepare themselves for the King,” she said, staring out the window.

Janice suddenly remembered a time, years ago, when she and Sunny were eleven or twelve. _I know where the boy puts it in_, Sunny had said, a grin on her face, leading Janice to the bathroom. She’d pulled her underpants down, then squatted on the floor, pointing to the dark place between her legs.

Now Janice glanced back at Kelly. “I thought we were going to Pay-Less before church. Anyway, how would we get out there?”

Kelly laughed. “I guess we could take your car.”
Someone tapped on the door and Kelly’s mom stuck her head in. “I’m going to the store for a minute, girls.”

Kelly flopped back on the bed, pulled her pillow up and flopped it over her face.

“Need anything? Hi Janice,” her mother said.

“Hi.”

“Are your parents going to be at church tonight?” She paused, coming over beside the bed. “I was thinking we could get together with them after, for some cake and coffee?” Her lips crinkled around the words. “One of those nice Bundt cakes? How would that be?” she asked, looking at the pillow. “Kelly, did you hear me?”

“I heard you,” came Kelly’s muffled voice.

“What did you say?” her mother asked.

“I heard you,” Kelly said, more loudly.

Her mother was still shaking her head as she went out of the room.

“Bye,” Janice called after her.

When they heard the car start, Kelly sat up, her face red and sweating, and threw the pillow across the room. “She makes me so mad! She makes me want to puke!”

An image came suddenly into Janice’s mind of how at games, when Kelly released the ball, her glove whacked against the side of her leg, a bone-thumping, explosive sort of noise that left a red, raw spot on her bare thigh. The girls on the other teams were a little afraid of her. Sometimes Janice was, too. She pulled her
knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “At least she tries to be
nice.”

“Ha! She is so fucked up. Everything is so fucked up. Didn’t you get what
she was saying? She was trying to make you feel guilty because your parents don’t
go to church. She just pretends to be nice.”

“Oh,” Janice said, remembering the first time she had come over to Kelly’s
house. “They don’t really go that much,” she’d told Kelly’s mom, when she’d asked
what church her parents went to. Kelly’s mother raised her eyebrows.

“Oh?” she’d said, in a polite voice. Janice clutched a pillow against her
stomach. “So did you see your dad yesterday?”

Kelly sagged back onto the bed. “Yeah. We went to the Rollerdrome,” she
said sarcastically. “He was trying to act like it was fun, doing the hokey-pokey and
stuff. There were all these middle school kids there. He even raced. It made me
want to die.”

“Did he say any more about anything? The divorce, I mean? Are they really
going to split up?” Janice glanced at her.

Kelly shook her head, then made a face. “I guess.” She scowled and shook
her head. “I don’t know. My mom acts like she’s this long-suffering saint, and
there’s nothing she can do about it.” She went to the window and looked out.

“You’re lucky your parents aren’t all messed up, like mine are.” She glanced at
Janice.

Janice looked at her hands. “Yeah,” she said.
“Hey,” Kelly said. “You know what? I don’t know if I really want to go to church tonight after all.”

“Seriously?”

“Did you want to?”

“I don’t know. Sort of.”

“Does your parents’ car still work?”

“It drives,” Janice said. “It starts, at least.”

“It’s not like tonight’s our last chance. To get baptized, I mean.” Kelly pulled Janice to her feet and out the door. “So what were you going to tell me earlier? What happened on the way over?”

“Oh,” said Janice, her underarms suddenly moist. “Nothing. It was just . . . that little boy. You know that one that always pretends to shoot himself with his toy gun every time I walk by his house?”

“Oh yeah,” Kelly said. “What was he doing this time, pretending to hang himself?”

“It was a knife,” Janice said. “He was, like, stabbing himself. In the forehead.”

“Geez,” said Kelly. “I wonder what that kid’s going to be when he grows up? Some kind of psycho?”

“I guess so,” said Janice faintly. She followed her down the steps, feeling somehow disappointed. “Something like that.”

**

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"What’re you trying to do, start a fire?" a man in a pickup shouted, laughing from his window as they drove past. Sparks flew as the front bumper of the Impala whanged against the asphalt road, jouncing against the rocks and dirt.

"Look out!" Janice said, her hand against the dashboard. She peered out through the cracked and broken windshield. Twelfth Avenue was fractured into tiny shifting pieces, the light gleaming off the chipped edges of glass in fiery streaks.

Kelly laughed as a gray cat shot across the road. "Did you see Mr. Pfenninger’s face when we drove off? He looked like he was going to pee his pants."

"He’ll probably call the police," Janice said.

"You can’t arrest someone for borrowing their parents’ car."

Janice flopped back against the seat. "Oh God."

"It’s still got a full tank of gas." Kelly pointed to the gauge. "Your mom must have filled it up right before she wrecked it."

"She didn’t do it on purpose. The accelerator got stuck. I keep telling you."

Kelly shrugged. "Whatever you say. Hey, look at that guy over there."

As they went by Quail Park, Janice looked out the side window at the outlines of the green oak leaves against the sky, the World War II fighter airplane that was tilted patriotically as if it were soaring through the air. A man with long, tangled hair lay underneath the gray belly, his head tipped back against one of the heavy metal poles that anchored the plane to the ground. He looked like he was asleep. She stared at him as they drove past.

"Hey Janice." Kelly pointed out the window on her side. "Isn’t that your dad?"
"Where?"

"Over there, across the street. Talking on the phone. He looks kind of upset."

Janice turned to look at him through the crazed splinters of glass. His shoulders were hunched and he held one hand under his armpit, the other hand gripping the phone.

"Oh Jesus," said Kelly.

"What?"

"I think he looked over here."

"Are you serious?" She turned and glanced back at her dad, but he seemed immersed in his conversation.

"Look, there it is. Right down there. Right? Where she smashed into the wall?"

"Yeah," said Janice.

"Holy cow." She whistled under her breath. "That took a lot of guts."

"Kelly!"

"What? You have to admit, the accelerator doesn't seem to be sticking now."

They pulled to a stop, looking at the cinderblock wall at the end of the street. Kelly revved the engine.

"She was driving fast, though."

"Which is actually another point in favor of my theory. If you think about it."

She glanced at Janice.
Janice looked out the window and didn’t reply. “Maybe she did do it on purpose,” she said, finally. “My dad loves this car.” There was a blank, dry feeling inside her, as if she had just spit some blood into a cup.

Kelly stared out the windshield.

Janice swallowed, then glanced at her.

Kelly fished a baggie with some joints in it out of her purse. “Let’s just go. It’ll be fun.” She backed the car up and turned around, then opened her door. “Trade me, okay?”

**

Sometimes, in the future, she will try to think back on this day, but she’ll only be able to see it in a series of brief pictures, like images flashing on a television screen—she and Kelly, laughing as they run down the hall at school, smears of turquoise eyeshadow on their eyelids—walking out through JC Penney in the mall, sliding their arms along the shelves so that the piled-up shirts and jeans tumble to the floor—Kelly’s chemistry homework flying out the open window of the car.

How pale the sky was that afternoon, driving along the highway, the flat fields stretching out alongside the road. The smell of alfalfa and onions and mint, and in some places, smoke, from the fields where the farmers had burned off the stubble.

How Kelly laughed, leaning far out the window, pushing her shirt up and holding her arms out wide. “Go faster!” Kelly shouted. “I want to go fast!” She grinned, as, underneath her shirt, she wrangled her way out of her bra straps, then twisted the bra around and unhooked it.
"You’ll kill yourself," she shouted at Kelly, trying to keep one hand on the wheel, then laughed as Kelly pulled the bra out from under her shirt. "Hey you guys," she shouted to two kids squatting beside an irrigation ditch, held her bra up, then flung it out the window.

Janice twisted her head toward the rear just in time to see it fly through the air, a narrow white streamer against the blue sky, then crumple into a small heap on the ground.

The engine screamed as the car raced down the road. "It sounds like it’s going to explode!" Janice shouted. Then Kelly started yelling too, until both their voices, with the wind, were shrieking through the window.

**

"You’ll kill yourself," she shouted at Kelly, then started laughing. She felt the spurts of laughter coming up and couldn’t stop, tears squeezing from her eyes. She leaned forward, trying to get her breath, then slammed on the brakes.

Kelly fell forward, bumping her head against the windshield.

"Something in the road," Janice said. "Look, a coyote, maybe."

"A dog," said Kelly. "Just somebody’s dog. See, there it is, over there." She pointed to a dark shape loping off across the field.

They lurched forward again, the car sloping to the right, then rolled off the side of the road and bounced slowly into a field. "I think we blew a tire," Janice said.

They sat in the car for a minute, then climbed out, and stumbling over the newly plowed clods of dirt, picked their way through the field. "We hit something. Look," Kelly said, pointing. A pile of fur, reddened with blood, was crumpled onto
the road. One ear was waving in the breeze and one foot—it was a rabbit—kicked into the air, thrumming desperately against nothing.

“Oh no!” Janice said. “It’s still alive!”

“The dog must have been chasing it,” Kelly said.

“We have to help it!”

“No, look,” said Kelly. “It’s dead. It’s almost dead.”

She and Janice stared at it in silence.

Kelly took one more drag on the joint she held in her hand, then tossed it to the ground. “We could ask to use their phone.” She pointed to a big dusty-looking house on a ridge above the river.

Janice sank down on the hard asphalt near the rabbit. “I want to help it,” she cried.

Kelly grabbed her arms, pulled her up to the feet. “We’re going to that house!”

“What about the car?” Janice said. “My parents are going to kill me.” She walked back into the field and plucked sadly at the bumper. It was dented and covered with dust. A chunk of brownish-gray rabbit fur fell to the ground. “Oh!” Janice said.

“Come on,” Kelly said. She pulled Janice by the arm. “Let’s cut through the field.”

Sugarbeets were sprouting in long rows and fields of young corn stretched out beyond them. “There’s the river. It’s so wide and brown,” Janice said, stopping to dump the dirt out of her shoes.
"Except when you get up close, it looks black. Or sometimes blue. One time
when I was little? I went swimming in it, and when I got out there were leeches stuck
to my legs. And I didn’t even know it. My parents didn’t tell me until later. They
just sort of washed my legs off in the river and I didn't even notice."

"Gross!"

"Yeah," said Kelly, "it was. It freaks me out even now, to think about it.
What bugs me most is that they didn’t tell me.” Her voice small and hollow-sounding
in the clear air, the spreading fields and desert. “Nobody ever really tells you,” she
said again, moving ahead of Janice, her rigidly-held shoulders, her muscled thighs
pressing on through the newly sprouting corn.

**

The house was farther away than it appeared to be, and when they finally got
there, no one was home. No one had been home for about fifty years, it looked like to
Janice. It was bigger than she had thought, too, from a distance, mud-daubers
droning around the old wooden eaves.

“We could flag down a car, maybe.”

“I guess,” said Janice. “The sun seems awfully bright, doesn’t it?” She
rubbed her temples. The house was surrounded by purple-topped sagebrush and
volcanic-looking rocks, some so large they were half-buried in the ground. Beyond
the bumpy dirt road and the greening fields they’d tromped through, the main road
stretched off toward the horizon, a long dusty black ribbon.

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“Or we can always walk home.” Kelly pounded on the front door, then plunked down on the crumbling front porch. “It’s pretty hot, though,” she said, doubtfully.

“You’re probably sitting on ants,” Janice said. “Or black widows. My dad said there’s a lot of black widows around here.”

“Not this early,” said Kelly. “Not till summer.”

“Oh,” Janice said, walking around the side of the house. “Hey, there’s an outhouse back here,” she called out. “And what’s that?” She shaded her eyes. “It looks like an old shed.”

“I don’t know.” Kelly lay her head on her knees. “I’m really thirsty.” Her voice sounded ragged suddenly, as if she were on the verge of tears.

“Lake Shore Market isn’t that far from here, is it? Do you have any money?”

“It’s probably, I don’t know. Ten miles? Fifteen?”

“Fifteen miles?”

As they walked along the dirt path, back toward the road, Janice stared at the water, then up at the sharp cliffs on the far side of the river. They jutted up fiercely, like a fortress almost, she thought, like they’d been built by some primitive people, chopped out of the hillside, as if some ancient man could be hiding there, waiting with bow and arrow, with sling to whirl or rock to heave. A pelican soared in large circles over the river, its white, v-shaped wings lined with edges of black and long pointed beak outlined sharply against the blue sky. “It looks like a pterodactyl, doesn’t it, kind of?” she said.
Janice watched it land, finally, its feet stuck out like a waterskiier, plowing a furrow in the water before it came to a stop and floated gracefully on the surface. A black dragonfly with clear striped wings hummed over their heads. "It feels like we’re somewhere else," she said slowly. "Like not where we’re supposed to be."

"Janice." Kelly grabbed her arm. "Look over there."

Two hundred yards away, a man had jumped out onto a rock with a fishing pole. As they watched, he cast into the river, flipping his arm in a rhythmic motion, making the long line arc and then flick the surface of the water, arc again and again, then finally letting it rest there, his arms holding the rod steady. "Oh my God. He’s naked. He’s naked, isn’t he, Janice?"

Janice put one hand up to shade her eyes. The sunlight gleamed around the man’s bare muscled back and shoulders. "He looks like he belongs out here. Did you see the way he jumped up on that rock? Like a mountain goat."

Kelly was silent. "Remember that guy that used to hang around our school? I told you about him—it was last year, before you came. He was always showing up at track meets and stuff. Sheree went out with him once, and she said . . . ."

"What?"

"She said he invaded her dreams."

"What’s that supposed to mean?"

"I don’t know. It sounds creepy."

Kelly looked at Janice, then grabbed her hand, pulling her down the ridge toward the river.
“Stop! What are you doing?” Janice said, but Kelly shoved her with both arms, and she fell into the water, splashing down onto her hands and knees.

“What does it look like?” Kelly threw her shoes in the sand, peeled off her jeans, then waded in beside Janice, pulling her down into the water. They floated out into the river, laughing.

“Is he still over there?” Kelly asked, dogpaddling beside Janice. “Do you think he saw us?”

“I don’t know. Maybe,” Janice said, grinning as she treaded water. Before they moved, she had often gone to the Boise River. In the late afternoon the water would be slow and she’d just lie there, in a large inner tube, the waves a gentle rhythm underneath her. Everything disappeared except the rocking, rocking, rocking—sometimes she’d simply give herself over to it, the sun warm on her arms and stomach and legs. She’d stay until she felt empty, drained, so hungry her stomach felt like it was collapsing, then ride home on her bike, her skin burned and sore. “Mr. Fisherman,” she said, now, looking up at the sky. It was clear and solid blue, like a bowl that had been painted with wide brushstrokes. “Fishing for men.”

Kelly flicked some water on Janice’s head. “You’re high. You’re a very bad girl.” She splashed her again. “You need to repent.” She laughed. “You need God, Janice Evans. Today. This day, this hour, to come into your life.” Janice kicked away, splashing through the water, but Kelly came after her. “Wait,” she said, laughing as she shoved Janice’s head down. “I’m going to baptize you. In the name of the Father—” she started, and from under the water, Janice could hear the muffled echo of her voice. She struggled, holding her breath, trying to bat Kelly’s arm away,
then opened her eyes into the green water. A fish whisked through the mossy weeds, its gills silently fluttering open and closed. Another fish nibbled at a rock, but as Janice reached her hand slowly toward it, it flickered away. She tried to open her mouth, to call to it, like something in a dream, but then the water rushed in, and she gulped and choked. Pushing upwards, she shoved Kelly’s arm away, bursting up to the surface of the water. Behind Kelly, on the bank, she caught a glimpse of a man disappearing into the trees, and then Kelly was grabbing her around the neck.

Janice coughed and choked, trying to expel the water from her lungs.

There were drops of water on Kelly’s face, dripping down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Janice. I don’t know why I did that. I don’t know why.” She twisted away and began swimming for the bank.

Janice followed her, her arms aching with the effort. She climbed out onto the wet sand and lay there, breathing hard. After a minute, she rolled over and looked at the trees again, but there was no one there, just a few small birds fluttering through the branches. She flopped back on the sand, feeling deflated, somehow, and tired. “I guess we might as well go home,” she said. She knew her voice sounded distant, the way her mother’s always did when she was angry, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at Kelly or say anything more. After a minute, she got up and started walking toward the road. Across the fields, a green tractor jounced slowly along one edge, the small figure of the man inside barely visible.

“I hope you know how to change a tire,” Kelly said, walking slowly behind.

**
The parking lot of Faith was crowded with horse trailers and the damp smell of sheep milling around, cages of doe-eyed rabbits, goats. In the acre of grassy land south of the school, Matt Cooper and Cory Henrickson were stringing lights along the fence. "When will I see you?" Kelly’s mom called out the window as they ran across the asphalt. The rides, a ferris wheel, the tilt-a-whirl, and a giant swinging ship called Pharaoh’s Fury were already set up, and on the far side of the lot, near the baseball diamond, several sleek brown horses trotted back and forth, whinnying, their hooves stamping up circles of dust into the air. Country Fair and Auction read a banner hanging over the doorway to the gym.

"It’s their main fundraising event of the year," Kelly said. "This is like the two hundredth year they’ve had it, or something like that. I can’t believe I’ve gone to this school since the first grade. And still no one talks to me."

"Yes they do," Janice said. "You just don’t talk to them."

"Yeah, right. Look, there’s the dunking pool," said Kelly. She grabbed Janice and dragged her across the lawn toward the round silver tank.

"Kelly!"

"What? You know you’re going to get dunked. Might as well get it over with." She stopped, pointing across the lawn. "Hey, isn’t that Ryan and Jessica, making out over there? Miss Stephenson’s probably in her office having a panic attack." Kelly clutched an imaginary coat around her neck. "Don’t look at me," she quavered, in a mocking voice. "I’m too insecure to even unbutton my coat."

Janice laughed. "Why is she like that?"
“Who knows? She’s a freak, like everyone else around here. They’re engaged, did you know that? Ryan and Jessica?”

“Are you serious?”

“That’s what Crystal said. But big whoop, they’ve been going out since they were like ten. Jessica’ll be this perfect little wifey-person, driving her Toyota around town. People like that don’t even think about anything else, you know what I mean? They’re just content to live out their boring lives.” She glanced at Janice. “When I first met you, I thought maybe that’s what you were like.”

“Thanks a lot!”

Kelly gave her a look. “Only for about five minutes. Anyway, tomorrow’s the pancake breakfast. You want to go? And in the afternoon they have the auction. People end up paying $300 for a pie, stuff like that. One year they had a boxed-lunch sale and all the girls had to make one. Steve Vandermannen bought mine. I remember we sat on the grass saying absolutely nothing to each other, until finally his older sister, that fat blond girl, what’s her name? Dory? –came over and said his mom was looking for him and they had to go home. They have a big dairy farm near Meridian. I went over there once when I was in grade school, and we played in these huge piles of cottonseed. Two kids in some other family suffocated doing that once. They got buried underneath it and couldn’t get out.”

“Wow, that sucks.” Janice said, squatting to dig through her backpack. She glanced up at Kelly. “I can’t find my English assignment.”

“No one’s going to be doing anything in class today anyway. Let’s skip. We could ride on Pharaoh’s Fury.” Kelly raised her eyebrows at Janice, then laughed.
Janice heaved her backpack over her shoulder. “I can’t. I’m supposed to talk to Mr. Langford.”

“Oh.”

They walked on in silence.

“So what, are you mad at me now?” Kelly said, finally.

Janice glanced at her. “No. I just . . . I can’t believe you thought I was like Jessica. Anyway, I have to go. I’ll see you later, though, okay?” she said. As she walked toward the building and opened the glass door, Kelly’s reflection stared back at her, a wavery, ghost-like girl in a plaid skirt, standing alone on the sidewalk.

**

“Hey, I didn’t think you were coming.”

The smell of sawdust and frying pancakes and bacon drifted from the gym, the auctioneer’s voice swelling out over the tinny sound of the carnival music. A woman, her jeans pulled up snugly over her stomach, sat at a picnic table nursing a baby, a small child leaning his head in her lap. When the little boy stood up, Janice could see the snow cone melting in his hand, his mouth and chin and the front of his shirt sticky with red syrup. He grinned at Janice, then ducked his head back into his mother’s lap.

“I guess the pancake breakfast goes on all day,” Kelly said as Janice walked over to her. “This splatter paint thing is kind of cool. Smell.” She held the piece of cardboard up. “You could get high on this stuff.” She squirted on another shot of royal blue, then turned the switch and watched as the cardboard spun into a blur.

“Are you hungry? We should do the cakewalk!” She grabbed Janice’s hand and
pulled her over to the circle of chairs where a bored-looking junior high girl was holding a cash box.

Kelly gouged her finger into the white frosting of a two-layer cake.

“You have to buy a ticket,” the girl said crossly.

“You mom has to buy a ticket,” said Kelly, scooping up another fingerful as she ran off across the gym.

Janice followed her, laughing, onto the lawn. “So did you get in trouble for skipping yesterday?” she asked. A seagull squawked as it dove to the ground to peck up a piece of popcorn from among the scattered candy wrappers and pop cans.

“Nah,” said Kelly, pulling out a joint. “I told you it wouldn’t be a big deal. Want some?” She sat down on a bench.

Janice shook her head, leaned back against the wall.

“Loser,” said Kelly. She lit it, then glanced at Janice. “So are you still mad at me?”

“I wasn’t mad. Why do you keep saying that?” She kicked her foot against the leg of the bench. “I’m just worried about my mom. The other day when I got home she was just pulling up in front of our house in a taxi. She wouldn’t even tell me where she’d been.”

“Why does your dad put up with that shit?”

“I don’t know. She just does whatever she wants, pretty much, while me and my dad tiptoe around the house trying not to make her mad. It’s always been that way.”

“Did they ever say anything about us taking the car last weekend?”
She shook her head. “My dad just took it to the shop. He said the parts had finally come in.” She had a sudden image of her father glancing at her as he pulled away from the curb in the car, a half-worried look on his face. “They act like I’m not even there half the time. I think they’re hoping that if they just don’t talk to me about anything, everything will be all right.”

A clown in a baggy polka dot suit walked by, then circled back, holding out a balloon.

“That’s always a good way to deal with things.” Kelly leaned her head on Janice’s shoulder. “I’m sorry it’s so crappy.” She fiddled with the hem of Janice’s skirt, rubbing the fabric between her fingers. “Hey, the senior trip’s in two weeks. Have you been up to Riggins before? It’s supposed to be pretty crazy up there, I’ve heard. I’m actually surprised the school’s letting us go.”

The clown hesitated in front of them, the white mask on his face glowing in the darkness. Kelly sat up.

“Thanks,” Janice said finally, taking the balloon.

He looked at her from his teardrop-shaped eyes, holding out his gloved hand.

“He wants money,” Kelly said.

There was something familiar about him, even with the mask, but Janice couldn’t think what it was. “How much?” she asked, but he gestured to her again, pulling her up off the bench. “Kelly,” Janice called back, as the clown led her across the lawn. “Come with me.”

“I’ll be there in a second,” she said, her voice small among the shouts and noise of the carnival. “I have to pee.”

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The clown led her past the ferris wheel and the tilt-a-whirl to a gated fence behind the gym, then looped his arm over her shoulder, the mouth of the mask turned upward in a smile.

“What?” she said, looking into the semi-darkness beyond the gate. Inside the opening of a large tent, she saw what appeared to be several goats milling around, and in a pile of hay, a man and woman writhing together on the ground. Janice could just make out the rounded curve of the woman’s breast under the man’s hand as he thrust his hips against hers. In the light from Pharaoh’s Fury, as it made its swinging arc downwards, she could see the woman’s mouth caught open in a kind of frozen scream.

Janice felt oddly exhilarated. “Is this—what is this?” she started, but the clown had taken off his black hat and mask and was laughing, as he backed away into the darkness. “Matt Cooper!” she called after him. “What do you think you’re doing?” She glanced back at the couple inside the tent, in time to see Cory scrambling up off the ground, the blow-up doll abandoned, its arms and legs sticking out stiffly in the air. She could still hear him laughing as she ran across the lawn toward the main building, pulled open the door and pounded down the stairs towards the girls’ restroom. “Kelly,” she called out, her voice echoing in the empty hall.

“Are you in here?” When she reached the bathroom door, she swallowed, listening. A faucet was dripping somewhere, a steady plink of water against cold porcelain. “Kelly?” she said again. As she hesitated there, a door creaked open at the other end of the hall.

“Hey,” a voice behind her, said sharply. “Who’s there?”
She turned to see a man with a knit hat pulled down over his head, holding a cardboard box. “Hey. It’s you. Want to help? I’ve got a couple more boxes in there,” he said, grinning, as he tipped his head in the direction of the storage room.

“Dan? You scared me,” Janice said, the words coming out in a rush. She tried to take a breath, her heart thumping. “What are you doing? Are you working here?”

“Come here, I’ll show you.” He touched her arm, then led the way through the dark hall. Through the small window at the far end of the storage room, the lights of the ferris wheel flashed as it rotated slowly around. “See this? It’s like window cleaner, paper towels, buckets and shit.” He squatted and peered into a box. “A hammer, some screwdrivers.” He looked at her, holding up a pair of silver pliers. “You want some of this stuff? I’ve got my truck outside.”

His eyes were transparent blue, slightly too hard and bright. “You could build something. Take it to Tijuana and sell it at the flea market.” He moved toward her.

“So what, you’re just taking this stuff?” she said, slowly.

“They said I could have it.” He reached over the box, leaning toward her, and kissed her, pushing her against the wall. Dropping the pliers, he took her face in his hands. The rough cement pressed into her shoulder blades as he slid his hands under her shirt, then fumbled for the hook on her bra. Something rose inside her, a thick feeling in her throat, and she found herself kissing him back, frantically.

“Janice! Are you in here?” Kelly’s voice echoed down the hall.

She pulled her shirt down and looked at him in the dark. His eyes seemed to be asking her for something, but she didn’t know what it was.
“Wait,” Dan said, as she backed out of the room, then ran down the hall and up the stairs. Kelly was propping the front door open with one foot.

“I was scared to come down there. What are you doing?”

“I couldn’t find you,” Janice said, breathing hard. “You said you had to pee.” She shivered as Dan came up the stairs after her.

“Uh, hello,” Kelly said, holding the door open for him.

“Thanks,” Dan said, backing through the doorway. He paused, looking at Janice. “Sure you don’t want some?” He held out the box, grinning, then walked down the sidewalk toward the parking lot, his hair a dark pelt hanging between his shoulder blades. After a second, he glanced back. “See you,” he said.

Kelly watched him go, then glanced at Janice. “Do you know that guy?”

“Not really, I just... I see him sometimes, around town.”

“So what, he’s your boyfriend? You have a boyfriend and you didn’t even tell me?”

“It’s just this weird thing. I don’t know what it is,” she said. She hugged her arms around herself. “It’s freezing out here. Let’s go back to the gym, okay?”

“Janice! You like him, don’t you!”

Janice turned back. “I don’t even know him! He’s just some guy.”

Kelly stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips.

The auctioneer’s voice barked from the loudspeakers to introduce a new item, rattling out through the air.

“Fine,” she said, walking away. “Go hang out with your boyfriend then.”

“Kelly!” Janice called after her, but she was already walking across the grass.
She was still a few blocks from her house when Dan pulled up beside her. Behind him, the sky glowed faintly from the lights at the school carnival. In the back of his truck, several boxes were piled beside a heap of heavy blankets.

“So I thought you were coming out to my house sometime,” Dan said, looking at her.

“Maybe I did,” she said. Her heart was pounding again, but she tried to keep her voice jaunty, confident. “And you weren’t home.”

“Hey,” he said, gesturing to her.

She hesitated, then walked slowly over to the truck. The blankets in the back, she could see now, were actually animal hides, small white moths fluttering around them. In the glare from the streetlight she could see that there was something dark red around the edges of them. Next to the tailgate was a deer’s head, she noticed, its eye sockets dry and empty, antlers pointing crookedly from the top of its skull. A faint fetid smell made her stomach churn.

“You could come now,” he said. He stuck his arm out the window.

She glanced at him, then down at her feet.

“You want to. You don’t know it yet, but you do.” He grinned at her again, then revved the engine, and drove off, a trail of exhaust pluming from his truck, dispersing slowly into the air, like mist.

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“You want to. You don’t know it yet, but you do.” He grinned at her again, then revved the engine, and drove off, a trail of exhaust pluming from his truck, dispersing slowly into the air, like mist.
It had all started like the pain from a bad toothache, like someone reeling away from a hard blow to the head, two nights ago when Sharon called her up, crying so hard Zinnie could barely understand her, said something had happened, would she please come now. Fifteen minutes later, Zinnie was standing in the parking lot of the Zion Lutheran Church, and Sharon, the creases in her face and neck red and streaked with tears, was thrusting a bloody poncho-wrapped bundle at her. At first Zinnie had the wild impression that she’d cut off her arm and was holding it out to her, like something in a dream—that’s why she was crying so hard—but then she saw a bit of the baby’s face and one of its hands, still crusted with blood from its birth, and knew, suddenly, without Sharon having to say another word, exactly what had happened. She let the questions spill out anyway. “What’s going on? Oh my God, you and Garrett—you . . . oh my God.” Sharon had nodded and cried harder, her stomach heaving, as she told Zinnie how she had hidden in the trailer behind her house—where she and Zinnie used to have sleepovers when they were small—had cut the umbilical cord, then rubbed alcohol around the stump, like she had seen her mother do after her little sister came home from the hospital not so long ago. “I thought all my insides were coming out,” she cried. “I was gonna come and get you, but it just started happening, and then it was too late.” Zinnie walked with Sharon back to the trailer and Sharon showed her the cans of instant formula she had taken from their
kitchen. The bedspread was bloody and there were diapers piled in a corner. “You
should go to the hospital,” Zinnie said, holding her nose. “I’ll go with you.”

“I can’t,” Sharon said, her voice rising into a wail. “I don’t want Orrin to find
out!”

Zinnie pressed her hands against her forehead. “Forget it. You’re right,” she
said. Sharon’s family were Mormons and her stepfather, Orrin, a rangy man with a
narrow, pinched face was an elder. The church had found Sharon’s mother a new
husband when her father had died, and in the evenings he often sat in the basement,
drinking, then hung a hammer in his belt and ambled around the garage and the back
yard tinkering with the sprinkling system and their three cars, which lined the
driveway. The trailer, a rusty old Airstream, where the cycle of cats that their family
owned slept and peed, was the only part of their property that he avoided. Sharon’s
real father had bought it for them to go camping in, and Orrin refused to have
anything to do with it, as if that would make the shadow of the first husband hang
over him a little less substantially.

Zinnie crammed the bedspread and diapers in a trash bag, then rode her bike
to K-Mart and threw the bag in the dumpster behind the store. She bought a package
of SuperMaxi pads and disposable diapers and stuffed them, along with a small baby
blanket, a pacifier and a bead bracelet she liked, into her backpack. They spent the
night in the trailer and the next day, when Sharon’s milk came in, she finally stopped
crying. The baby’s little hand clutched at her, its fingers splayed red against the
white curve of her breast. Zinnie tried not to stare. Sharon had woman-breasts now,
blue-veined and heavy, not at all what she remembered from when they used to twirl
their batons in Sharon's back yard, then strip down to their underpants and run through the sprinklers, shrieking when the cold water hit their bare skin. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, she looked dignified somehow, Buddha-like, her rounded shoulders rising and falling as she held the small baby to her nipple. Zinnie felt sad, suddenly, as she remembered how she used to hang from the top bar of the jungle gym, then clench her legs around Sharon's neck and hold on to her sweaty forehead as she trotted slowly around the backyard like a big, gentle pony.

"I could take it to the hospital in Boise," Zinnie said, trying to keep her voice calm. "They'll take babies there, no questions asked. I've seen the ads on TV."

Sharon's shoulders drooped. "It's all stupid Garrett's fault."

"You don't really like him, do you?"

"I don't know!" Her hair hung in limp clumps around her face.

Zinnie twisted her legs up underneath her. She couldn't believe Sharon had been with Garrett Stone—that sad, video game-playing freak. He spent hours every day sitting in front of his TV, hoping to get good enough to win a tournament at a video game convention in Salt Lake City. The first time she saw Garrett he had been showing a bunch of kids down by Mann's Creek how he could fart to the tune of Yankee Doodle. "His hidden talent," she had whispered sarcastically in Sharon's ear. "What an idiot." Sharon had looked down at her feet instead of laughing loudly, the way she usually did, at Zinnie's rude comments. That was two years ago. Later that afternoon, Garrett had splatted into the muddy water over and over from a rope someone had tied to a tree, his bare ass white in the bright sun. They had been together then! The realization dawned on Zinnie slowly. Sharon had already liked
him then. And now there was a baby. She stared at the newborn in Sharon’s arms, the redness of his chin and cheeks, his pale tuft of hair.

“You just want to get away from here,” Sharon said. “You’ll go there and never come back. You’ll get a job there like you always wanted to.”

“No I won’t,” Zinnie said, although she realized now she had felt something leap inside her, something small, a tiny frog of happiness, at the thought of going to Boise. Her mother had lived there for a while, a long time ago, in a small house that was now a shopping center on Emerald Street. “Boise’s a great town,” her mother said. It was one of the few things that her mother seemed able to evince any enthusiasm about. “We had a nice house there, with big trees all around it. It was in a real neighborhood, with some other older houses. We had barbeques sometimes, with the neighbors. It was kind of fun.” “Why don’t we go back there?” Zinnie asked her once, after she found out her parents were planning to divorce. “It’s not like McCammon’s such a lovely, wonderful place.”

“And leave your father?” her mother replied, sounding startled. “You’d never see him.”

“You mean, you’d never see Mr. Newman,” Zinnie had muttered, as she walked away. Her mother had been involved with Papa Newman, as everyone called him, since before her father moved out, but she and Zinnie both pretended that Zinnie didn’t know this. Mostly her mother was so tired from her job at Birdseye, that after work, she did nothing but sit outside smoking with Neola Thompson until it was time to go to bed, then get up the next day and go back to work.
"I can't believe you didn't tell me about you and Garrett," Zinnie said. "How long have you been together?"

Sharon shrugged, her chin trembling, then her face grew defiant. "He likes me. He said so."

"Did you tell him about . . . this?" Zinnie gestured toward the baby.

"Cody. His name is Cody," Sharon said. She touched the baby's small foot. "I haven't told anyone except you." She looked at Zinnie, pleadingly.

"You don't have to tell them anything at the hospital." Zinnie went on, trying not to look at her. "Not even your name."

Sharon pulled the baby closer to her chest, wrapped her arms tight around him. "I can't." She was close to tears again.

"Do you want to tell your parents then? Or just . . . I don't know. What should we do? School starts in a few weeks."

Sharon started crying again.

"They'll find a good home for him," Zinnie said, her voice trailing off weakly. She couldn't believe they were sitting here talking about this—Sharon's baby. She had thought Sharon had been gaining weight recently, but she had always been big, with layers of flesh padding her body, so it was hard to tell.

Looking at her, Zinnie suddenly thought of Sharon's mother, who wore tent-like dresses to hide her bulging stomach and hips. Zinnie sometimes saw her standing by the hedge in the yard, flipping a limp garden hose around. For the first time, she could picture Sharon being just like her.
“Why don’t you come with me?” Zinnie said, impulsively. “We could go to a show. Green Day played there a while ago. It’d be fun,” she said, then felt her stomach clench at the thought of Sharon trailing her around the Joint, among all the kids with their green and blue hair and lip rings and silver-spiked belts. She and Sharon didn’t really hang out at school anymore, the way they did when they were younger. Sharon never said anything about it, but they both knew that somewhere along the way, Zinnie had managed to put on a façade of coolness that Sharon would never be able to attain. Zinnie still felt surprised by it herself. It was amazing what shoplifting could do for your reputation. She glanced at Sharon anxiously, but she was blubbing into the top of the baby’s head.

“You have to come back, promise? If you take him there?”

Zinnie gave Sharon a look. “It’ll be okay,” she said. “Don’t worry.”

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But now that she was on the bus, it didn’t seem okay at all, none of it. They’d stopped in three different towns just since McCammon, and it was starting to feel like forever. She looked down at the baby. He waved his arms, screwed up his face and opened one grayish-blue eye, then closed it again. She already felt dizzy with the effort of watching him every minute, trying to keep him quiet, trying to smile at him all the time. This whole thing made her feel foggy, like she’d shot off into outer space and was walking around on some other planet. She closed her eyes and tried to think about something else, but Cody’s little foot kicked out from under his blanket and she opened them again. Her mother hadn’t even questioned it when she said she
was going to a friend’s house, just flapped one hand in Zinnie’s direction and went on watching TV. Not one person in the world knew she was on this bus, except Sharon.

“Hey, I’m Derek,” a voice across the aisle said. She turned to see a boy pulling off his earphones. He reached over to touch Cody’s hand. “Is that yours?” he asked. “Weird. It feels like rubber.” He looked at her blearily then brushed his hand across the stubble on his chin. “That’s awesome.” Cody stirred in her arms, pulled his knees up and began crying in a weak, plaintive yowl. She jiggled him and when that didn’t help, carefully lifted him up against her shoulder. She was trying to think what to do next, but as the bus swung around a corner, she peered at him again. His little mewed-up face had relaxed and he was asleep.

She fumbled in her pocket for a cigarette and looked at Derek. “It’s not mine. I’m . . . babysitting.”

He lifted his earphones again. “What’d you say?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “Where you headed?”

“Boise.”

“Oh yeah? Me too.”

He nodded. He was tapping a little silver box against his thigh. “Cool. I’ve got a job I’ve gotta get back to. I work for a radio station.”

“Yeah? What are you listening to?” She gestured to the headphones. He did not have a job at a radio station. He was completely lying, she could tell. She always knew when people were lying. He looked like the kids she used to top corn with in the summer, crappy old Adidas shoes with no laces, a faded Nirvana T-shirt. He rubbed the silver box with his thumbs. She was pretty sure there was some pot inside.
“Rancid,” he said. He disconnected the earphones from the CD player and turned up the volume so she could hear. “Never fell in love ’til I fell in love with you. Never knew what a good time was ’til I a good time with you. If you wanna get the feeling, you wanna get it right.” He drummed wildly on the seat in front of him.

“Then the music’s gotta be loud. Cause when the music hits I feel no pain at all.”

The woman occupying the seat turned around and glared. “Sorry,” he said to the back of her head, when she had turned around again, then looked at Zinnie. “Can you believe their bass player? He rocks.”

She slowly laid the baby on the seat beside her to rest her arms. He was still asleep, his mouth puckered into a small red bow. She watched him for a minute, then lit a cigarette, waved the smoke toward the open window.

The bus driver looked at her in his rearview mirror. He ran his hand over the back of his bald head, then turned around. “Put it out, or you’re getting off,” he said, in a loud voice. Everyone turned to look at her.

She held up her hands and pretended to rub the cigarette out on her palm.

“Screw you,” she said, softly, then glanced over at Derek and smiled. He was cute, she thought, with dark hair that curled down the back of his neck. She felt herself relaxing, her shoulders sagging with relief. Maybe this was going to be okay after all. She put the cigarette up to her lips again and looked out the window.

They were through Pocatello already, had passed the Flying J truck stop, heading toward American Falls. The sky was blue and the fields of sugarbeets, alfalfa and potatoes that they’d passed earlier had given way to desert, and in the
distance, mountains. She let the cigarette burn down to her fingers and watched the sagebrush that dotted the ground roll by the window.

**

The first time she realized her mother was having an affair was the day Sara Thompson, Neola’s little girl, died. Neola had brought her older girls over to their house early in the morning while she took Sara to the hospital. When she came home, that afternoon, Zinnie remembered, her face was white, a desperate look in her eyes that made Zinnie’s throat close up. It reminded her of a cat she’d had once, which had stalked through the house yowling incessantly, until they’d realized it had an abscess in its leg. Erin and Abigail peered at their mother, clung to her hands, one on either side of her. “He said it was the worst case of chickenpox he’d ever seen. She was whining, crying at me that her head hurt, and I told her to lie down and be quiet. That was the last thing I said to her.” She looked at Zinnie’s mother, her chin trembling. “I can’t believe it. The doctor said it might have been Reye’s Syndrome.”

“How much aspirin did you give her?” Zinnie’s mother asked, in a whisper.

“Just four,” Neola said, wringing Abigail’s and Erin’s hands. “Baby aspirin. I don’t know if it was aspirin. Tylenol, maybe.”

“Mommy,” Abigail said, pulling at her mother’s hand. “There wasn’t any Tylenol. Remember? We were going to go get some.”

“Stop that,” Neola said, crossly, yanking her hand away. “You girls run outside.”
Erin and Abigail stood off to the side, freckles faded across their pale cheeks, shoulders narrow and bony. They had dressed themselves, it looked like, Zinnie thought. Abigail’s shorts were on backwards.

Zinnie pulled Abigail’s hand out of her mouth and walked outside with them. Papa Newman was out, pushing his lawn mower back and forth across his yard—sinewy brown arms, white wife-beater, dark stains of sweat on his back. The roar of the mower filled the air. He must not know, Zinnie thought. Otherwise he wouldn’t just be outside mowing, would he, making all that noise? The muscles stood out on his arms as he strained to push the mower through the tangled grass. The thought that she knew something important that he didn’t, that maybe no one else in the neighborhood knew, filled her up, made her chest feel tight. She considered going across the street to tell him, but then looked at Erin and Abigail sitting on the curb.

“You guys want to go to the park?” she asked.

Erin shuffled her feet in the gutter. “I don’t think Mommy will let us,” she said, finally.

“Come on. We’ll tell her when we get back. I’ll buy you a Popsicle at Sparky’s. Blue ones. And push you in the swing.”

“No,” said Erin. “We have to stay here.”

Zinnie looked at her sad face, the soft darkened dents under her eyes. “Okay,” she said, and sat down by them on the curb. They stared, together, at their legs, sticking out into the street.

“Where’s Sara?” asked Abigail. Abigail was six, Erin, eight. “I want Sara.”

“Shut up, Abby,” said Erin.
Abigail started to cry and ran back into the house.

“She doesn’t know anything,” said Erin, glancing up at Zinnie.

The lawn mower sputtered to a stop. Papa Newman pulled an old t-shirt from his back pocket, and swept it over his face and the back of his neck, then started down the sidewalk toward them.

Zinnie’s heart began to pound. Now she’d have to tell him.

He lifted his arm as he approached. His chest was bright with sweat. Taking off his sunglasses, he squinted at them. “Is your mother home?” he asked, directing his question to Zinnie.

Zinnie had never seen him close up without a shirt before. She stared at his forearm. A snake wound its way around the muscular flesh—green, with small black angular lines etched into its skin. Scales, she thought. The snake’s tongue flicked out of its mouth, a thin, red fork pointing toward his wrist. “Erin’s sister died at the hospital this morning,” she blurted. “Her mother is inside with my mother. She had Reye’s something. Reye’s Syndrome.”

He nodded his head, briefly and squatted down beside them, looking at Erin. His eyes were like small brown olives, his forehead deeply lined. “I’m going on inside,” he said finally, and started toward Zinnie’s house.

Zinnie stared after him. The confident way he turned the doorknob made it look as though he lived there, had entered their house many times.

She suddenly felt like she wanted to run far, far away and never come back. Grabbing Erin’s hand, she ran down the sidewalk toward the park. “Just for a little while,” she said, over Erin’s wails. “I’ll bring you right back. I promise.”
At the rest stop, the driver pulled the bus over, then, when the rest of the passengers had gotten off, shoved his way down the aisle toward Zinnie. When he got to her seat, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Get rid of it."

"Okay, okay," she said, and tossed the cigarette butt out the window.

"One more and you’re out," he said. "And keep that kid quiet, okay? What are you, a runaway? I could call the cops, you know."

Her palms were suddenly moist. "Want to see my I.D.?"

"Sheesh." He shook his head and went back up the aisle. "Forget it."

"I’m sorry," she called after him.

Derek tapped her on the arm, held up the silver box. "Behind the restrooms," he said. He pointed out the window. "See, back there near the trees?"

"Are you kidding? I’m going to get kicked off," she said, looking at the baby. His tiny fingers curled over the edge of the blanket. He was sound asleep, and she was so tired of watching him. "I don’t know. Maybe I could. Just for a minute."

Derek nudged her. "Come on," he said, loping toward the front of the bus, his boxers sticking up above the waistband of his jeans.

She propped her pillow on the armrest by the window to block the sun from the baby’s head, glancing back at him as she followed Derek down the aisle.

They were high when the bus pulled back onto the road, laughing and taking hits from the joint Derek had hidden in his pocket, cupped inside his hand. "Ow, shit, look at that," he said, showing her the red spot on his palm. He laughed again. "Shit." He hung over the side of his seat and curled his arm around Zinnie’s neck.
She shoved him away so that he fell back into his seat, then started laughing again. "I'm so tired." She stretched and yawned, then leaned her head back against the seat. She and Sharon had stayed up almost all the night before, and her neck and shoulders still ached from holding the baby. She glanced down at him. He was still asleep, his hair damp with sweat. She pulled the blanket down from around his face, then leaned back, watching the little lights on the ceiling swirl together over her head.

**

When she woke, she was slumped over on the pillow and for a minute, she thought she was in her own bed, just waking up. Then the bus lurched to a stop and a blast of diesel poured in through the window. She opened her eyes and reached for her backpack, then suddenly sat up straight and snatched the pillow off the seat. The baby. The baby. Her pulse throbbed in her eardrums. She'd been slumped over right on top of him. The baby. She peered at his face, his waxy eyelids. He's asleep, she said to herself—he's just asleep, but she was afraid he wasn't, even before she grabbed him up and felt him sag, like a crumpled doll. She held him tightly against her chest, trying not to think about the glimpse she'd had of his wrinkled, bluish lips. The other passengers on the bus were groping for their things, straggling toward the door. "Derek, where are we?" she hissed, but he was already halfway up the aisle. She clutched the baby. She had fallen asleep on top of him and now he wasn't all right anymore. He was fine before, and now he wasn't. She jerked her backpack out from under the seat, then, holding the baby carefully, made her way to the front. Her heart raced as she tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Could you help me with this baby? He's... there's something wrong with him. I don't know what to do."
He glanced up at her, then went back to thumbing through a sheaf of papers.

“Let me see your ticket.”

“Why?” she said, reaching in her pocket.

“You have to change buses to get to Boise, but there isn’t another one till tomorrow morning at eight. There’s no place open here, in Meade, not at this time of night.”

“This isn’t Boise?” She looked out the door. Past the bus station was a row of older brick buildings with plate glass windows. In the intersection, a yellow traffic light blinked on and off and she could hear a lone cricket chirping from a patch of weeds near the sidewalk. It was strangely dark, and she realized suddenly there were no streetlights. In the glow of the bus’s headlights, she saw Derek meandering toward the parking lot. “Derek, wait,” she said. “Derek.” She ran after him, the baby’s head jiggling against her breastbone.

“Hey,” he said. “You need a ride somewhere?” He walked unsteadily towards her. “I got my truck right over there. I could take you someplace.” He pulled a small glass bottle out of his pocket. “This is good shit. You should try some,” he said, holding it out to her.

“Derek,” she started. “I don’t know what to do. I tried to take good care of him, but . . .” She closed her mouth. Air seemed to be rushing past her ears. She couldn’t bring herself to say it.

“I could take you someplace,” he said again. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. “I mean, until tomorrow morning.”
By take her someplace, he meant they could drive out to the river and make out and then sleep in his truck until morning. But the farther they got from town, the slower he drove, as if he couldn’t remember how to press the accelerator. “Leave me alone,” she said, when he finally stopped the truck behind a clump of trees and flopped his arm around her shoulder, groping toward her mouth. “I’m going to puke!” She got out of his truck and started running back toward the road, the baby still pressed tightly to her chest. She stumbled along through the bushes, tripping over the rocks that seemed to be everywhere. She clutched the baby, feeling like she could hardly breathe, then stopped and looked around. She had no idea where she was, or where she was trying to go. She couldn’t see the road, and she wasn’t sure where Derek’s truck was, either, now. After a few minutes, she heard footsteps coming up behind her, felt Derek’s breath on her neck.

“Where are you going?” he said. “Come here.” Leaning around, he tried to kiss her cheek.

She pushed him away, so that he stumbled backwards. “The baby’s dead.” She could hear her voice rising into a panicky screech. “Did you hear me? I think he’s dead!”

He shook his head. “What’s wrong with you?” he said. “Are you crazy? Come on.” He tried to focus his eyes on her, but then he gave up and looked at the bushes instead. “It’s too dark to see crap out here.” He headed toward a large rock and kneeled down slowly, his legs crumpling underneath him, as if someone and pushed him gently onto the ground.
She watched him, trying to swallow the bitter feeling in her throat, then ran over beside him and squatted down. He moaned a little as she fished the keys to his truck out of his pocket, his head rolling back onto the rock. She left him there, and started walking.

**

It has to be right here somewhere, she said to herself. It has to be right here. An animal—a rabbit, she thought—sprang past her feet suddenly, and she stopped, her heart thumping, then pushed on through the bushes. All she could see were the vague outlines of the sagebrush that was everywhere and some orange-petalled flowers that looked like little flames spiking out in the darkness. And to her left now, the dark flat stretch of the river, which she could hear more than she could see, a gentle lapping noise that seemed somehow comforting. Hadn’t the truck been near the river? She stumbled toward it and walked along the bank, trying not to think about the fact that she was lost. After she had walked for a long time, what felt like at least a half an hour, she saw a clump of trees that looked familiar and started running. As she neared the trees, a frog croaked hollowly, but too late for her to step somewhere else, and she felt it flatten under her foot, as if it were made of paper and air. But there was no truck, just the ongoing riverbank, a long meandering line of bushes and rocks and trees. She was so tired, and her brain felt numb, as though it had been dipped in ice. The baby, too, seemed less real, as if he could float up out of her arms, his body dangling from his large baby head. She clutched him, suddenly thinking of Neola’s white face, Papa Newman striding purposefully toward the front
door of her house. Sinking down onto the ground, she cried into the top of his fuzzy soft hair.

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All there was was walking. If she walked for long enough, along this river, she would come to something. That was the thought she tried to hold in her head, but it was hard to hold any thoughts now, because she wasn’t really thinking anymore—she was too tired to think—but after a while, there was a thought in her head, one thought, and that was to set the baby down, just for a minute, to rest her arms, and then she did, in the dirt, near a clump of spidery sagebrush. She crouched down and peered at the baby in the darkness, then put her hand under the blanket, to feel for his heartbeat. She couldn’t feel anything, so she put her fingers on his neck, where his pulse might be, but all she could feel was soft folds of baby flesh and the little hard snaps on his undershirt. She wrapped his blanket tight around him, then walked a few feet away, and glanced back. The blue bundle lay under the branches of sagebrush, a little pale bundle. It seemed all right there, like that was an all right place for it to be. She walked a few more feet away, then up a ridge to try to get her bearings, see something, but there was only darkness and more darkness and the shadows of bushes and mountains.
CHAPTER 3

“Why can’t we just watch from the yard?” Janice climbed halfway up the ladder. “I can’t even see anything out here.”

“Come on.” Dan sat down near the chimney and propped his foot against the top of an out-jutting window. “You’re not scared, are you?”

“No.” Janice stepped off onto the flat part of the roof, began edging her way up the rough shingles on her hands and knees. He laughed and leaned toward her, holding out his hand. “Put your feet right here, see? Now wait just a second,” he said. Sliding back down, he jumped off the ladder onto the ground.

“Dan!”

“Be right back.”

She leaned back against the chimney and squeezed her hands between her thighs, trying not to yawn, then held them up to her nose and sniffed. She’d been out on the river most of the evening with Dan and George, and her hands were still sticky with fish scales, and something else, pine sap from the wood she’d carried inside earlier. She heard the front door shut, and after a moment, Dan’s shape loomed toward her in the dark. “That was quick,” she said. She nudged a loose shingle with her foot. “This feels like it might fall through.”


The moon had come out again and the river, which had been pale pink as the
sun started to go down, was black now, as still and flat as a mirror. Beyond it, the
ciffs jutted sharply against the sky, black shapes that blotted out the stars.

“Up there, I mean,” he said, pointing to a narrow shadow swittering over their
heads.

“What did you say they’re called?”

“Mexican free-tailed bats.” He crouched over her, looking at her intently,
leaned to kiss her. “You’re not going to fall asleep, are you? I want you to see the
comet.”

She sat up, wanting to feel his enthusiasm. “Is that a coyote?” she asked. She
pointed to a pair of glowing eyes moving along near the trees. They often circled
around the house at night, seeming hungry, or as if they were waiting for something,
hoping to reclaim lost territory. Sometimes when she went out to the garden, she’d
get a glimpse of one darting away between the circular mounds of corn, a limp rodent
dangling from its mouth. One morning when George and Amber had gone into town,
and Dan was out pheasant hunting, she’d thought she’d heard one howling, then
realized it was a siren, a police car heading out Deer Flat. It sounded like it was
coming toward the house and she’d stood at the window, her heart beating, listening
until it faded away into the distance.

When Dan got home, she told him about it, and he rowed her out to the small
island in the middle of the river, and from there, showed her how the house was partly
hidden behind a ridge, just looked like an old chimney sticking up, a sagging,
weathered roof. “Cops never come out here,” he said, but sometimes he made them
hide in the root cellar when a fisherman or some high school kids meandered too
close to the house. The cellar was dark with the heavy door pulled shut, and she was always relieved, when Dan lit the kerosene lanterns, to see his familiar, angular face reappear, George sitting in a chair near the cluttered table, head bent, his hands between his knees. Amber was usually off in the corner, her arms crossed, underneath the dry-looking hunks of weed that hung from the ceiling. "Trespassers," she always said, rolling her eyes, when Dan and George started arguing about George’s plans for his antenna again, the tall pole he had put up near the tool shed. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "We’re being infiltrated," she said to Janice. Once, when they’d been in the root cellar for several hours, and Dan still didn’t think it was safe to go back up, she started bouncing a small rubber ball against the wall. "I have an announcement to make. To all you men who think you’re in charge down here. You’re not.” When she said the last word, she threw the ball at the shelf above Janice’s head, shattering a jar of canned peaches. "Are you okay?” Dan asked, as he picked the broken glass out of Janice’s hair. She remembered the sweet smell of peaches and cinnamon mixed with the musty smell of the root cellar and Dan’s sweat, the steady drip, drip, drip of peach juice on concrete as he rubbed her forehead, then kissed the back of her neck.

"Are George and Amber asleep?” she asked now, still looking up at the sky.

"Probably passed out somewhere."

"Maybe they’d want to see the comet."

He grabbed her knee. "Look right over there. Can you see that? It’s supposed to be visible to the naked eye."
She squinted, searching the stars. She imagined the comet would be a streak of light, like the bottle rockets George shot off into the river sometimes, bright arcs curving up and up into the darkness, but Dan said it was more like a fuzzy ball.

"The tail is almost invisible," he'd told her yesterday, his knee jiggling up and down. He looked up from the newspaper he'd spread out on the table. "This one has two tails, actually. They think it formed about four billion years ago. It's supposed to be a bad omen."

"What's that?" she'd asked, pointing to a little diagram he'd drawn in the margin, a solid black box with angled legs sticking out.

"Nothing. It's just a drawing, okay?"

"Okay."

He looked at her. "It's George's antenna. I don't like it."

"How come?"

"People are going to notice it. Someone is."

"Why don't you tell him not to put it up, then?"

"I don't know. It might be important somehow." He rubbed his forehead.

Now he scooted closer to her on the roof and shut his eyes, as though he was reciting something, calling up a lost phrase from memory. "Satan, commonly called Lucifer, had a place in heaven, a literal home, in time and space. When it was destroyed, it left the debris we now see as asteroids and comets." He opened his eyes. "Whence comest thou, Satan?" He nudged her. "Say it."

"What?"

"The Satan thing."
She laughed. "Whence comest thou, Satan?"

"Don’t laugh."

"Whence comest thou, Satan?"

"From going to and fro in the earth, from walking up and down in the midst of the stones of fire," he said.

She glanced at him. "And when will thou be cast down into the pit?"

"When the stars of heaven fall into the earth. When the sun becomes as black as sackcloth, when the moon becomes as blood." He stared up at the sky. "I think the comet’s going to tell us something."

"What do you mean?"

"About the antenna."

She fastened her eyes in the direction he was looking, but all she could see were the same bright clusters of stars and the half-moon, a pale cloud drifting over it. No matter how many times he pointed it out, she could never see it. "Dan," she said, touching his arm.

He blinked, then looked at her. "What?"

"I have to pee." She struggled up into a sitting position. "I’m getting cold."

"Not yet," he said, grabbing her from behind. "Wait a second." He put his arms around her ribs, pressing her close to his chest. She looked up at him, running a strand of his hair through her fingers. She kind of liked it when made her do things, stay up all night with him, walk for miles along the river to see some new fishing spot he’d found. The way he was always drawing he closer, as if he were trying to absorb her into his skin. It was so different from her parents, especially her father, who had
always seemed distant. She swallowed, trying not to think about her him, but after a minute, she struggled out of Dan's grasp.

“What? You didn’t see it yet.”

“It’s just . . . I was just thinking about something.”

He pulled away from her and lay back against the roof, his arms under his head. “What?” he said. His face was half-covered by the shadow of the chimney.

“Your folks again?”

Something seemed to crumple in her chest, like wrinkled tinfoil. “No,” she said. She hitched herself cautiously down the steep part of the roof, then paused, looking back at him, suddenly picturing her old house, her father’s head bent over the table as he graded papers, the fading afternoon light filtering into the living room. Her mother lying in a lounge chair on the lawn, a bored look on her face, flipping through the pages of a magazine. Things before—her old life—all that was starting to seem weirdly pale when she thought about it, like swimming through the shallow end of a pool. She didn’t know why thinking about it made her feel so uncomfortable. She climbed down the ladder and leaned against it, pressing her fingers against her eyes. “It was something else,” she said, not wanting to start the ‘maybe you should just go home’ conversation again. Whenever he talked like that, her palms started sweating, and she found herself crying, grabbing him frantically around the neck. She couldn’t understand how it had ended up like that, with her trying to convince him that she wanted to stay, when it had been him that was so desperate to have her come out here in the first place.

“Whatever,” he said now. “I’ll be in after a while.”
“Okay,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. She walked across the yard and climbed down the ridge to the river, stared into the water.

She had dreams about them a lot, too, weird ones that didn’t make sense. The other night she’d dreamed her mother had given birth, only the baby was hers, not her mother’s, Janice realized when it started flopping around, and it was strange, more like a fish than a baby, a big silver fish with a baby’s head and arms. It had flopped around on the floor, seeming so real that she’d leaped up out of bed, stumbled down the front steps and out of the house, thinking what?—thinking nothing—just running, her thin white robe tangling around her legs, until she tripped over a rock and found herself lying on the ground, sweat dripping from her face, her bare feet bruised and sore.

She touched her stomach. Maybe she’d just imagined it, she thought now, that fluttery feeling in her gut, but her abdomen had been heavy and achy the last week or so, and lying on the ground the other night, her breasts had felt tender. She’d been afraid before, that she’d been pregnant, but she was pretty sure there was a real baby in there this time, a tiny bean starting to grow inside her, she kept imagining, like a vine, shooting out leaves and wrinkled, winding tendrils.

When she mentioned it to Dan the other morning, he had rolled over in bed and lifted her top. Hefting one of her breasts, he circled her nipple with his tongue. “I knew it,” he said. “You’re boobs are bigger.”

“Dan!” she said. “What are we going to do? It costs tons of money to go to the hospital.”

He propped himself up on one elbow. “I could deliver a baby,” he said.
“Dan, I can’t—”

“What?” he interrupted. “I could. It would be so cool.” He rolled over on top of her, pushed her thighs apart with his knee. “To see a baby coming out of you.”

Then, seeing the look on her face, he flopped down next to her. “Just think about it for a minute.” He kissed her shoulder. “If we had a baby, he’d never even have to go there—” he waved his hand in the direction of Meade “—if he didn’t want to. He could just live out here, from the very start. In all of this.”

For a minute, she could see a little boy with dark curls running along next to Dan, his chubby arms swinging out from his body, the river spreading out behind them, the shadows of clouds scattered across the sunlit landscape. “What if it’s a girl?” she said.

“Even better.” He grinned. “I can always take you to the emergency room, if something goes wrong. We wouldn’t have to tell them your real name. They can’t refuse anyone there. No one would even have to know.”

_No one would even have to know. You trust me, don’t you?_ Janice walked along the rutted path, glancing up at the sky. He always seemed so convinced of his rightness that she found herself wanting to do the things he suggested. From the very start, it had been that way—when she got in his truck the first time, sleeping all night at his house the way he wanted her to, instead of going home. And later on, the two of them standing on a rock in the river, George and Amber watching from the bank, Amber’s arms crossed over her chest. _Christ’s blood was shed for you. The knife pressed into the skin. A small cut, an opening. This do in remembrance of me._ Her
heart pounding as she held out her arms, the look of concentration on Dan’s face as he fastened the wedding bracelets around her wrists.

Maybe he could deliver a baby, she thought. A shiver of excitement ran up her spine. She stared up at the sky again. It looked so close, sometimes, out here, it felt as if she reached into the blackness, the stars would swirl thickly around her hands. She looked up at it for a minute, then walked on into the dark.

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She pushed her way through the branches of an overhanging willow, glancing out at the river. She didn’t like being outside alone at night, but if she kept the river on her right, she could walk a couple miles before the trees started looking unfamiliar. She pushed down the top of an old barbed-wire fence and stepped over.

George kept talking about the possibility of putting in a composting toilet, but so far, it was just another one of his projects. There wasn’t any bathroom in the house now, just a cracked and graying bathtub near the back door. And she hated the outhouse, a wasp-ridden wooden structure, even more than she hated squatting behind a bush or tree. She hiked down into a small gully and looked back at the house. Sometimes Dan followed her. At first she had been embarrassed when she caught a glimpse of him disappearing into the trees just as she pulled her shorts back up, and took longer and longer routes, trying to find a place where she wouldn’t run into him. Then one time, as she pulled down her underwear, he came crashing through the bushes. “What are you doing?” she asked, looking up at him. He seemed a little out of breath. “I want to watch,” he said, his forehead reddening. “You do?” she said, and he nodded, quickly. “I already went,” she said, but the next time he followed her,
she didn’t say anything, and he just stood there, openly staring, while she trickled into
the dirt.

Now, feeling a dampness between her legs, she squatted, tugging her
underwear down. As she peered at them in the darkness, the bushes rustled. “Dan?”
she said. She twisted, looking behind her, but there was nothing to see except another
bat fluttering overhead, chittering through the air. She stood up, trying not to make
any noise, then glanced back at a movement in the bushes. Someone wearing a
brightly-colored shirt was crouching, half-hidden behind the trees. She took a step,
then half-fell, her panties tangled around her ankles.

Someone sniffed, as if they were crying, and Janice held her breath, listening.
“Hello?” she called out uncertainly into the dark, and then the crying sound came
closer, as the girl pushed through the bushes and ran toward her.

“I didn’t think there was anyone out here. Could you help me?” She was
shivering, clutching a backpack to her stomach.

“Are you all right?” she said, all in one breath. She stepped out of her
underwear, as if that’s what she’d been intending to do all along, pushing them
behind a bush with her toe.

“I know this is weird, but I can’t find my truck. It’s—” The girl glanced back,
as if she might see it among the bushes and trees. “I don’t know where it is,” she
said. Her long hair was tangled, and her skin looked blotchy in the moonlight, her
nose red from crying. “It’s so dumb. I don’t know what to do.”

Janice was trying not to look at her underwear, lying crumpled in the dirt. “Is
it a long ways from here?”
“Yes. I don’t know,” the girl said, miserably.

“You could come to the house with me,” she said. “My husband—” she started, then stopped. She looked around, half-expecting Dan or George or Amber to materialize out of the woods, tell her what she should say or do. She wasn’t ever on her own like this anymore. She felt her heart start to pound again, trying to think. It felt weird to even be talking to someone other than them. “Dan and George will help you . . . I’m sure they will, in the morning, you know, help you look for it,” she said. “Or I could, maybe.” The girl looked young to Janice, under her smeared makeup. Her jeans hung low on her narrow hips. “Is it wrecked? The truck, I mean? Could you drive it?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said, starting to sound desperate again.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find it.” They walked toward the house, the girl following slightly behind. Once she stumbled and grabbed onto the back of Janice’s shirt. “Will your parents be worried about you?” she asked, turning to glance at her. “Do you need to get in touch with them?”

The girl swiped her hand under her nose. “No,” she said, something defiant in her voice now. “I’m eighteen.”

Somehow she had known that’s what the girl would say. They walked on in silence. “We’re about the same age then,” Janice said, after a minute.

“Almost, anyway,” the girl said, quickly. “I’m seventeen. I’ll be eighteen in a couple months.”
"Oh," said Janice. She turned and pushed down the barbed wire so the girl could step over. "What's your name?"

"Zinnie," the girl said. "What's yours?"

**

"Wait here a minute," Janice said, as they approached the house. "Dan!" she called, climbing up the ladder. A brown spider had already spun its web from the top rung to the edge of the roof, and she watched it, hovering there, the strands of silk glimmering in the moonlight, then jumped as it began creeping toward her, its slender jointed legs moving rapidly across the web. "Dan!" she said again, but there was no response, just her own voice echoing in the night air. She stood there for a minute looking at the empty roof, then made her way slowly back down the ladder.

"He must be inside," she said to the girl. The girl stood awkwardly in the doorway while Janice walked past George and Amber, lying naked on a mattress in the living room. "Just a second," she said, running up the stairs. As she opened the bedroom door, the smell of weed floated toward her. Dan was asleep, curled up on a mattress on the floor, still wearing his jeans. "Dan," she said. "Why did you come in?" His arm twitched and he squinted up at her, then closed his eyes again.

"Dan. Are you stoned?"

She watched him for a minute, lying there, then went back down the stairs. "You can sleep here," she said, pointing to the couch. "What was your name again?"

"Zinnie," she said. "My real name's Zandra."

"Here's a blanket, if you need it."
Thank you.” The girl sat on the edge of the couch looking up at her. “Do they care? That I’m here?” She looked at George and Amber. “Don’t tell anyone, okay?” She sounded scared.

“Tell them what?”

“Never mind.” Her face fell, as if she were about to cry again.

“We’ll find your truck in the morning,” Janice said. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, but she didn’t sound convinced. She pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. She was still staring at the ceiling when Janice went up the stairs.

**

The sun was streaming in the window and she turned over on her side. “Dan,” she said, trying to open her eyes, but he didn’t answer. She squinted one eye. His side of the mattress was empty. She lay there for a minute, yawning, then let her eyes go shut again.

**

When she woke again, Dan was bending over the bed. “That girl downstairs,” he said, urgently. He paced back and forth across the room. “Why didn’t you tell me she was here?”

“I tried to.” She sat up, the events of the evening before flooding over her.

“You were sound asleep,” she started, but he had already bolted from the room. “I was trying to let you sleep,” she called after him. “I couldn’t just leave her out there in the woods all night. I didn’t know what to do.” The blanket Dan had carried up to the roof last night lay in the corner, covered with bits of broken tumbleweed. She got up and shook it out, then squatted to sweep up the dirt and weeds with her hands.
The floor creaked and Dan stuck his head back inside the door. “I found these outside,” he said, tossing her underwear at her. She could see the edge of a dark red stain on the crotch. “So you’re not pregnant, after all, right?” he said. “Right?” he repeated, when she didn’t say anything.

“I guess not,” she said, feeling somehow disappointed at his response.

“That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?” he said, and something crumbled inside her as he disappeared again, leaving her kneeling on the floor next to the bed.
CHAPTER 4

The house didn’t look like anything anyone could live in, Zinnie thought, every time she went outside. It looked like it was crumbling into pieces, would disintegrate piece by piece, if she even poked it with a broom. She had a sudden image of a house falling in on itself, as if it were being sucked into the ground. Boards cracked and glass splintered as the walls collapsed. A mattress tumbled down, then another, clothes and shoes and a mirror smashing against the breaking boards and a chest of drawers. She put her hand over her mouth. “How did that happen?” she imagined herself saying, her eyes on a pile of broken, exposed pipes. A bathtub crashed to the ground, and she watched as the big crossbeams broke and the roof caved in, first one side and then the other, leaving just a red brick chimney sticking up out of the rubble in the yard.

A crow flapped away into a nearby tree. She stared up at it, blinking. The windows were edged with newspaper, yellowed scraps fluttering in the breeze. Someone must have put it up years ago so they could paint, she thought, but now the white latex was peeling and worn, and the eaves were black with grime. When she’d climbed the ladder that was leaning against the front of the house the other day, she could see that the blackness was actually endless numbers of smashed and disintegrating insects, bits of wing and glistening shells flattened against the siding, plastered onto the old screens. The insects looked as though they had been here for centuries, maybe, hardened into a crust by fire and wind and floods. Looking at the
house now, she suddenly felt tired, and climbing back up the steps to the front porch, she collapsed into a moth-eaten chair, leaned her head onto her arms.

What's wrong with me? Talk to yourself. Think about something else besides the baby. She tried, but all she could see was that little bundle she'd left lying in the dirt, that wrinkled blue mouth. His tiny bowed legs, the way he'd pulled them up when he cried, waving his fists in the air. Her stomach cramped and she jumped up, ran down to the outhouse and slammed inside. Jabbing her fingers against her closed eyes, she cried, thumping her head against the wall. I'm going crazy, she thought, then knelt down and threw up into the stinking hole. She leaned back against the wall, cold sweat dripping down her face. Think about something else. She took a deep breath, and stumbling out of the outhouse, she ran across the yard, still trembling, and half-climbed, half-slid down the ridge to the river.

Janice. Think about Janice. Just for a minute. She took a deep breath, trying to picture Janice going up the stairs to bed last night, her back and shoulders very straight, as if she were aware Zinnie was watching her. Zinnie's mind veered back to the baby again, but she picked up a rock and threw it into the water, forcing herself to listen to the small splash it made. She picked up another rock, turned it over in her hands, rubbing the rough edges, then dropped it, looking at her red, sore fingertips.

Janice, she thought again. She'd been animated enough that first night, out under the moon, something shocked and open on her face—but by the next morning she seemed to have receded into a pale version of herself, as if she had turned slightly inward. Except when Dan was around—then she seemed suddenly more alive,
flopping her head back to laugh, making and remaking her ponytail with the black stretchy band she kept around her wrist. And the other night, when they were sitting outside by the river, George lined a row of bottle rockets up on the bank, and for a second, as the arcs of light sailed through the air, she leaned toward Zinnie, covering her ears with her hands, laughing as their arms bumped together, as if they were good friends, two high school girls at a fireworks show. Zinnie had felt okay for a few minutes then—the ache inside her chest dissolving, but a few minutes later, when Janice turned away again, the ache had come back, and Zinnie had run back to the house, flopped down on the couch in the living room, pulling the pillow over her head.

*You are now imitating Christ. You were naked before the eyes of all and were not ashamed, the image of the first born Adam.* The other morning she’d gotten up early—she’d hardly been able to sleep since she’d been there—and had looked out the window to see Janice on the bank of the river, with Dan and Amber and George. Dan was wading into the water, and as Zinnie watched, Janice let her robe fall from her shoulders, and followed him in, the sun shining on her long hair. George and Amber watched from the bank—everyone seemed to be watching, the whole world silent for a moment, as Janice let Dan lower her into the river, her nipples puckered rosily from the cold water as he brought her back up again, her hair streaming down her back.

And then it was Amber’s turn, then George’s.

Dan had suggested to Zinnie that she might want to come out there with them a day or two ago, but she had said, “I’m not doing that,” and Dan had looked steadily
at her for a minute, as if trying to see into her mind, then turned away. Now she pulled Janice’s notebook out of her pocket and read the words over again. *Most mornings, after breakfast, Amber and George greet each other, ritually, right after the dishes are done. In the sight of God, George says, as he slides Amber’s robe off her shoulders and lays it gently on the couch in the living room. In the eyes of God and Man. You are the witness to our love, he says, then plunges into her, his bony, hairy shanks on top of her white ones, a thirsty mountain goat seeking water.*

She’d spotted the small notebook in the kitchen, one morning when everyone was outside, and flipped it open, then after reading the name on the inside cover, quickly stuck it down the front of her pants. *Janice Evangeline Evans, in the Lord Jesus Christ,* it said in slanted, even handwriting, and Zinnie kept finding herself reading it over and over. Sometimes she found herself saying the phrases out loud, some sort of comfort in the words. *We drove in his small pick-up, through Meade, then parked on the side of Fancher Road, where there was hardly any traffic. Miles, we walked—out Green Brier, then onto Deer Flat, then we ran through the open fields, tripping over clumps of dirt and irrigation pipes and then on farther until a silent wave of coolness broke onto our faces and the moon was waiting, in the smooth water of the river. Spreading the blanket behind a clump of birch trees, he pushed me down, then bent over me, his hands hovering just above my forehead. I stared up at his palms, saw the calluses there, the bluish veins that traveled down toward his wrists. “Get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth.” He kissed the top of my head, then my nose, then my mouth. “There will I give thee my love.”* He was
breathing quickly and I swallowed, seeing his face so close to mine. When he kissed me, small hard mounds of rock or dirt poked through the blanket into my neck, but it didn't seem to matter. I wondered what time it was and looked at the sky, thinking maybe the position of the stars would tell me something, but I got lost after Orion's Belt and the Little Dipper, and when I squinted, the stars blurred into thick clusters, like someone had thrown out handfuls of hot sparks and they'd stuck to the black curtain behind.

Zinnie lifted her head and stared out at the river. She had no idea what to do, how she was ever going to go home again. She kept trying to imagine getting on a bus, riding back to McCammon—and then the thought of Sharon and Garrett and her mother and the baby would flood her mind, and a razor-like pain would tear at her stomach until she felt stunned and almost numb, like her insides had been ripped out. And then she would get up and go down into the kitchen, or hang out with Dan in the shed or the garden, trying to feel nothing, until the pain started again.

A small rabbit appeared from around the side of the house, hopping toward Zinnie, then froze, its ears quivering in the breeze. A second later it leaped off again, flying toward the desert to the west of the house, followed by the large white dog that had appeared mysteriously at the house the same night Zinnie had. "Dog!" Amber had shouted over and over the next day as the dog's tail whisked up over the top of the ridge, then disappeared again. "Boy dog! Come here. Come on, boy dog!" she'd called, and now that was his name. The rabbit darted out from behind a tumbleweed, and after a moment, Zinnie could see the dog's waving tail, haunches braced, as it bent its head to the ground.
Her heart began to pound again. Last night she’d dreamed she was carrying a little boy up the stairs in an old house, and he had to die, she’d decided in her dream, although she wasn’t sure why. She remembered putting the boy in a bag, except he was more like a picture in a magazine than a real boy, just a flimsy, slick piece of paper. But still, she had put him in the bag and tied the top shut tightly, then knew with a sickening lurch that once she had tied it shut, his air would be cut off, and he would definitely die.

She jumped up and ran down the bank of the river to a heap of large stones. The heap was about three feet high, the rounded stones piled unevenly on each other, the top covered with blackened, ashy marks. Nearby, the jawbone of a deer lay on the ground, some of the yellowing teeth scattered around it. Dan spent most of his time fishing—she’d even seen him in the dark, sometimes, waist deep in the river, or standing on a rock in the moonlight—but once when she looked out the window, she could just make out his bare shoulders as he knelt in front of the pile of stones, his head bowed, his hands clasped under his chin. She picked up one of the yellowed teeth and turned it over in her hand. She kept imagining Sharon looking at her, how her eyes would follow her through the halls at school. She couldn’t even imagine being back at school, actually. She couldn’t imagine doing anything, ever again, except living out at this house, with these weirdos, trying not to feel like she was going to die every day.

She dropped the tooth back into the dirt and walked slowly up the ridge to the house, smoothing her fingers over the pulse in the base of her throat. She shaded her eyes and looked out at the horizon. You could see so far out here. Way off to the
left, sprinklers were rotating in a field of sugar beets, and even from here she could see the big jets of water circling around, shooting out in a huge, pulsing stream. She remembered the year she’d topped corn—she’d been fourteen, too young to get a job anywhere else—and all she had was a gallon jug of water tied to the belt loop of her jeans, bouncing heavily against her leg as she moved slowly down the rows, reaching up to grab the long silky tassels. Pop, pop, pop, pop. She could hear that sound, the tassel pulling away from the stalk, even after she was in bed at night, and see the bees and earwigs, swarming over the leaves. She and the other workers—almost all teenagers—had to wear thick brown gloves, and even then, the bees often stung right through them. They’d be inside the tassels, and there wasn’t time to search through each one looking for insects. They just had to grab and pull, grab and pull, grab and pull, up one row and down another. If they went too slow or stopped to get a drink before break time, the crew boss, a woman with short dark hair, would shout, “move it along!” “Move your buns, honey,” she said once to Zinnie, standing so close Zinnie could see the beads of sweat forming on the pores of her nose and the comb marks in her slick hair.

They worked from six in the morning to eight or nine at night sometimes, with just one real break, at noon when they stopped for an hour, piled onto the back of a truck, and drove into town to eat at The Hungry Onion. That was the only time all day she got to use a bathroom. The rest of the day, she had to squat quickly in the field when Mrs. Shannon wasn’t looking, and after a while, she dreaded hearing the sound of her friend Bryce’s car honking for her at five-fifteen every morning. Still, it was better than staying at home all day, riding her old blue Stingray around the
neighborhood, nothing to do except wait for Sharon to get done babysitting her younger brother and sister so they could go to the park, and then sit around there doing nothing. Twist around and around on the swings, until they had to lie flat in the dirt, the sky spinning over their heads. Once Sharon twirled around until she threw up, Zinnie remembered, then cried because she was afraid her mother would yell at her for messing up her new white shorts.

Now Zinnie walked slowly through the tall grass and weeds. The sunflowers near the edge of the garden were covered with small fuzzy stickers, their huge tops drooping and bobbing. She rubbed her finger over one of the sticky stalks, then pushed her way into the tall corn. It loomed high over her head and she felt lost, suddenly, surrounded by the tall plants. A ringing sound began rising in her ears, and she clapped her hands over them, but it was still there, somehow sucking up all the stillness of the air. Move your buns, honey. As she stepped to the left, something squished under her bare foot, and she jumped away, pushing one cornstalk completely over in her haste. A small dead bird lay spread-winged and half-disintegrated on the ground. She nudged it with her foot and it fell apart, leaving small thin bones, a beak, and feathers that poked out at odd angles. An image of Cody's small face, his waxy eyelids and fuzzy, fine hair, came into her mind, and turning, she stumbled back the way she came, pushing her way through the crinkly stalks and leaves until she reached open ground, then ran into the house, closing the door quickly behind her.

**

Janice walked through the sagebrush and thistles toward the old railroad bridge, a few hundred yards from the house, glancing from time to time at the dark
heads gliding along the edge of the river. Muskrats, Dan had told her. If you moved too fast, they’d be gone in an instant, sinking under the water to their burrows deep in the soft earth along the banks. Sometimes she saw beavers swimming along, as big as dogs, their flat tails trailing behind in the green water.

In the shade of the giant metal rafters, she took a baggie from her pocket, rolled a joint and sealed it with her tongue. If Kelly could see me now, she thought, watching a flock of ducks take off, quacking loudly, their wings beating a V against the sky. She took a hit, then blew out a white stream, watched it swirl over her head. She smiled, imagining Kelly sucking in her stomach and pulling her shoulders forward to imitate Zinnie’s thin arms and slouchy way of standing. *I don’t care what you think,* she’d say in a sarcastic voice, rolling her eyes. *My name is Zandra. I’m seventeen.*

Thinking of Kelly, longing clutched at her throat. She flicked her lighter on and a tall piece of grass flamed up, then petered out into a thin ribbon of smoke. This morning, as she’d passed through the hallway, she’d seen Zinnie leaning against the doorframe of the living room. Dan sat on one of the sagging couches, flipping through a deck of cards. “So this isn’t really your house? You’re just squatting here?” Zinnie said. Dan glanced up at her. “Yeah. What do you think about that?” he said, and hearing the eagerness in his voice, Janice hesitated for a minute, wanting to hear what else he would say, then, her cheeks burning, went quickly out the front door and down the steps.

*Don’t be like this,* she said to herself. *You don’t have to do this.* She usually ended up regretting the times she got mad at Dan—it always seemed right at the
moment, but later, when the feelings faded away, her anger seemed silly, and she’d wonder why she’d had been so upset. Why can’t you just relax? Dan said to her sometimes. Just because Amber and I chose for her to be with George doesn’t mean anything about you and me. She crouched at the edge of the water and peered at the pool of minnows darting back and forth under the clear water, suddenly remembering once when she was small, going on a long hike with her father. “Duck Lake,” he said when they reached their destination. “Look how clean this water is. See those minnows? I’ll give you ten dollars if you can catch one.” He had looked at her seriously and she’d spent a long time bending over the water, trying to scoop up one of the tiny silver fish, while he leaned against a rock, reading a book. Finally he said it was time to go, and she plunked down beside him, almost crying with frustration, but he seemed to have forgotten all about the minnows. “What’s the matter with you?” he said, looking at her in astonishment. “Look at those mountains over there. Aren’t they pretty?” he said, but she had just cried harder.

She sometimes felt that when she was a little girl, he hadn’t quite understood that she was a person, but thought of her more as a small animal, like a pet, or a doll that could just be plunked down here or there, given some small toy to keep her happy.

She swiped her hand through the water and the fish scattered. Why didn’t he try to figure out what was wrong with me? she thought. Why couldn’t I just tell him? Janice peeled off her shirt and jeans and, wading in, swam out beyond the bridge, the blood pumping through her veins. The water flowed east, away from the house, and she swam until her arms were aching and tired, then turned
over and floated on her back, letting the greenish water flow through her hair, over her chest and shoulders. She stared at the little golden hairs on her arm. They gleamed in the sunlight. Everything felt intensified, the wetness of the water, the brightness of the sun. I’m high, she said out loud, but the thought wouldn’t quite register. A dribble of water filled her mouth and she coughed a little, choking, then lifted her head and stared at the bridge, which was growing smaller and smaller in the distance. *In a minute, I’ll swim back,* she said to herself. *In just a minute,* she thought, then lay her head back in the cool water, staring up at the clouds.

**

He’d held his hands just above Zinnie’s head and prayed, saying some words that sounded like Latin—*Deus est amor, Amor est Deus, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost*—and then they smoked pot together and lay on their backs, looking at the sky, and everything seemed extra, she thought, extra blue and shimmery, the air and the sky and the water. There was so much of it, sky and water and hills! And a fish he’d caught with a round black eye. Zinnie stared at it and it stared back at her.

“Where’s Janice?” she asked, after a while. It seemed like hours ago that they’d seen her hurrying out of the house, a flustered look on her face. She looked out at Amber, who was swimming through the water in her white panties and bra.

“I don’t know. You worried about it?” He rolled over and gave her a long look. “Because you don’t have to be,” he said, then got up and climbed over the ridge toward the house.

“Where are you going?” she called after him.
But he acted like he didn’t hear her, just walked on, tossing his cigarette butt on the ground.

She glanced out at Amber, stroking back and forth between the two poles George had stuck into the riverbed, then turned and looked up toward the house. She couldn’t stand it when Dan walked away from her, when anyone did. She couldn’t stand being by herself with the thoughts in her head. There was a blackish line under her fingernail, and putting her index finger in her mouth, she chewed away the dirt, then spat the slight grit on her tongue onto the ground. “Dan!” she called, then jumped up and followed him up the ridge. Two quails scratched in the dirt near the house, the crowns on their heads bobbing, but Dan was nowhere in sight. Scuffling through the dirt, she ran at the quails, watched them scatter into the air, then slid her back down the rough side of the house so that she was sitting in the dirt between two giant sunflowers. She stared out at the black ribbon of road that led off through the desert. Once when he and Janice drove off for a while in his dusty brown pickup, she started feeling panicky and walked down to the main road, watching for almost an hour until she finally saw them coming, then ran back to the house, flopped down on the couch as if she’d been taking a nap. When she asked where they’d gone, Dan acted like it wasn’t any big deal. “Just into town. We had to make a beer run.” But from the look Janice gave her, she had the feeling there was more to it than that. She jabbed her fingernail into one of the sunflower stalks. There were dry seeds scattered around on the ground and she crunched one between her teeth, then picked up a rock and tossed it at the door to the root cellar.
The other day, Janice had asked her to get the meat grinder, but when she couldn’t find it in the cupboard, she’d gone outside to the cellar, thinking that’s where it might be. When she opened the heavy door, Dan was down there, sitting in a chair. “What are you doing?” she’d asked, peering at him from the wooden steps.

“Nothing,” he said. “What are you doing?”

She climbed down the stairs. The cellar was quiet, and in the pool of light, she could see long white tendrils curling out from the dirt wall behind him.

“Are you guys . . . I thought you said there was food down here,” she finished, her voice trailing off as she looked around. Two kerosene lanterns hung from the ceiling and another one burned on the edge of a table, which was jammed into the north end of the room. Piles of magazines and newspapers were flopped underneath it and small items cluttered the top, small plastic tubes, wax paper envelopes with white powder spilling from them, a box of coffee filters. In the opposite corner, a hot plate and propane tank were propped near a metal stand and a big red bowl. A few jars of fruit sat on the shelves lining the south wall and on the other side of the room, green plants sprouted from earthy-looking containers.

He looked at her for a second, then turning, snapped one of the white tendrils and sniffed it, then bit off the tender tip with his front teeth. “Want some?” he asked, holding it out.

“What is it?”

He was looking at her, but his eyes seemed distant, and a little dazzled, as if he were staring into the sun. “It’s willow, trying to find water.” He leaned his head back against the wall, then got up and came over beside her, ran one finger down her
arm. "The early Christians didn’t think there was anything wrong with nudity. Did you know that?"

She looked at him, shook her head.

"Jesus was baptized naked. People hung out like that, men, women, children. The way Christians act now, like being naked is a sin? Those people who go to church every Sunday? It wasn’t like that when it started."

She tried to swallow, but her throat felt dry.

"So you gonna let me baptize you pretty soon?"

She could feel her neck getting hot and turned to go. "Is that like confession?" she asked, and when he started laughing, she ran back up the stairs.

"I can’t find it," she said, coming into the kitchen, but Janice had gotten the meat grinder herself, was poking chunks of venison down into the metal funnel. "I didn’t know where to look." Her throat felt clotted and tight.

"It was on the back porch," Janice said, without looking up.

Now Zinnie turned and stared out at the river. Amber was floating face down, hanging limply in the water. "Hey Amber," she said as she climbed back down the ridge. "What are you doing?" A fly circled slowly through the air near Zinnie’s face, and she waved it away.

Amber splashed over onto her back. "Who were you talking to up there?"

"No one."

"Why did you go up there then?" she asked, as she slowly tressed water
"I just wanted to." Zinnie sighed and looked off in the other direction. She could vaguely hear George’s voice, drifting down from the direction of the garden. "Are you going inside pretty soon? There’s nothing to do out here."

Amber dunked her head under the water and held it there for a long time, then finally burst up to the surface again, gasping for air. She climbed up on the bank and sat down to pull on her sandals, then walked ahead of Zinnie toward the house. “Why are you so nervous all the time?” Her damp cotton panties were stuck to her skin, the moons of her bottom dark with gritty sand. Inside the house, she climbed the stairs to her room. “If you met me at a club, would you want to go out with me?” she said, turning to look at Zinnie. “You know, a bar?”

“You mean if I were a guy?” Zinnie said.

“Whatever. I used to be a pole dancer in Vegas. But then I came here and got religion.” She clinked her bracelets together and smiled, a little bitterly. “I used to be with Dan. That’s where I met him. In Vegas.”

“In a club?”

“At the hospital. He was a security guard. But now I’m with George.” She gave a short laugh, then touched Zinnie’s head. “You have pretty hair. What happened was my mom dumped me off at the emergency room one time. She told them I tried to kill her.” She laughed. “I never did that.” She turned as they reached her bedroom door. “Have you ever been in one of those places? Where they try to tell you you’re crazy?”

Something about the way Amber’s voice went on and on made Zinnie’s chest feel tight. She shook her head.
They said I did meth, but I think somebody must have laced my weed with it. They just lie in there, say whatever they want. Anyway, Dan was the only one who was nice to me there. He helped me get out. And then we came up here. Are you hungry?” she asked, abruptly. “I eat and eat but I can never get filled up.” She lifted a handful of Zinnie’s hair, let it fall through her fingers. “I know something you don’t. It’s about a baby,” she said. She put her finger to her lips.

“What? What do you mean?”

“Shhh. Don’t tell Janice I told you.” She caressed Zinnie’s face, then went into her room and shut the door. After a second, she opened the door a crack and pressed her eye against it. “Wait for me,” she said. “Okay?”

Zinnie nodded, leaning her head against the doorframe. The baby. She could hear Amber moving around inside the room, humming to herself. What if they’d already found him?

She pounded on the door. “I’ll be right back. I’m going... I’m going to look for something to eat,” she called to Amber, then ran down the stairs and out the front door, skirting around the east side of the house. She shaded her eyes. There were miles of dry-looking trees and bushes, up and down the bank of the river. She still couldn’t believe she’d just left him out there. What if he wasn’t really dead? What if he was just asleep or something, or sick, maybe? The thought that she’d been trying to keep from coming into her mind sprang at her now, and she sank onto the ground, her armpits sweating. He was, though, she knew he was, but she kept having this dream that she was holding three skeletons in her arms, only they were somehow alive, with large eyes opening and closing, and she was trying desperately to think
how to make them better, how to make them well again, and there was nothing to do. She bent forward, her face pressed into her hands. She couldn’t stand to think about it. Her eyes and nose ran wetly into her hands and there was a roaring in her ears. She tried to breathe more normally and finally the roaring subsided a little and she sat up, slowly becoming aware of Dan’s and George’s voices. She wiped her face and crawled behind a clump of bushes. She peered through the leafy branches and saw George kneeling near the tall wooden pole next to the shed, tearing off strips of tape, winding it around the arms of his antenna.

She watched him and Dan, trying to see what they were doing. George had hardly been speaking to her since she refused to join them the other morning in their communal bath, or whatever it was. She used her shirt to wipe off her face again and stared out at them. It didn’t sound like they were talking about a baby, but George looked angry. She closed her eyes for a second, thinking about the other night. They’d all been drinking and ended up in the living room, Zinnie and Amber each on a couch and Dan and Janice on a mattress on the floor. George had gone upstairs, but at some point he came back down, and Zinnie had awakened in the darkened room to see him on top of Amber. “Come on baby,” he’d said, in a whisper, the knuckled bones of his spine pale in the moonlight. “Come on.” Zinnie lay there, the blankets pulled up around her, trying not to move or even breathe.

As he fumbled at Amber’s thighs, pushing them apart, her arm slid over the side of the couch, and Zinnie could see that her mouth was hanging slightly open. George tried to flop her arm back onto the couch cushion, but it slid off again. “Amber,” he whispered, but she didn’t reply. “Baby.” He kissed her, sucking at her
lips for a long time, then finally sighed and rolled off of her. “Fine,” he said. “Be a
passed out drunk.” As he stumbled through the scattered beer bottles and headed
back upstairs, he glanced over at the couch where Zinnie lay. She closed her eyes
quickly, but not before he saw her looking. “Hey,” he said, thickly. “What are you
staring at?” “Nothing,” she said, her eyes tightly shut.

Now his voice drifted through the air. “I just think it’s a little weird that we
couldn’t find any truck,” he was saying. He tossed the roll of black tape on the
ground, and picking up a screwdriver, strode over to the edge of the garden. The
muscles in his shoulders strained under his overall straps as he began prying at the
blades of the rototiller. He glanced up at Dan, who had his back to Zinnie.

“Maybe somebody stole it. Or maybe somebody just dumped her off,” Dan
said. George straightened up and looked at him, the sunlight reflecting off his
glasses.

“What, her and that dog?” He crouched down and began jabbing at the
rototiller again.

Dan put his hands in the pockets of his tattered shorts. “What are you trying
to do to that thing? Kill it?” He watched George for a minute. “Maybe she
parachuted in,” he said. “From one of those fighter planes like they used in World
War II?” He made a noise like machine gun fire juttering from an airplane.

“Right,” said George, shaking his head. “I’m serious. What are we going to
tell the cops if they show up out here, looking for her?”

“I don’t know. Say she’s supposed to be here. Say she’s our cousin.”

“And that you’re fucking her? Should we tell that to the police, too?”
Dan walked off toward the house, then turned back. “So what if I am? You jealous?”

“Yeah right,” he muttered. “I have Amber, remember? You gave her to me,” he shouted after him. Zinnie crouched down lower, her cheeks blazing, as George jerked the starter cord and started into the garden, his arms vibrating as he shoved the rototiller through the dirt. A bee buzzed toward her head, and she jumped up, walking fast toward the house, trying not to look at George, but when the rototiller died, she glanced back. “Nothing seems to be working very well around here lately,” he said, loud enough for her to hear, as he squatted beside it. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him stare at her for a moment, then throw the screwdriver down and stride toward the shed. As soon as he was out of sight, she ran quickly toward the house.

Dan was leaning against the porch railing, a cup of coffee in his hand. He said nothing as she hurried up the steps, just looked at her intently, his blue eyes squinting in the bright light. He had taken off his shirt and his chest and shoulders shone with sweat.

She paused with her foot on the top step, his slightly spicy, pungent smell drifting toward her. “There’s lots of bees out there.” She waved her arm vaguely in the direction of the garden. As she talked, a large furry bumblebee droned by and lit on the purple morning glory that wound its way around the railing.

He laughed. “They won’t hurt you. A little sting, maybe. Did you see the tomato plants out there? They’re Big Boys. You can’t buy tomatoes like that anywhere. They’re so sweet, they’re like strawberries, almost.” He came up the
steps and propped his arm on the wall. "Did you notice the way the soil is heaped up into little hills out there? They’re called spherical soil antenna mounds. They make it so the sun reaches all the plants equally.” He laughed a little, then leaned forward. “We could feed the whole world, George says.”

She felt her throat tighten, and swallowing, shrugged past him into the house, then turned when she heard the floorboards of the porch creaking behind her. “I’m not scared of any fucking bees,” she said, standing in the doorway. A sudden picture came into her mind of Dan, kneeling beside a tomato plant in the garden, his outspread hands hovering over its leaves, his lips moving silently, his face turned upward.

He grinned. “They make good honey. Janice puts a little in her lotion sometimes. Just a drop or two.” He turned and walked back down the steps and across the yard.

“I’m not afraid,” she shouted after him.

“It’s okay,” he said. He turned for a moment, then lifted his hand in a wave.

Blinking her eyes, she looked up at the ceiling to keep the tears from overflowing, then swallowed, leaning her head against the doorframe.

**

The fire on the beach blazed up as Dan threw another bundle of dry brush onto it. Janice yawned, leaning her head against a tree. Earlier that afternoon, she’d opened her eyes to find herself lying in an old rowboat, half-buried in the sand, almost a mile from the house, and had to walk all the way back, her wet hair flopping against the sides of her sunburned neck and face.
She slapped at a mosquito whining around her ear. If her arms weren’t so sore, she’d think it had been a dream—finding herself in the middle of the river, not high anymore, just exhausted, her arms growing numb and achy in the cold water. When her head slipped under, something inside her felt relieved for a second or two—I’m just so tired, she remembered thinking, as she sank, before the panic set in, and she began flailing wildly. When she felt something sharp raze against her hand, she grabbed on, pulling herself along through the water from rock to rock, then finally found her hands in soft sand, realized she was floundering through shallow water. She didn’t remember climbing into the rowboat, just waking up, her hands stinging, even her eyelids sunburned, almost crusted shut with sand.

Maybe it was a dream, she thought. Maybe everything was a dream. On the opposite side of the fire from her, Zinnie stood hugging herself with her arms, staring at the fire. When Janice looked at her, she glanced up, then looked away again.

“Why is everyone so quiet?” George leaned toward the fire, his glasses glinting in the light. He tossed a pinecone into the fire and it snapped and popped, bursting into flame.

“It’s the ionosphere. We’re supposed to get a storm tonight. Makes everybody tense.” Dan leaped out in front of Zinnie. “See?” he said, laughing when she jumped.

“I’m hungry.” Amber looked at over at George. “When are going to eat?”

“You’re always hungry,” he said. He turned away from her. “I heard you had quite a swim, Janice.”
She tried to smile, but yawned instead. “So what were you guys doing all afternoon?” She glanced at Zinnie, but she was still looking at the fire.

“I was trying to get some work done. I don’t know about anybody else.”

George looked at Dan. “I have to figure out some way to get my antenna up on the pole. What I need is a tilt-over tower. Instead of an old utility pole.” He rubbed his foot in the dirt. “Or somebody to climb it for me,” he said. “How about it, buddy?”

“I dragged the damn thing all the way out here,” said Dan. He held up his bottle of Budweiser and looked through the dark glass, squinting one eye as if he were peering through a gun sight. “Why don’t you get somebody who knows how?”

“Like who?” George said, rubbing the back of his neck. “That pea-headed kid who works at IGA? What’s wrong with that guy, anyway? His head is like the size of a lemon. Or, hey, how about Zinnie over there? I’ll make some girl climb a sixty-foot pole.”

“That pea-headed kid is old, like thirty-eight or something. He just looks like a kid. Zinnie’s could probably go right up, though,” he said, turning to grin at her.

“I bet she could,” said George, tossing another pinecone into the fire.

“I know how,” Amber said. “I could do it.”

“Won’t someone notice? I mean—a big antenna like that sticking up in the air?” Zinnie said, looking at George.

“That’s what I’ve been telling him. It’s to make contacts,” Dan said. “He thinks he could make more contacts that way.”

“My dad has a ham radio,” Janice said.

“Oh yeah,” Dan said, laughing a little. “Would he want to buy some weed?”
George gave Dan a look. “You just don’t like it because it wasn’t your idea. It’s better than standing around on Vista Avenue in Boise all day. Or driving down to Tijuana or Juarez,” he went on. “Better than a guy who tried to break your arm.”

Dan glanced at Zinnie. “I have a friend down in Juarez who helps me out sometimes. Raúl.”

“Yeah,” said George. “Dan broke his arm.”

“For real?” said Zinnie.

“Shut up,” Dan said to George, but he was grinning. “He was hanging onto the door of my truck. I just drove away, that’s all,” he said to Zinnie.

George laughed. “Yeah, with his arm attached.”

Dan pinched the joint in his fingers and put it between his lips. A wisp of smoke trailed up into the darkening sky.

Janice glanced up. Clouds had begun to gather, half-covering the moon.

“This is good stuff. Better than the last bunch,” Dan said. He nudged the logs in the fire with his foot, then squatted to poke at them with a stick. Zinnie crouched down beside him, holding her hands out toward the fire.

“I could climb the pole,” Amber said, picking up a beer from the table. She slit her eyes at George. “You don’t have to let her do everything.”

“Hey Dan, remember that woman you met down there? That nun or whatever? Sister Cecelia?”

“She wasn’t a nun,” Dan said.

Amber chugged the rest of her beer, then picked up another one and walked down to the edge of the water. She tipped the bottle back, swaying a little as she
drank it, tossed the bottle onto the sand. Peeling off her black tank top, she unhooked her bra, then turned slowly in a circle, her arms over her head. Her nipples were dark and pierced with small gold rings, so that they stood out from her breasts.

“George, I want to dance,” she said, the jewel in her belly button winking in the firelight. “Come dance with me. Someone dance with me.”

“What are you naked for?” George said, shaking his head. “Put your shirt back on.” He picked up another pinecone and threw it at Dan. “You could at least help,” he said. “The antenna’s pretty much done, now. All I have to do is join the last couple element wires to the arms.”

“What, goddammit?”

“I’ll do it.” Dan made his way over to Amber and began dancing, his eyes closed, his hands in his pockets. “What about that guy with the crane? What was his name? Darren?”

“He wants two hundred bucks,” George said.

“That’s nothing compared to what you’re going to make, though, right?”

George shook his head, took a swallow of beer. “Fuck yeah,” he said. “Yeah. That’s right.”

Dan laughed, put his hands on Amber’s waist.

“Hey now,” George said. He came over beside Amber and Dan. “Hey,” he said again, trying to shove Dan away.

“Stop it, George. I want to dance with Dan now,” she said, putting her arms around his neck. She pressed herself against him.
“Hey Zinnie,” Dan said. “You come too.”

“Yeah,” said Amber. “We’ll all dance.” She shrugged away from Dan and pulled Zinnie over beside them.

“What are you doing?” Zinnie said. She swung her arms, dancing awkwardly for a minute, then covered her face with her hands. “I can’t dance,” she said, laughing.

“George, where’s your radio?” Amber asked. “We need some tunes.”

“I’ll go get it,” Janice said, stiffly. She started up the ridge. “Dan, could I talk to you for a minute, please?” she said, then turned back to see Amber grabbing Zinnie, sliding her hands under her shirt, pulling it up over her chest. “You have to take it off to dance,” she said. “You have to take your clothes all off.” Janice caught a glimpse of Zinnie’s breasts in the moonlight, freckled and pale, before she snatched her shirt back down. “What do you think you’re doing!”

“Look, George.” Amber turned to him. “Did you see that? She’s not wearing a bra. I told you so. We were having a little argument earlier,” she said to Zinnie.

In the light from the fire, Janice could see that a red flush had spread from George’s neck up onto his face. “Holy Christ.” He glanced up at Zinnie. “I’m really sorry.”

Zinnie turned aside, brushing angrily at her cheek.

Amber turned to him. “You are not sorry! You are such a liar! You lie, all the time you lie. You wanted to see her.”

A crack of thunder echoed through the air, and George leaped up from the table, strode down to the edge of the river.
"Come back here. Don’t walk away from me!" Amber ran after him, slapped him on the arm. “You think her titties are prettier than mine are, don’t you?” she said. “Don’t you. You do.”

“What’s wrong with you?” George grabbed her hand and pushed her away, then swung around and headed down the beach. Amber ran after him, and leaping up on him, grabbed him around the neck, pummeling his shoulders and back. “Knock it off,” he said, as his glasses flew off onto the sand. He pushed her down, grappling with her as they rolled into the water, pulling and slapping at each other.

Amber choked and sputtered, and George crawled away, feeling around in the dirt with his hands.

“You don’t like me anymore,” Amber choked out. “Do you? Nobody likes me. Not Dan, not you, not anyone.” She jumped up, grabbed another beer and ran down the bank of the river toward the pole, which was sticking up beyond the ridge. “I’m going to climb the pole,” she shouted. She ran across the sand and up over the ridge toward the tool shed. “She doesn’t get to,” she shouted back at them, wrapping her arms around the pole. She lifted her foot high to the steel spike that stuck out from the side and heaved herself up.

Finally locating his glasses, George shoved them back on. He stared at Amber for a minute, then looked at Dan. “I’m going for a walk,” he said, starting off in the opposite direction, his hands shoved in his pockets.

“George, wait,” Dan called after him.

Janice looked over at Amber, who had climbed several feet up and was hanging onto the pole, gripping it with her knees.
“Hey, you guys,” she said, laughing. As she waved her bottle of beer, it slipped from her hand and crashed to the ground. She stared at the broken bottle for a minute, as if she wasn’t sure how it had gotten there, then grabbed onto the pole with both arms and lifted her foot to the next rung.

Dan stared up at her.

“I’m going up,” she called out. “Climbing the big pole!”

“Dan, go over there,” Janice said, watching her climb. “She’s twenty feet in the air!” A streak of light flashed through the dark sky, and she glanced up. As she watched, another one blinked through the sky, a tiny bright snake of light that disappeared almost before she saw it.

“Hey,” Dan said. “Did you see that? It’s a shooting star!”

“It looked like lightning to me,” Janiee said. “The storm’s coming.” The lightning zigzagged across the sky again, this time in bigger strokes, and in the flashes of light, Janice could see Amber clinging to the pole.

“Hey Amber, can you see the comet from up there?” Dan shouted.

“Dan!” Janice said, but he had already run halfway up the ridge.

“Hey Amber!” he called.

“Tell her to come down!” Janice said. There was a lump in the pit of her stomach. “She’s going to get struck!”

“I just want her to take a look,” he said.

As Janice watched, Amber waved, then grabbed the pole again as if she were about to slip. “Dan! Do something!”

“What? She’s all right,” he said.
"No she’s not! Why are you doing this?" Janice turned away, sat down near the fire and leaned her head on her knees to hide the tears coming into her eyes. She could feel Zinnie looking at her.

"Hey Dan. Dan!" George ran up to them on the sand. "Come here a second."

"George, Amber is up on that pole!" Janice said.

George glanced at her, then turned back to Dan. "It’ll just take a minute," he said. He sounded tense.

Dan glanced at Janice. "We should head in," he said, holding out his hand, palm up. "It’s starting to rain, anyway." He picked up a shovel and started scooping dirt onto the fire.

"Dan!" Janice said.

"She’ll come down when she wants to," he said. "What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Dan, I’m serious," said George. "Will you please come here for one minute? I have to show you something."

"What is it, George?" Janice said. She glanced at Zinnie, who was fiddling with her shoelace, her face pale and pinched-looking. "Should I get the flashlight?"

"Just Dan," George snapped.

Zinnie stood up and started toward the house. "Why are you all staring at me?" she said, looking back at Janice, then ran up over the ridge, disappearing into the dark.

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Janice tried to lift her eyelids, but they were heavy and she felt as if she were coming up a long, long way, as if she had sunk into the mattress and now she had to swim up and out. Desperately, she kicked the covers off and sat up, gulping in the cool air that blew through their open window.

Dan stood at the end of the bed, the light from the candle in his hand flickering over his face. “It’s a boy,” he said.

“A boy?” Janice said, trying to connect the words he had just said with some sort of meaning. The baby. He must mean the baby. She lay back down, put her hand on her abdomen. Only she wasn’t pregnant anymore, was she? Or had that been part of the dream too?

“She seems pretty upset,” Dan said. “Zinnie, I mean.”

“Where is she?” Something had happened but she wasn’t sure what. She raised up on one elbow. “Who’s that in the hall?” She peered around behind him, trying to see. “Is it Amber? Is she all right?”

He glanced around. “Listen to me. I’m going to stay downstairs for a while, with Zinnie. Amber’s fine. She’s asleep, finally. George is too.”

Oh. George. George had found something out in the brush near the road, a baby, at least the remains of a baby. “It’s so weird,” she said, then remembering the glimpse she’d had of the grubby, blood-stained blanket, realized that wasn’t the right word at all.

He held up his candle. Something behind him moved, flickered away into the dimness of the hall. “George thinks a coyote must have got it. Anyway, go back to
sleep. I just wanted to tell you what was going on, so you wouldn’t be worried.” His voice sounded slightly husky, as if he were asking her a favor.

“Why are you talking like that?”

“You’re half asleep. I’ll be back up after a while,” he said, then went out, shutting the door behind him.

She felt herself drifting back off, into the dreamy silence of the night, then jerked awake again. “She isn’t staying, is she?” she said. But no one answered and after a few minutes, she sank back into sleep.
CHAPTER 5

Inside the mud hut, the dirt was cool under Zinnie’s legs. She peeked out through one of the chinks in the walls as George wheeled his motorcycle over, shoved the kickstand down. He’d built the hut, a framework of timber and woven twigs, to hold the rest of his ham radio equipment, but this morning, she’d seen him emerging from it, his hair sticking up, red marks imprinted on his cheek. When he meandered off behind a clump of bushes, began fumbling with his pants, she ran to the hut and crawled inside.

Now she watched as he peered at the underside of his motorcycle, tinkering with it, then stretched out full-length, her arms under her head, stared at the sun filtering through the roof. She could see why George would want to sleep out here—the smell of dirt, the goldy-brown light scattered over the ground. The feeling of being inside where no one could see you.

Something about it reminded her of when she was younger—sometimes, when she couldn’t go to sleep, she’d kneel on the pillow, and peek out at the man next door, Shane Marks, as he jogged around his large back yard, pounding around and around behind his tall clapboard fence. She could just barely see the top of his head, she remembered—he had long hair, but he always wore a baseball cap and she could see it bobbing up and down behind the fence. She usually drifted off to sleep to the sound of his footsteps, but one time, when she woke around midnight, he was still out there. She could hear his heavy shoes, thump, thump, thump, louder, louder, then,
gradually quieter, muffled in the long grass, pounding, pounding, and she pressed her face against the screen, listening, trying to hear something that would tell her what was wrong. There was something, she could tell. The next day, after he’d roared away on his motorcycle, she walked around through the alley, and peeked over the back gate. There was nothing to be seen, though, just a messy yard, tall with weeds and grass, some old tires leaning against the garage. She hesitated for a minute, then unlatched the gate and ran up to one of the windows. It was dark inside, and all she could see was a chest of drawers and an open closet with a few hangers and a bare light bulb dangling down. There was another window, but it was higher up and when she dragged a stump of wood over to it and climbed up, there was nothing to see, just a shade that was pulled down all the way. She plunked down in an old lounge chair on the patio, ran her fingers over the cracked flowered cover, then leaned her head back, wondering where he’d gone. It seemed like her eyes had only been closed for a few minutes when she heard the front door slam shut. She sat up with a start and ran for the gate, but he caught her as she was squeezing through. “Hey,” he said, grabbing the back of her shirt. Then, “oh,” recognizing her. “You live next door, don’t you?”

“I lost my ball,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Oh yeah?” he said, glancing around. “I don’t see it.”

“I guess I lost it somewhere else,” she said, then pushed past him and ran home. A few days later, when she saw a light on in the bedroom, she dug her old soccer ball out of a box in the garage and ran to his gate. She was drumming her
fingers on the metal arms of the lounge chair when he came outside, a cigarette in his hand.

"Hey," he said, laughing, as if he were only a little surprised to see her there. "So you found it."

Propping her knees up on top of the ball, she looked at him. "Can I try one of those?"

"Your mom smokes, doesn’t she? Why don’t you ask her?" he said, holding it just out of her reach.

"Cause she wouldn’t give me one," she’d said. Grinning, she grabbed for it.

"Whoa there," he said. "Hold on a second." He pulled a new one from his pocket, then squatted beside her. He lit it, then took one puff and handed it over. "A gentleman always gives you one of your own," he said. A strand of hair fell over one of his eyes and he brushed it back. "Don’t just take some guy’s leftovers. Okay?"

She was fifteen the first time he invited her in—it was the fall after Papa Newman started coming over to visit her mother—and she remembered how she and Shane had sat on the floor of his living room, playing with his cat. After a little while, he’d started pretending to play with her shoestring, then leaned toward her on his hands and knees, not pretending anymore, just looking at her, without blinking, and then started kissing her and wouldn’t stop.

She didn’t think it was going to be like that.

Tugging one of the twigs from the wall of the hut, she snapped it in two, then pulled a cigarette out of her pocket and lit it, watching the air inside the hut grow cloudy. A familiar ache rose in her throat, and she pulled her knees up to her chest.
She still couldn’t stand being by herself. Ever since she’d gotten on that stupid bus, she’d been alone. At least that’s how it felt.

She peered out again as George gave a final twist with the wrench, then swung his leg over the seat and jumped on the starter.

“George, Dan’s looking for you,” Janice said, coming around the side of the house. “George!” she shouted over the roar of the motorcycle, cupping her hands around her mouth.

He cut the engine. “Where is he? Still in the garden?” he asked. “I thought he was heading into town.”

Zinnie watched as Janice walked over beside him, her hands in the pockets of her faded skirt. When she glanced at the hut, Zinnie flinched, scrunching into a corner. “He’s inside. Have you seen Zinnie?” she asked.

Zinnie held her breath, waiting, but George shook his head. “Nope,” he said, running his hand over the seat of the motorcycle, as Janice walked away.

“Hey,” he whispered, after a minute. “You can come out now.”

Zinnie exhaled, grinding her cigarette into the dirt, then peered out again. The white dog had flopped onto the ground, panting, its pink tongue lolling out.

Something had shifted between her and George in the last several days. He seemed sympathetic to her in a way he hadn’t before, as if finding the baby—that he had been the one to find it—had forged some sort of common ground between them. She swallowed, then crawled out of the hut and brushed off her knees. The dog got up, stretching lazily, then wagged up to her, pushed his wet nose into her ear.
George turned back to his motorcycle, then glanced over at her, his glasses gleaming in the sunlight. “I think she saw the smoke coming out through the walls, though.”

“Oh, sorry.”

He shrugged. “You like it in there, huh?” he said, sitting back on his heels.

“It’s nice, isn’t it.” Behind him, the antenna looked like a giant spider overturned on the dirt, its legs spraying out from the angled metal body in the center.

“When are you going to put the mud on?”

“I don’t know. In a couple days. Maybe tomorrow. I’ve been sleeping out here the past few nights,” he said, then bent his head over his motorcycle. “I might just move out here,” he said, glancing at the antenna. “Until I figure out what to do about my radio stuff.”

The dog continued to nose her until she gave in and started petting him.

“I should have my bike going by this afternoon.” He glanced at her. “I mean, if you want to learn how to operate it.” His words trailed off.

“For real? You’d let me ride it?”

He jumped on the starter again and it roared into life, then died again. “It’s the clutch, I think. I hope I don’t have to rebuild the cylinder.”

“Is it that thing that’s not working?” she asked. She came over beside him and pointed to a silver bolt.

“Something’s leaking a little,” he said. “And put your hand here.” He peered at it closely. “Feel how hot that is?”

She nodded.
“Shouldn’t be.”

She was silent for a minute, watching him.

“I’m going to throw a mattress in there tonight,” he said, abruptly, nodding toward the hut.

“Oh yeah?”

He looked at her for a second, his face reddening, then began tightening the bolt with quick twisting motions.

She wasn’t sure what to say. “I’ll be back in a minute, okay?” She hesitated, then headed toward the house. When she glanced back at him, he was sitting on his knees, staring after her.

She ran up the front steps, and Boy-dog trotted after her, waving his tail. She glanced back at George once more, but he was crouching over his motorcycle again. “You can’t come in,” she said to the dog. Shutting the door quickly behind her, she climbed the stairs to the second floor, then opened one of the bedroom doors and peeked in.

The morning sun spilled over the warped and cracking floor, a pile of jumbled towels, sleeping bags, backpacks and in the far corner, rusty cans of paint, dropcloths, an ancient, splintery sawhorse. On one of the windowsills, a leafy plant sprouted up, vivid green against the faded curtains.

Janice and Dan sometimes slept in here. She sat down on the mattress, then lay back and pulled the blanket up over her. She’d tried to close her eyes and go to sleep last night—I’m just going to lie here, this one time, I’m going to lie here by myself and be okay, she’d said to herself, turning over onto her side—but when she
started sweating and couldn’t seem to block the thoughts that kept coming into her head, she threw the covers off and stood up. Climbing the stairs to their room, her heart thumping, she raised her hand and knocked. After a minute, Janice opened the door, her eyes squinty with sleep. Behind her, Zinnie got a glimpse of Dan, lying on the mattress, a blanket tangled around his legs. “What are you doing?” Janice said. “Oh,” Zinnie had said, peering past her. “Nothing. I just . . . I wanted to talk to you. About . . . what happened. With the baby.” She couldn’t quite get herself to meet Janice’s eyes. “It was my friend, Sharon’s. Hers and Garrett’s.”

“You told us that yesterday.”

Her throat constricted and she felt her eyes tearing up. “But do you believe me? It’s just . . . it wasn’t like you think.” She stopped talking. She could hear her voice whispering too loudly in the dark.

“Could you just go back to bed?”

“Wait—” Zinnie pushed the door back open. “I . . . I was going to tell you something else.”

“What?” Janice stood there with her arms crossed.

“I just . . . never mind,” she said, swallowing, then tiptoed back down the stairs and lay stiffly on the couch, trying to think what it was that she had been planning to say. Something about how she wanted to stay in this house with them. Something about wanting to be with her and Dan forever.

She put her hands over her face, her eyes burning, then shoved the blanket aside and sat up. There was a box of papers on the other side of the room, and she went over to it, thumbing through the magazines and yellowed newspapers and
notebooks. At the side of the box, there was a loose piece of paper, the lines filled with Janice’s handwriting, and she grabbed it up.

*Now he’s kneeling beside me, his chest, with its curling hairs, a few inches above me. Speak peace to all his seed, he says, covering my face with his hands.*

*I imagine a flock of doves lifting off the ground and wheeling into the sky, arcing and turning, their bodies glowing almost, their feathers silver with moonlight. Opening my hand, I find that I am squeezing a pebble tightly. I fling it away, and although I listen, I don’t hear it land—nothing, no noise at all—but when I look at my hand, I see that the stone has left a red mark. Dan rubs the spot with his finger, then kisses it. In the sky, something bright shines near the moon and I wonder if it’s my pebble—a tiny moon orbiting the big one.*

*Afterwards, I cry, not because it hurts, which it did, but because he smells spicily pungent in a sharp, arresting way and I can feel that smell sinking into me, through my veins, and I know it will always be there from then on, circling around inside, from my heart to my lungs, to the smooth place behind my knee cap, down under the arch of my foot, into each of my toes. When he kisses me, first between my legs, then my mouth, I can taste my own sweet saltiness.*

Something stabbed through her, and Zinnie laid the paper back in the box, then picked up a bra that lay on the floor. It had been worn and washed so much that the brand and size had worn completely off the small silky tag in the back.

“What are you doing?”

Zinnie turned quickly. Amber was standing at the door. “Oh,” Zinnie said.

“I was just looking for something.”
“Is that yours?” Amber said. She walked over and sat down on the mattress, set the knife she was holding on the pillow.

“Oh, yeah.” She stuffed the bra in her pocket.

Amber scooted back against the wall and crossed her legs. “Do you have a mom?” she asked, after a minute.

Zinnie nodded.

“What’s she like?”

“Well . . .” Zinnie started. “She kind of works a lot.”

“But she’s home some of the time?”

Zinnie nodded.

“You’re lucky. To have a mom that cares about you. You could go home if you want.”

“I thought you liked it here.”

Amber picked up the knife again. “I liked it better when I was with Dan.”

“So why don’t you leave?”

“And go where?” Amber turned it over in her hands, then pressed a button and a blade sprang out. “So was that your baby?”

Zinnie looked at her. “I already told you guys . . .”

“I guess not, huh.” She let her eyes drop over Zinnie’s frame. “Your stomach’s pretty flat.” She paused. “I had a little girl. Her name was Alli.” She tested the point of the blade on her fingertip. “It takes a while for your stomach to get flat again, after you have a baby.”

Zinnie felt her stomach tensing. “He wasn’t mine.”
Amber glanced at her. “The cops took her away, but I’m going to get her back. My little girl.”

The room was quiet. Amber picked at her arm, then flipped her straw-colored hair behind her shoulder. “Mosquito bite,” she said, holding out her arm. “Did you know if you cut them off they don’t itch anymore? You have to get the poison out.” She peered at her arm, poking at it with the knife.

“Is that what everybody thinks?” Zinnie blurted. “That he was mine? The baby?” She could hear the note of hysteria rising in her voice.

The spot on Amber’s arm was red now, shiny and flat. She wiped the knife on her cut offs and flipped it shut again. “Not everybody. That’s Janice’s bra, isn’t it?” she said, gesturing at Zinnie’s pocket.

Zinnie looked out the window.

“You could borrow one of mine, but it probably wouldn’t fit.” She laughed. “I’m kind of on the small side.” She lifted her shirt. “My nipples are great, though. See? Guys love ‘em. Hey, do you want to help me wash the dishes?” Amber jumped off the bed. “Did you know you can use shampoo if you run out of dish soap?”

“No,” Zinnie said, walking slowly behind her down the stairs.

When they got to the bottom, Amber turned back. “Nobody thinks that. It was just me. I was just wondering.”

Zinnie nodded, trying not to cry as she followed her into the kitchen.

**
Janice slammed the door to Dan’s truck and cranked the starter, then shoved the truck into gear and backed out onto the dirt path. She jounced over the rocky, twisting ruts. “I’m going into town,” she’d said to Dan as she left the house. “To do something. About that baby.”

“Like what?” Dan had asked, looking up at her from the couch. He was mending a fishing net, and when she spoke, he stood up, his hands still tangled in the webbing. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know!” she called back to him, letting the door bang shut behind her. Now she jammed her foot harder onto the accelerator. It was almost noon already, but she couldn’t get the image out of her head that she’d woken up with, a baby’s face, perfect, but blank somehow, as if it were missing some vital element—an eye, or its eyebrows, maybe, or an ear, something she couldn’t quite identify. It floated in the back of her mind, a pale, disembodied ghost. “What else do you want me to do?” Dan had asked yesterday when she tried to talk to him about it. George had buried the baby in a wooden tomato box, about a mile from the house. “We could get a stone, at least,” Janice said. “To mark the spot.”

George glanced at Dan. “I don’t know. It’s not exactly something we want to advertise.”

“What? So she just gets to do this?” Janice asked. “And nobody’s going to even do anything about it?”

Dan shoved his hands in his pockets, then looked up. When he touched her arm, she jerked away.
"Don't," she said. Yesterday, she had hardly spoken to him, and he'd spent most of the day trying to act as though nothing was wrong, but then this morning, after she'd slept with her back to him all night, he'd rolled over with a panicked look in his eyes and began touching her, rubbing her hard, then slid into her. He pushed her arms over her head, holding her against the mattress while he thrust and thrust, the floor squeaking under their weight.

Her head bumped against the top of the cab as she swung around the last curve and pulled to a stop at the intersection of Deer Flat. She stared out the window at the craggy, sagebrush-covered hills, then laid her head on the steering wheel. "And I can't stand the way she follows me around everywhere," she said out loud into the warm interior of the truck. She heard the sound of an engine grinding up the road, and looked up as an old pick-up truck drove by, kicking up a cloud of dust. The driver touched the brim of his hat and nodded faintly as he passed.

When she went outside yesterday afternoon, she'd seen Zinnie sitting on George's motorcycle. "What are you doing?" Janice asked.

"Oh," said Zinnie, swinging her leg over the seat. Janice could see a faint trail of blond hair coming from the waistband of her low-slung jeans. "Dan said he was going to show me how to ride it."

"Dan said that?"

"I mean George. I used to ride bikes a lot. In McCammon." She glanced up at Janice. "I don't know why I said that. I've never ridden a motorcycle in my life. But I want to. Hey," she said, eagerly. "Do you want to, too? We could both learn."

She had stopped wearing make-up the last couple weeks, and without it, she looked
even younger, Janice had noticed. Sweat glistened in the creases of her nostrils and a wisp of hair stuck to her cheek. And she seemed a little calmer lately. Janice could hardly stand it.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said, turning away.

_I don’t care_, she thought now. _I’m just going_. She shaded her eyes, watching until the truck as it disappeared over a small uprising in the road, then shoved the gearshift into first and followed it down the road.

**

In the mall, Janice hesitated near a display of leather carry-on bags while she watched the people passing by, old people striding along in jogging shoes, young mothers with babies in strollers. A few teenage girls huddling in front of Pretzel Time, glancing over their shoulders at some boys on the other side of the hall. It all seemed strange to her, too brightly lit and too clean, too many stores to choose from. And too many sounds, a different song playing in every store, whole rows of TV’s flashing blue in the aisles at Sears.

When a salesgirl glanced at her for the second time, then looked away again, pretending to straighten a pile of leather billfolds, Janice left the luggage shop and walked down the hall to The Bon. It’s August, she realized with a start, thinking of her parents as she stared at the crystal bowls, the silver trays, the candlesticks. I should buy them something, she thought, then laughed, weakly, into her hand. She picked up a glass water globe, turned it over so that the water inside filled with sparkling silver glitter. She could see herself in its rounded surface, one eye, one eyebrow, half a mouth, pale, freckled cheek. Why am I so pale? She wondered.
Maybe I’m sick. She peered at herself more closely, the set the globe back on the shelf. She pressed her hand to her forehead, but it felt cool, almost cold, and a little moist. Feeling dizzy, she climbed on the escalator, then pushed her way between the racks of clothing in the juniors section.

She stared at the long rows of tank tops and skirts, then lifted her arm and sniffed, suddenly feeling conscious of her t-shirt with its yellowing armpits. A girl with dark, shaggily cut hair and a small silver stud in one nostril glanced at her. Is that someone I know? she thought, then remembered the girl leaning out the window of Arctic Circle, a nametag that said “Randi.” She recognized me, Janice thought, and turned away, heat flooding her cheeks. She’s seen me a hundred times, in the drive-thru’. What if there are other people out here? What if Kelly’s out here somewhere?

As the girl moved closer, sorting through a stack of jeans on the counter, Janice grabbed several pairs of shorts, headed into the dressing room. She pulled the door shut behind her and perched on the edge of the chair inside, her heart pounding. After a minute, a girl with black Converse tennis shoes walked by, followed by another girl. Janice heard hangers rattling onto the metal hook on the door next to hers. “Hey Randi, where are you?”

“Right next to you,” a voice said.

“Did you get some 501’s? They’re buy one, get one free. Did you see that?”

“Yeah, what size did you get?”

“Thirties, but they’re way too big.”

Janice pulled her feet up onto the chair, holding her breath. Give someone
else’s name. That’s what Dan had told her to do if anyone in Meade ever asked her.
When they went into town together he made her wear a robe and veil—the same robe
she wore at home—a white one they’d found at a thrift store, which George
laughingly said was a Mormon baptismal robe—and a piece of cloth wrapped around
her face and neck. But when she went by herself, he’d told her to try to just blend in.
No one has to know who you are. Who are they, God? The rulers of the universe?
She remembered how he’d laughed a little, drunkenly, as he said that.

“Do yours fit, Randi? I need a smaller size.”

Just go, Janice thought, trying to breathe normally. Just get out of here.
She pushed open the door, but as she started away, the handle caught in the pocket of
her skirt. The dressing room next to hers opened and the girl, Randi, brushed past
her. “I’ll see if they have any 28’s,” she said.

Janice’s skirt ripped as she jerked it off the handle. “Hey,” the girl said,
turning back to look at her. “Aren’t you—”

“I’m Angie,” Janice blurted. Her tongue felt thick and dry. The only name
she could think of was her mother’s maiden name. “Angie Vickerman.”

“Oh,” the girl said, looking confused. “I thought . . . were we in a class
together.”

“I don’t think so.” She heard herself laugh, an embarrassed note in her voice,
then hurried away before the girl could say anything else.

She ran up the escalator to the housewares section and picked out the water
globe that she’d looked at earlier, carried it to the counter. “Oh,” she said, “actually,
I—” she started, then saw that the woman had already begun to ring it up. She felt
tears coming into her eyes and tried to blink them back.

“Do you need anything else today?” the woman asked. “Did you find everything all right?”

“It’s my parents’ anniversary,” Janiee said. She brushed a tear off her cheek. “But I just... I forgot my wallet in the car.”

“I can hold this here for you if you want to run get it.” She peered over the top of her glasses at Janice.

“Never mind,” Janice said.

“Have a nice day,” the saleswoman called after her, as she went hurriedly out the door.

She was still crying as she drove out of the parking lot. At the exit, she paused, glancing in the rearview mirror. The girl with the dark hair was just coming out of the mall, swinging a plastic bag in her hand. She pulled out a pair of sunglasses, then hopped confidently into her car, a white Mazda. Janice stared at her. She looked so carefree, so unconcerned, as she tossed her bag in the back seat and began backing out of her spot. Janice watched until the person in the car behind her tapped their horn, then turned slowly out onto the road.

**

It was getting dark by the time she pulled up across the street from her parents’ house. She’d circled around the police station several times, her palms sweating, already knowing she wouldn’t really go in—what would she say?—I’m Angie Vickerman and I’m here to report a dead baby?—then she’d driven out to the lake and sat there for a long time, slowly eating an ice cream cone that she’d bought
with some change she found in Dan’s ashtray. It was weird, she’d forgotten about money, kind of, since she’d been out at Dan’s house. “You don’t really need any. You have everything you need, right?” he’d said, a little anxiously, the one time she’d mentioned it, which made her feel bad for bringing it up, as if she were somehow calling their whole life together into question.

She watched the sun go down, then, finally started the engine. She knew where she was going, but she didn’t let herself think about it, just drove until she reached the street where her old house was, then cruised slowly by, staring at her darkened bedroom window, the lilac bushes next to the house. It looked just the same. She unrolled the window and peered at it in the darkness. Her father’s Impala sat backed into the driveway, the front end still unpainted, the headlight that had dangled down, completely gone now, the metallic socket dry and empty.

She leaned back against the seat. She’d written a note once to tell them she was all right and convinced Dan to drive with her into town, so she could leave it in the mailbox, but when she got there, she couldn’t get herself to do it, had just sat there, her throat aching at the sight of the house, the familiar yellow irises blooming underneath the front window. Dan had offered to do it for her, but she wouldn’t let him. “Can we just go, please?” she’d said finally, then cried as they drove back to the river, Dan glancing at her from the corner of his eye. “You can still go back,” he said. “If you want to. You don’t have to stay with me.” “I don’t want to go back,” she said sharply, and then he was silent the rest of the way home, his arm thrown over the top of the steering wheel.

Her parents would know what to do about the baby, she thought now, looking
at the house, then suddenly remembered Zinnie coming upstairs the other night.

When Janice opened the bedroom door, she'd looked startled, as if she’d been expecting someone else. She’d been *hoping* to see someone else, Janice thought. An animal trampled its hooves against a wooden gate, and she glanced up again, staring into the darkness, trying to see Mr. Pfenninger's goats, but all she could see was the fence and their silver drinking trough, gleaming in the moonlight. *He likes her. Dan likes her. I'm going to end up just like Amber.* The thought had come into her mind before, but this time it sank into her like a heavy stone. She turned to the house again, and sat there for a long time, watching the swallows swooping around, then started the engine and drove slowly down the street.

**

By the time she got home, it was late. She parked the truck and walked around to the back of the house. Someone had lit the lanterns and Dan was sitting on the ground, pouring black powder into a six-inch long section of PVC pipe. George was kneeling beside him. “Right through here, see?” he said. “Straight through this way. Once we get rid of the rocks, we can drive straight east and hit Deer Flat, instead of winding down along the river.” Dan hadn’t seen Janice come up behind them, and he glanced at Zinnie, who was standing near him. “Watch that sagebrush over there, Zinnie.” He put in the wick, a piece of string he’d snapped off with his teeth. “Watch,” he said. He plugged the ends of the pipe with plastic caps, struck a match on his boot, lit the wick and straight-armed the pipe into a hunk of sagebrush about twenty yards away. The brush was dry and branching out fiercely under the bright moon. The pipe bomb landed, rested for a moment in the sagebrush’s brittle
arms, then exploded with a terrific boom, causing sagebrush, soil, and dry-looking husks of grasshopper to shoot furiously through the air, then rain down in a shower of dirt clods and dust.

When Janice opened her eyes, George was loping toward the hole in the ground. She turned and pulled open the screen door, letting it bang behind her, and watched from inside the house. Zinnie was clapping and laughing. “Cool,” Janice heard her say.

“Dan,” Janice said through the screen, but he was already tapping the powder into a piece of pipe, getting ready to strike another match.
CHAPTER 6

Behind the house, the garden spread almost to the Elijah drain ditch, the grapevines and raspberries twisting over the fence that Dan and George had built out of uncut tree limbs. Zinnie watched Janice bend to pick up a jug of water near the shed, then crawled away behind the tangle of tomato plants. Ducking behind the fence, she glanced at Janice one more time, then ran across the yard to George’s hut and slid down beside the door. She buried her head in her arms, trying not to cry.

She’d thought when Janice asked her to help her in the garden that maybe she was beginning to forgive her a little, for everything, but after a couple hours of kneeling beside her, while she silently ripped bindweed out of the ground, Zinnie had begun to realize that that wasn’t the case. She didn’t know why Janice had even suggested that she come out there.

A series of squeals and wolf tones began streaming from the hut and Zinnie lifted her head and leaned around the door. George had covered the hut with mud a few days before—she’d seen him clinging to the top, slapping on bucketfuls—and now it was filled with equipment, metal radios with black knobs and glowing dials, a headset with padded earphones, a generator. He was seated in front of the desk, hunched over the microphone and as he adjusted one of the dials, more whistles and squeals erupted, and then underneath, a rumble of murmuring voices, the pitch rising in intensity, then lowering again. Zinnie backed up a little, peeping in through a chink in the wall.
“Is this frequency in use? This is W70XD. Whiskey Seven Oscar X-ray Delta.” “Come in, please.” The voices subsided into fuzzy static and George fiddled with the dials again. “CQ, CQ, come in.” More static. “Damn it. I just about had it.” He reached for a knob, twisted it, just slightly to the left. He was wearing a baseball cap, his hair hanging down his neck in sweaty strands.

“CQ, CQ. Come in.” George took off his glasses and peered at the dials.

A voice, now only slightly obscured by static, answered finally. “Roger, W70XD. This is W4PBM. What’s your QTH?”


As the men’s voices went on, Zinnie stared at the glowing dials. They reminded her of the other night—when she was lying on the couch, trying to go to sleep, she’d thought she’d seen some tiny bright eyes staring at her from the corner of the ceiling. Jumping up, she’d brushed off her arms and legs, then felt around on the floor for the candle. She was always afraid bugs were going to drop down from the ceiling in the middle of the night—a mouse had run up her arm one night and she could still feel those tiny sharp claws skittering over her skin—so she slept with a blanket pulled tight over her shoulders, even though she was often too hot, the sweat gathering in her armpits, the small of her back. Usually she was able to convince herself that she was just imagining it, about the bugs, but this time, when she lit the candle and held it up toward the ceiling, she saw that the eyes were real, belonged to a small brown bat hanging from the chipped plaster. She ran to the window, thinking to open it and shoo the bat out, then saw that the sky was full of them, bats darting...
through the air, and quickly slammed it shut again. When she turned around, George was standing behind her, and she gasped, clapping her hand over her mouth.

“You all right? I thought I heard a noise.”

She plopped down on the couch, sagging back against the cushions. “You scared me.” She pointed to the ceiling. “There’s a bat.”

He took the candle and went over near the wall. “It’s just hanging there,” he said, peering upwards. “I’ll get it out in the morning.”

She nodded.

“Probably came in when Dan left the door open earlier.” He looked up at the ceiling again, as if he were considering what to do about it. “I could keep you company if you want. If you’re worried about it.”

She pulled the blanket over her shoulders. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“It’s okay.” She looked up at him, standing over her. “I’m just going to go back to sleep.”

“You sure? I could stay right here, on the floor.” The candle was reflected in one bright spot on each of the lenses of his glasses.

“Yes,” she said, more sharply then she meant to. “I’m sure.”

He turned abruptly toward the door. “Night, then,” he said, shortly, blowing out the candle. “Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

The room was enveloped in blackness again, and Zinnie pulled the covers up, willing herself to go to sleep. Outside, she could hear the bats making their small squeaking noises, swarms of them, she imagined, with their dark, beating wings. Something thudded against the window, and she sat up, her heart pounding.
In the darkness, she could hear someone breathing. She looked across the room, straining to see. "George?" she said. "Is that you?"

Her voice echoed in the silent room, and after a few minutes, the floor creaked, and she heard footsteps going up the stairs.

Now she looked at him. In the faint glow of the radio, Zinnie could see the dark rings under his eyes.

" Didn't catch that, " the voice on the other end of the radio connection was saying. "Waves, was it? You do some surfing in Idaho? Thought it was still cowboys and Indians out there." Zinnie heard the man's voice again, then it faded, his laughter just a faint crackle over the airwaves.

"Come in, W4PBM. Over," George said. No one answered, but he went on talking. "Electromagnetic waves is what I meant. What ham radios use." He clicked the button on the microphone several times, but there was still no response. "The waves produced by the vibration of electrons on the sun's surface," he said into the dead microphone, clicking the button again. The gray fuzz of static filled the room. "Fuck," he said, fiddling with the dial again.

The small generator hummed in the corner of the hut. "George," Zinnie whispered, but he didn't hear her, just kept tuning the dials. This morning, when she went into the kitchen, he was sweeping the beer bottles and empty Cheeto bags off the counter into a garbage bag, and didn't even look up when she came in.

"CQ, CQ, come in," he said now.

"Roger," said a crackly voice. "This is W7ZVE, Zulu, Victor, Echo. Where ya' calling from, good buddy?"
“Meade, Idaho. How about you?” George said into the microphone.


“Nice afternoon here. Just taking it easy, smoking a hay butt. Over.”

“Roger. Sounds good. Know anybody that could hook me up with some chicken feed? Got some hungry chickens over here in Eagle.”

George scooted forward in his chair, his lips almost touching the microphone.

“I might know somebody. What kind of feed do you want?”

“Just looking for a candy store. Don’t want nothin’ green. Over.” The voice was staring to fade.

George twisted the dial and the radio squealed. “Give you some directions, if you want to go for a drive. Over.”

“Copy. Go ahead.”

George leaned into the microphone, listing the names of the roads. “Did you copy, W7ZVE?” In the background, the generator faltered, and two red lights on top began to blink. The glowing radio dials faded and went out. “Damn it,” George said. As he turned to fiddle with the generator, Zinnie crawled away from the hut.

“Hey.” George leaned out the door, his face reddening. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Zinnie turned back. “I was just... I was helping Janice in the garden.”

“Over here by the hut?”

Zinnie swallowed. “I was just—” she started again.

“I’m trying to get some work done.” George pushed past her and walked off
toward the house, his hands shoved in his pockets.

She followed him, trailing up the porch steps as he pushed open the front
door. He kicked at an empty beer can that lay on the floor. “My God, this place is a
mess.” He walked into the other room and came back carrying his toolbox, a large
black metal case. “Amber! I need your help,” he shouted.

After a minute, Amber came to the top of the stairs. “What?” she said,
yawning. “I’m asleep.”

He looked up at her. “You’ve been asleep for two days.”

She rubbed the back of her neck. “So?” The strap of her tank top was sliding
off her shoulder and she pushed it up again.

“You’re a tweeker,” he said. “Why can’t you just admit it?”

“I’m too tired for this,” she said, turning away from the stairs.

“Wait a second.”

“What?” She crossed her arms.

“I need someone to ride shotgun for me. Keep an eye out for the cops. I’ve
got a . . . I’m meeting someone.” He looked up at her. “Get dressed.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “No way.” Shaking her head, she went back down
the hall.

“Why not? You’ve done it before.” George thumped his fist against the
railing, then went down the hall and peered into the kitchen. “Where’s Janice?”

“She’s in the garden,” Amber called from upstairs. “At least she was.”

“What’s she doing?”

“Gardening, probably?”
George grabbed his toolbox and shoved past Zinnie again, letting the screen door slam behind him.

She watched as he strode off around the side of the house. Sitting down on the front porch, she flicked a large black ant off the steps, watched it scurrying aimlessly in the dirt. She was picking at a red bump on her knee when George pulled up in front of the house on his motorcycle. He gestured to her, revving the engine.

"Come on."

Zinnie glanced behind her. "Me?" She came halfway down the steps.

"Somebody's gotta go with me. Get on."

**

The garden was out of control—tomato plants burgeoning thickly over the wooden stands, the zucchinis swollen into heavy sodden clubs, their trailing vines eating up the ground, snaking their way through the mounds of pumpkins and cantaloupes. Janice pushed aside a tangle of bindweed, dug into the dirt with her trowel. The sun was already hot, at ten in the morning, and she sat back and wiped the sweat out of her eyes. She picked up the grimy jug beside her and tipped it back, swallowing. She'd gone to get it a few minutes ago, thinking she'd offer Zinnie a drink, make an effort at least, but when she turned around, Zinnie was crouching behind the fence, sneaking off toward the house. Shaking her head, she dropped the trowel and dug her hand into the ground, tugging at a carrot. She pulled until it broke, leaving a bright orange piece still stuck in the hard earth. She sighed and brushed the dirt off her knees. It always amazed her how quickly things went to pot—you turned your back for just a minute and the tomatoes were falling off the
vines, the thistles sprouting up wildly.

Someone had left a hoe lying on the ground, and she stumbled over it as she walked over to the ridge and shaded her eyes.

Earlier this morning, she’d seen some high school kids riding around on their four-wheelers on the other side of the river. It was a bunch of boys, three or four of them, and a girl, who’d stood off to the side, her arms crossed, wearing a cowboy hat. Janice had watched for a minute, then turned from the window to see if Dan had noticed their shouts, the noise of the engines, but he was lying on the mattress, his arms behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. He’d seemed distracted the last several days, had even given in and helped George get his antenna up, climbing a ladder and using a long rope to pull the antenna to the top of the pole. “I’ve been thinking,” she’d said, sitting down beside him. She twisted her bracelet around on her wrist. “I really do want to have a baby. I mean, I know everything’s been weird—” she paused. “Really weird, lately, and maybe it seems dumb to even talk about it right now, but—” She stopped, realizing Dan’s eyes hadn’t even flickered from the ceiling. He turned away from her, onto his side, and she watched him breathing for a minute, then traced her finger over his tattoos. In the dim morning light the lines looked like snakes, she thought maybe, or a peacock, its feathers arching in a wild array over his back.

He turned to look at her. “Zinnie wants to help out more. Would you take her out there and kind of show her the ropes? She could help with the weeding at least.” He paused. “I think she’s been feeling kind of out of it lately.”

She went back to the window, ran her finger over the splintered windowsill.
“Why does it matter if she feels out of it?” she said finally. “What about how I feel? She’s not going to stay here forever, is she?”

When she turned to look at him, he was sitting up, staring at his hands.

After a few minutes, when he didn’t say anything else, she went over and sat beside him. She couldn’t keep the tight sound out of her voice. “What did you want me to show her?”

“Come here,” he’d said, pulling her to him. He pushed her onto the mattress, shoved her shirt up. “I want to make a baby with you.”

Now she swallowed, trying to make the lump in her throat go away, then bent down and picked up a smooth rock. She turned it over in her hand then looked out across the river again. The high school kids were gone now, nothing left except a couple beer cans scattered over the ground.

Flinging the rock as hard as she could, she watched it splash into the water.

After they’d been working in the garden for an hour or so, Zinnie had held out her box of tomatoes. “I’ve got this almost full,” she said. “Do you want me to take it in the house? I can if you want.” A trickle of sweat ran down her cheek.

Janice glanced up at her. “I’ll do it later,” she said. She gestured toward the other side of the garden. “The peppers need to be thinned out, if you want to start on that.”

Zinnie set the box down and squatted beside Janice. “I used to top corn in the summer. It was kind of like this.”

Janice bent over the mound of zucchinis she was weeding. “I guess you can do a lot of things if you have no other choice.”
“What do you mean?” As Zinnie looked at her, Dan pushed his way through the corn, stepping over the patch of cantaloupes and melon. “How’s it going?” he said.

Zinnie got up and headed over to the peppers.

“Great,” Janice said, putting down the garbage bag she was holding to scrape a rotten tomato off the ground. “Just terrific.”

“It’s pretty bad out here, isn’t it.” Dan was silent for a minute. “I’m going hunting. I thought you’d want to know.” He glanced over at Zinnie. “Hey. How’s it going?”

“Are there any gloves I could wear? I was just wondering,” she said, glancing at Janice. “There’s bugs and stuff.”

He stepped over beside her and squatted down. “Look at this sucker,” he said, plucking a caterpillar from one of the leaves. “It’s so green.”

Zinnie tapped the worm gingerly and it swung back and forth, dangling from Dan’s fingers. “It has a little horn on its head.”

“That horn is on its rear.”

“Oh.” She looked at him. “Is this the kind that turn into hummingbirds?”


“That’s what I meant,” Zinnie said, flicking him with her finger.

Janice stabbed her trowel into a soft purple eggplant, shoved it into the garbage bag.

Dan laughed, flinging the worm out of the garden. Ripping up handfuls of bindweed, he made his way back through the cantaloupes.
He brushed past Janice, squeezing her arm. “I’ll be back in a little while.” Dumping the weeds into a heap at the edge of the garden, he picked up his shotgun and headed toward the river.

“Where are you going?” Janice called after him.

“Over across Deer Flat. We’ll have pheasant for dinner.”

“I thought you were going to help out,” she said, watching him disappear over the ridge. She glanced over at Zinnie again, but she was concentrating on a tomato, turning it over in her hands, pretending she hadn’t heard their conversation.

Now Janice shaded her eyes again, looking out toward Deer Flat. He probably wouldn’t be back for hours, and she wanted to talk to him. Glancing back at the garden, she started toward the road.

**

The white dog raced along beside the motorcycle as George and Zinnie roared away from the house. Zinnie twisted around, watching it as it grew smaller in the distance. She could see it barking, its mouth opening and opening, its tail waving.

“Where are we going?” she shouted to George over the noise of the engine.

“The bridge,” he shouted back.

The motorcycle lurched over a bump and Zinnie tightened her arms around his waist. His shirt smelled like a mixture of wood smoke and sweat, as if he’d been crouching over a fire. As she loosened one hand to brush the hair out of her eyes, George shouted something else, but the wind sucked his words up into the sky. *Keep your eye out,* she thought, maybe. She lifted her head to look around, but her eyes began watering fiercely, and she buried her head on his shoulder again, squinting out
at the stands of cattails, the flat green river rushing past.

The shadow of the bridge approached and as they passed it, she lifted her head and looked up at the long iron expanse. "I thought we were going to the bridge," she said, cupping one hand around her mouth.

He pointed at a dusty car half-hidden in the trees above then, on the ridge, and just kept driving. Eventually the path turned into asphalt—Victory Road, the sign said. They turned onto it and after a few miles of winding through rocks and sagebrush, the desert changed abruptly into fields and scattered farmhouses. Finally George slowed down and pulled over in front of an old shed. A brick chimney stuck up out of the ground nearby and off in the field beyond, Zinnie could see a rusty tractor and several wrecked cars, missing their doors and windows. Farther out, a tall wooden structure of some sort pointed up into the blue sky, perched on an A-shaped stand. "What's that thing?" Zinnie asked, climbing off the motorcycle. She pulled her fingers through her tangled hair.

George swung his leg over. "Come on," he said, pulling her toward the shed. "Didn't you see that car back there?"

"By the bridge?"

He opened the door and pulled her down inside, crouching against the wall.

"It was an undercover cop."

"For real?"

"There was an antenna sticking up in the middle of the trunk. Pretty much gives it away."

Even though the window was broken out, the air inside the shed smelled warm
and musty. A stream of light filtered in through a broken window on the side of the
shed and in the corner, a large fly buzzed around a pile of antlers, yellowed bones and
deer hides.

“Do you think he’s coming after us?” She went over to the heap of antlers,
watching the fly as it settled onto one of the hides. Its phosphorescent body gleamed
in the sun.

George came over beside her. “That’s a horse fly. They bite.” He swatted at
it and it circled into the air, buzzing. “Don’t know. Nah. He’s not going to chase me
down and then offer to buy meth.” He laughed.

“Was that who you were talking to? On your radio?”

“A cop? No.”

“Oh.” She sat down, leaned her head back against the rough wood. She felt
exhausted, suddenly. Her throat and mouth were dry and she ran her tongue around
her lips, trying to moisten them.

George peered out the window. “That’s a Mormon hay derrick. That tall
thing you asked about? They used to use them for loose-stacking hay.”

“It looks like something to look at the stars with. Like a giant telescope.” She
lifted her hair off her sweaty neck. “I wonder whose house this was.”

“There’s a lot of these abandoned places around here.” The fly buzzed,
bumping against the window. “That’s why Dan doesn’t try to fix up the outside of
our house. You don’t notice it that way. Know what I mean? It’s like camouflage.
Except for the garden, it doesn’t look like much is going on there.”

“And the antenna.” She glanced up at him.
He cleared his throat. “Yeah. Have you ever been to Silver City? That ghost
town southwest of Murphy?”

She shook her head.

“It’s got a lot of old houses, hotels, old cemetery, stuff like that. They used to
mine silver out there. That bridge back there, by the house? It was built about a
hundred years ago to transport silver and gold, but by the time they got it finished, the
boom was over and it was never used.”

“How do you know that?”

He pushed his glasses up with one finger. “Didn’t you ever have Idaho
history?”

“Like in third grade.”

He looked out the window again. “I was a teacher for a while, actually, a
while back. I just got sick of it finally—telling the kids to get their feet off the desks,
trying to make them shut up and learn something.” He glanced at her.

“Amber said you were a security guard.”

“That was Dan. I haven’t had a real job in three years.” He gave a brief
laugh. “It’s great being a derelict.”

She stood up and looked out the window with him. “You don’t really look
like a George to me.”

“Oh yeah? What do George’s look like?”

“I don’t know.” She laughed.

“I was named after my father.”

“Oh.” She glanced at him. “Should we go back there? To the bridge?
Maybe your friend's there by now."

"I guess we could take a look." He pushed open the door, then gestured to
her.

Zinnie blinked in the bright sunlight.

He pushed his motorcycle around to the front of the shed and she climbed on.
His back seemed familiar this time, as she grabbed him around the waist. "Don't let
go," he said, over his shoulder as he started the motorcycle.

**

"The car's gone," George said, pulling to a stop in front of the bridge. "I
don't see anyone."

He parked his bike and they climbed up the steps of the bridge, then started
across, jumping from one railroad tie to the next.

"What if that first car was the guy you were looking for?" Zinnie asked.
"Your friend, I mean."

"It wasn't. I told him to meet me on the other side."

It seemed to take a long time to get across the bridge. Looking down over the
railing, she could see the green water below. "Wait," she said to George, then hurried
to catch up with him, clinging to the back of his shirt. Jumping down the last few
steps into the dirt, they pushed their way through the bushes. In the distance, a duck
quacked and Zinnie looked back at the house, on the other side of the river from them
now. She stood on her toes, trying to see the garden, hoping to see if Janice was still
out there, but it was mostly hidden behind the house. "There's no one here," George
said finally, after they looked around. They retraced their steps across the bridge,
going more slowly this time. Zinnie felt lulled by the sound of her footsteps, and George’s, as they thumped back across and went down again by the river. George stood looking up at the ridge, to see if anyone was coming. After a while, he looked over at Zinnie. “You can go on back to the house if you want. I’m going to wait for a while, to see if he shows up.”

Zinnie leaned against the tall metal rafters, then sat down in the dirt, staring up at the bridge. The cabled arches extended from the center support like spreading wings. “There aren’t any tracks leading up to it,” she said. “There’s just the bridge.” She looked at it, trying to imagine a train full of silver and gold rattling over the tracks, smoke puffing from the engine. “How would a train come here if there aren’t any tracks?”

“What?” George asked, glancing at her, but she yawned, lying back in the weeds. “Never mind,” she said. “I’ll wait for a little while.”

When she jerked her eyes open, her heart pounding, George was bending over a growth of blackberry vines, hacking them away from the barbed wire fence that ran along the dirt path. A dragonfly flitted past her arm, its wings transparent in the sun. She sat up, trying to get a breath. “How long have I been asleep?” she asked. She’d been dreaming about some kind of large fish, circling slowly in a dark pool. She had been reaching down to it, through the water, but it swam just out of her reach, and every time she got close, it flickered away through a sea of soft weeds.

“You okay?” George asked.
She stood up slowly, brushing the dirt from her arms and legs and walked over by George, still feeling under the spell of her dream. “What are you doing?” she asked.

He swung again, caught some around the head of his hatchet and ripped them from the ground. “These vines weren’t here last year,” he said. “Now look at them. The fence is about to fall over.”

She rubbed her face, trying to wake up. “Did your friend come?”

“I found this. Stuck on a bush over there.” He pulled a grimy piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to her.

_I was here. Where were you?_ it said, and then a scrawled number underneath.

“Oh,” Zinnie said. “I’m sorry.”

George swung again, hacking at the vines.

Zinnie watched him for a while in silence. “What do you think happens to people after they die?” she asked.

He grunted, pulling and heaving at the vines. “Better ask your boyfriend that question.”

“What boyfriend?” she said, thinking for a minute that he must mean Shane Marks, the man who had lived next door to her in McCammon.

His face reddened. “Never mind.” He scooped up the blackberry vines, heaped them into a pile about twenty yards away, came back for more.

Her heart rate was starting to slow, finally, and she picked up a handful of dirt, let it spill out through her fingers. “These little girls that lived across the street from me when I was growing up? Their little sister died when she was three. I remember
her dressing up as a dragonfly for Halloween. Her name was Sara. She and her
sisters came over to our house for trick-or-treat and she kept jumping off the top step
over and over. I think she was trying to see if she could fly.”

“Did you know they only live twenty-four hours?” He started hacking at the
vines again, then threw the hatchet down, started pulling at the vines with his hands.
“Damn. I always forget how thorny these suckers are.”

“Who does?”

“Dragonflies. Here.” He ripped up the last of the vines and threw them in the
heap, then motioned to her. “I’ll show you.” He led her along the edge of the river
and squatted near a streamlet of water. He stared at the water for a long time, then
touched the surface gently with a twig. “Look,” he said.

She knelt beside him.

“See those little brown swimmers? They’ve got legs on them, like a spider
almost?”

She peered at the water. Something was stirring the surface of the water. It
looked like it was moving on its own, like tiny hands were clutching and grabbing at
it, invisible hands from underneath.

“Look,” he said again.

She got down on her hands and knees. “Oh,” she said. “I couldn’t see them at
first. They look like little cigars. Tiny ones.”

“They’re dragonfly nymphs,” George said. “They swim by pushing water
through their intestines. They molt a bunch of times, then finally, after a couple
years, maybe, when they’re about three or four centimeters long, they come out of the
water and molt one more time, into a real dragonfly.”

“They don’t have wings or anything.”

“Not now. Not till they come out of the water. The mothers cut tiny slits in
weeds—see, like these here? And lay the eggs inside the slits. They live in water
until right at the end when they finally turn into an adult. Some of the adults live a
few weeks, others as short as a day or two. What you see as one of those big, pretty
dragonflies flying around? They’re at the end of their life cycle then. They live most
of it in the water, then come out just long enough to mate and die.”

“Oh,” she said, feeling something catch in her throat. She swallowed, trying
to speak normally. “Are those their eyes, those bulgy things?”

“That’s right.” He glanced at her. “They eat mosquito larva and water lice,
stuff like that. Other nymphs. Some of the bigger species even attack small fish. But
not these little guys.”

Zinnie sat back in the dirt.

George stuck his finger in the water, swirled it around. “Look at them go. It’s
good that they’re in there, because that means the water is clean, pretty well
oxygenated, which is a good deal for everyone.” He looked at her. “I love it out
here. It’s so . . . I don’t know. Undefiled. Nobody around for miles.” He thumped
her leg gently with his fist. “You know?”

She pulled her knees up, staring out at the water. When she glanced back at
him, he was looking at her.

He leaned close to her. “It’s just you and the water and the air. The ground.”
She put her head down on her knees. “Yeah,” she said.

He leaned over and kissed the side of her neck.

She looked at him for a second, the open desire on his face, then jumped up and started down the bank of the river toward the house, but he ran after her.

“Wait a second. Don’t run away. You don’t run away from Dan like that.” He grabbed her arm again, working his zipper down with one hand. “See what you did?” He jerked his hand up and down on his cock, then groaning, pulled her close to him. “Do something about it.”

“Leave me alone!” she said. She twisted out of his grasp, starting away again, then tripped, sprawling onto the dirt. Crawling away, she grabbed the first thing she could find and heaved it at him. The rock was the size of her fist, and it hit the front of his head with a dull thud.

He staggered back, then fell onto the ground, a purple welt on his forehead.

“What the fuck? That hurt.” He lay back, slowly, his eyes fluttering shut.


She ran up the ridge, then glanced back. He was sitting up again, looking at the blood on his fingers in a puzzled way. She watched him for a second, then ran toward the house. As she hurried across the yard, Dan came down the front steps.

“Hey,” he said, half-laughing. “What’s going on? You see a ghost or something?”

“It’s just—” Her face felt hot and when she glanced down, she saw that her knees were scratched and covered with dirt. “I was down there and . . . and then
George..." She stopped, not knowing what to say. "He was... we were—"

Dan pulled her to him. "What? Are you okay?"

She flung her arms around his neck. She could hear herself crying, her breath catching in her throat. She tried to stop and choked, coughing into his shoulder.

Boy-Dog trotted around the corner of the house and stood beside her, whining a little, then started licking one of her scraped knees.

Dan stood perfectly still, his arms tight around her. When she stopped crying, he bent down and kissed her forehead. She looked up at him and he hesitated, then kissed her on the mouth.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, and then he was kissing her again, doing something to her with his lips and teeth and tongue that made her stomach tighten and something ache along the inside of her thighs. She made a noise, a little half-crying sound, and the white dog jumped up, its paws against her side, barking loudly.

"Boy-Dog," someone called, and Zinnie looked up to see Janice coming over the ridge from the river, walking toward the house.
CHAPTER 7

Janice banged the door shut on the rusty wood stove and stared at the pan of blackberries that were slowly congealing there. She poked a fork into the part of the crust that hadn’t sunk under the berries, tears coming into her eyes. As she clunked the heavy pan onto the table and began peeling a potato, a boom shuddered through the walls and the potato slipped from her hands and skittered across the floor. Clutching the edge of the countertop, she looked out the window. George had driven away on his motorcycle the other afternoon, had stayed away for several days, but when she got up this morning, he was back again, beside the river, swinging an ax onto a pile of tree branches. Now he was holding a heavy stick, pounding it into the dirt. It was a little foggy out, but as he tossed it aside, she caught a glimpse of his clenched jaw muscles, the sharp point on the end of the stick. Poking something down in the hole, he ran back a ways and covered his head. Another boom rattled the windows and Janice clapped her hands over her ears as dust and small rocks shot up into the air, then scattered to the ground again.

“What in the world?” Coming up behind Janice, Amber peered out the window. “What is that?” She pointed to an animal hanging from the heavy lower branch of the tree at the top of the ridge.

“I think it’s a pig,” Janice said.

“Look at its back legs, the way they’re dangling down. They look like they’re human, almost. George!” She pounded on the window, then unlatched it and pushed
it open. "George!"

Janice glanced at her. Her hair was piled on top of her head, a few bobby pins floating in the messy strands.

I’ll be back,” she said, and in a minute, Janice heard the front door open and then her voice as she came around the side of the house. “Where have you been?” she said. “You didn’t even tell me you were leaving.”

Janice watched through the window.

George knelt down, stuck his hand in the hole again and tossed out a handful of rocks. “So you’re up, huh? That’s a surprise.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m digging out a pit. So we can have a pig roast.”

“You killed someone’s pig?”

“Where’s Dan? I could use some help out here,” he said, throwing out another shovelful. He flicked his lighter on as something dark flopped out of the pile of dirt, then sprang off across the ground. “Get back a minute, will you?”

“At least get the frogs out of the way!” Amber said. “Why do you have to go around blowing things up all the time?”

George looked abashed for a minute. “What do you mean by that?”

“Isn’t that an M-80?”

He looked at the small red cylinder in his hand. “Oh. Yeah.”

“What did you think I meant?”

He shook his head. “Never mind.”

“What?” Amber swatted him on the arm and Janice could see them gesturing
at each other through the window.

“What’s going on?” Dan came up behind Janice. He watched silently for a minute, then touched her arm. “What are you making?” he said.

Janice bent to pick the potato up off the floor. “I was trying to make mashed potatoes,” she said finally. “And a blackberry thing.” She pointed to the table. “I wish we had some ice cream. And I want some meat.” She jabbed her knife into the potato, tears suddenly forming in her eyes. She couldn’t quit replaying the picture in her mind from a couple days ago, Dan’s arms quickly dropping, Zinnie pressing the back of her hand to her mouth, then running toward the house, Boy-Dog galloping after her, as if it were some kind of game. Dan had told her it was nothing, that he’d just been comforting her. “It’s George that has the thing for her,” he’d insisted. “That’s why he took off.” But she still couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Now she felt him hesitating behind her. “Looks like George is getting ready to cook some. Or we could go to the store if you want.”

“Do you have any money?” When she glanced at him, he had turned away and was running his thumb over the edge of the table.

“Never mind,” she said, turning back to the potatoes. After a minute, she spoke. “I’d have to get dressed first.”

“Okay. I’ll be outside,” he said. “When you’re ready.”

“And I have to finish peeling these,” she said, turning, but he was already out the door.

**

A rumbling noise woke Zinnie and she pulled her eyelids open and stumbled
to the window. It was still dark out, but she could see George’s motorcycle out there, its headlight shining through the fog. Opening the front door, she went out on the porch and stared at it, wondering why it was here, idling in front of the house, when George was gone, had been gone for days. She picked her way through the weeds and thistles, and switching off the headlight, she took the keys out of the ignition and set out walking in her bare feet, thinking she should tell him that someone had left it running, so he could do something about it, but the fog grew thicker as she walked downstream, and after a while she realized that the roaring and rumbling had sunk down into her stomach, and that she needed to lie down.

She retched into a bush on the edge of the riverbank, heaving until her stomach was empty, then flopped onto the ground. The dirt was cool under her face, and after a while, when her heart had stopped thumping, she rolled onto her back. She wiped her mouth off and held her fingers up—they weren’t glowing or expanding anymore, like they had been last night, but her head still throbbed, something inside it vibrating as though a wire had been pulled tight between her ears. She plucked weakly at a yellow leaf that had swirled to the ground and stared at the tree above her. It was shrouded with white—the bushes, too, she noticed, as she lifted her head—and a few ducks on the bank quacked and flapped their wings, stretching their necks almost as if they were trying to take a bath in it. Tossing the yellow leaf away, she used her shirt to wipe the sweat off her face and hands, and sat up slowly, leaning her head against the trunk.

It’s fall already, she thought, looking up at the tree again, remembering the first day of school last year—it had been foggy that day too, the air thick with the
smell of the sugarbeet factory, and she and Sharon had run down the block together, laughing and clutching each other’s arms, but when they finally reached the edge of the school grounds, Zinnie had made some excuse and hurried away. At lunchtime, Sharon had pretended to be intent on the tray in front of her when Zinnie walked past with her other friends, but after school, she was waiting hopefully on the corner, and they walked home together like usual.

I’ll just tell her I took the baby to the hospital, she thought. I’ll tell her I left him there and then I wanted to stay down in Boise for a while, just to see what it was like, but now I’m back and we won’t have to tell anyone anything, we can just go on, and it will be like it never happened. Maybe it didn’t. Maybe if I tell myself that over and over, it will be almost the same as if it didn’t. She’ll believe me. She might.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to imagine the half-pleading, half-panicked look on Sharon’s face when she’d stood by the bus, watching as Zinnie climbed on with the baby. The sweat was cold on her face and under her arms now and shivering, she started back toward the house.

She pulled her sleeves down over her hands, trying to keep warm, then paused as Dan and Janice came down the steps, walking toward the river. They climbed down the ridge, Janice slightly behind Dan, as if she were trying to keep a little distance between them, but when they reached the edge of the water, Dan turned and pulled her close to him. Zinnie crouched down, watching as Dan hugged her, sliding her robe off her shoulders, then bent his head to her breast. They’re going to do it, Zinnie thought. Like Janice wrote about in her journal. The morning ritual. But instead of having sex, they knelt, naked from the waist up, in front of the heap of
stones, Janice holding herself a little stiffly, her back rigid, her hands clasped together on her lap. She looks cold, Zinnie thought. She looks like she wishes she were somewhere else.

Maybe it’s you who wishes that, she thought, watching the two of them kneeling there. Suddenly, she didn’t care if Janice and Dan saw her watching them, and coming out from behind the tree, she started off down the ridge, thinking she would just go down there and join them.

Pushing aside the frost-covered cattails, she hurried toward them. They had their backs to her and her heart thumped, afraid they would stand up and start back to the house before she even got there. “Hey, you guys,” she said, but the fog seemed to smother her, blanketing her voice, and stumbling through the thick underbrush, she felt something tangle around her ankle. She jerked her leg, trying to free it, then plunged to the ground, her hands jamming against the grit and rocks. She lay in the dirt, the twisted piece of barbed wire that had caught at her leg behind her now, still vibrating from its moorings on an old fence post. She rubbed the red mark on her ankle, then looked up as Dan and Janice stood, pulling their robes back on, started back to the house.

Flopping onto her back, she covered her face with her hands. The night before Dan had spent a long time whispering to her about his mother, how she’d been born in Juarez, had been forced into prostitution at a young age by some fleabag who was running a whorehouse out of his motel. I don’t even know who my father is, he’d said—just some guy who paid to sleep with a thirteen-year-old. He’d been sitting beside her, wearing just his loose white shirt, and when he said this, he pushed
her down on the living room floor, yanking off her jeans and underwear. Her breathing quickened as he ran his tongue up the inside of her thigh, pink and green lights exploding under her closed eyelids. She jerked them open again and found that she was looking at a plant that had forced its way through the cracking baseboard from outside, a long trailing vine that twisted and curled over the floor. As she stared at it, it seemed to lengthen and expand, its glossy leaves vibrant as it twined rapidly around the leg of the couch. Dan pulled her face back to his, trying to kiss her, but she grabbed his sweaty arms. “Did you give me something?” she asked. “What did you give me?” “Shh. Just some magic. Magic mushrooms.” He grinned. “I’m preparing your body for God,” he whispered as he thrust into her, and then he came, choking a little, biting her fingers, which he had grabbed and pulled into his mouth, in the quietness of the darkened house.

Now she sat up, watching as Dan and Janice walked past George’s motorcycle and up the steps to the house. George’s keys had fallen out of her pocket, and she picked them up, began jabbing at the ground with one of them until she’d made a small hole. She dropped them in and covered them up with the loose dirt, thumping it down with her fist. It doesn’t matter, she thought. In the fog, they probably hadn’t seen her, anyway. She stared at the mound she had made for a minute, then quickly dug them up again, put them back in her pocket and ran toward the house.

**

Dan cut the engine and, leaning over, handed Janice a piece of cloth. “Here, put this on.”
“Is that my pillowcase?” she said, as he wrapped the veil around her head and the lower part of her face. Pulling it away from her mouth, she glanced across the street. A few leaves were drifting down onto the sidewalk in front of the red brick buildings—an old hotel that had been converted into apartments, and next to that, Pearson’s Jewelry and Schmidt’s Shoe Repair. Through the wisps of fog, she could just make out the reflection of Dan’s truck and her own blue-veiled face peering out of it in the plate glass window of Shakey’s Pizza.

“You’re not taking it off, are you?”

“What?” she said, still looking across the street. On the way into town she’d seen a blond girl that looked like Zinnie on the side of the road, reaching for the handle of someone’s car, and now that was all she could think about. It had been her, Janice was almost positive, and in the glimpse she’d had, it looked as if she were about to climb in. Janice had started to say something, but then glanced at Dan and saw he was concentrating on the road ahead, trying to see through the fog, and hadn’t even noticed the car off to the side. She’d shut her mouth again and looked straight ahead, her palms suddenly sweaty.

_She had her backpack with her. Maybe she’s leaving_, she thought. She glanced down and saw that her hands were clenched tightly together, and she plucked at the sleeves of her robe, trying to hide them.

“Are you nervous?” Dan said, looking at her.

“Kind of.” She peered out the window at the Greyhound station at the end of the street.

“I’ll go in first, like we always do.”
She was still looking out the window.

"Come in the opposite door, okay? I’m going in the one by the carts.”

He gave her a brief, tight hug, and under the surface of his skin, she could feel his pent up energy, like coiled springs.

“I’ll be right there,” Janice said, but he was already out and loping down the sidewalk.

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She tried not to make eye contact with anyone, but even so, she could tell people were noticing her, some boys outside the pizza shop, two men changing a tire. A little girl stared openly, lagging behind her mother. “Natalie,” the mother said, jerking her by the hand. The little girl twisted her head around, still looking, as her mother pulled her along. Janice felt strangely visible and invisible at the same time, like she was wearing a Halloween costume. But that was the idea, Dan said—everyone looked, but no one recognized her, instead of looking at him, while he was hiding things inside his shirt or in the large pockets of his coat.

Once a manager had stopped her and insisted on searching her—she still remembered the feeling of his hands groping through the folds of her robe—but he didn’t find anything because Dan was already walking out the door, carrying off a gallon of milk and a crate of oranges. “It’s easier in the regular grocery stores,” he’d said to her the first time he took her to Paul’s IGA. They’d been sitting inside his truck, the sun spilling over the warm dashboard. “They don’t have anyone watching at the doors, like Walmart, and most of the time, they assume you’ve already paid for

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it, if you just look confident, don’t get all shifty-eyed and nervous. What?” he said, looking at her.

“Most of the time? What happens the rest of the time?” She twisted a string from the hem of her robe around her finger.

“Nothing. Nothing bad.”

She looked out the window.

“All those people in IGA with their little red nametags? Their little rules and stuff? They don’t know anything.”

“They act like they do.”

When she glanced at him, he was looking at her impatiently as if she should understand what he was talking about. “No, they don’t. They don’t know shit. Driving around town in their minivans, all tight-assed, going to church every Sunday. Their hair all bunned up.” He shook his head. “Say it with me.”

“What?”

“‘From the time the daily sacrifice . . . come on,” he said. She swallowed, then started in. “From the time the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. He will make a firm covenant with many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and destruction will be poured out on the desolator.’”

She stopped, but he went on by himself.

“‘And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth. And it was commanded to them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, but only those men who
have not the seal of God in their foreheads. And the shapes of the locusts were like horses and they had tails like unto scorpions—” He stopped in mid-sentence. “I never should have let George put up that antenna. You know that? They’re going to be able to see it from miles away.”

“Who?”

“The Beast. The anti-Christ. The angel of death.” A sheen of perspiration glistened on his forehead. He brushed his hair back from his face. “We have to get more stuff. Store it in the root cellar.”

Janice looked at her hands. The intensity in his voice was making a feeling of desperation rise up in her chest.

“Blankets. Kerosene, matches. Sudafed. Meth is going to be the only currency, once the world market collapses.” He glanced at her. “It’s not going to be that long, either. At least we have water. Listen.” He grabbed her hand. “My name’s Daniel. Did you ever think about that? That’s what my mother, a thirteen-year-old girl, a poor prostitute, named me. She had to leave me in a Mexican orphanage, she was so poor. Have you read the book of Daniel?”

She shook her head.

“It’s prophecy, all about the end times. Don’t you think there’s a reason she named me that?”

She could feel tears coming into her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know!” His voice was rising and from the corner of her eye, she could see him clenching the steering wheel. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I just don’t want to get in trouble, Dan.”
“Oh God,” he said, and leaning forward, he thumped his forehead against the steering wheel. The hollow sound reverberated through the truck, as he did it again and then again.

“Dan,” she said, pleading now. “Don’t.”

Finally, he flopped back against the seat, then turned, looking at her. “You won’t get in trouble. I promise, okay? You won’t.”

The truck was silent for a minute. “But what about the time we took stuff from the elementary school?” She knew she was just making things worse, but she couldn’t seem to stop. “I would have gotten in trouble that time. If we’d gotten caught.”

“We didn’t, though, did we.” He turned to look at her, his jaw set. “I made sure we didn’t. Anyway, all I want you to do is walk around.” He leaned over her to open her door. “Let’s just go. And don’t come anywhere near me so they don’t notice we’re together.”

Now she walked down the sidewalk and past the rows of cars and SUVS in the parking lot of the store. Sometimes she waited outside for a long time, hoping he would just come out again. Peering through the glass doors, she tried to see if she could catch a glimpse of him, then went slowly in.

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“You in line?” A voice behind her interrupted her thoughts.

Janice hesitated near the magazines in front of a check out stand, turning to the man behind her, who was sitting in a wheelchair. He was wearing a cowboy hat,
and had an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth. He tapped his fingers impatiently on the armrest.

“No,” she said.

“Would you mind then?” The cigarette bobbed up and down with each word.

“What?” She couldn’t take her eyes off that cigarette, and for a minute, she thought he wanted her to light it. Then he gestured with a jerk of his head and she realized he just wanted her to get out of the way. He shoved the wheels of his chair impatiently forward toward the check stand, narrowly missing the side of her foot. “Excuse me,” she said, moving aside.

“Nice get-up,” he said, but pretending she hadn’t heard, she walked down one of the long aisles. Taking a couple jars of spaghetti sauce, she put them in the red basket she was carrying and headed toward the dairy section in the back, looking around for Dan.

An older man with a graying crew cut winked at her as he clunked a gallon of milk into his cart. “Do you happen to know where the canned soup is?” he asked her. She picked out some large containers of yogurt and put them in her basket. “My wife usually does the shopping.” He eyed her, sounding a little embarrassed. “But she’s home sick. You from Boise? Portland, maybe?”

Janice caught a glimpse of Dan heading toward the produce section. He was carrying something under his arm, but she couldn’t tell what it was. “The soup’s that way, I think,” she pointed, then hurried off, hesitating at the end of the cereal aisle, trying to keep Dan in her range of vision. She peered around the end of the aisle. He was standing in front of a bin of apples, then headed toward the swinging doors that
led into the back room. As he started to push through the doors, an employee—a man wearing a green apron tied around his neck—came out through the other side.

"Can I help you with something?" she heard the clerk say to Dan. He stood in the doorway, one arm holding the door.

"I was just looking for the raspberries," Dan said.

"Everything we have is out front."

"Oh," he said, as if this were surprising information.

"Want me to show you where they are?" the man said.

"Nah, no big deal," Dan said. He stood looking at the man for a minute, then grinned in a casual way and zigzagged back through the bins of vegetables.

Janice turned around, almost bumping into the man in the wheelchair. "Hey," he said. He was looking up at her, one hand gripping the armrest. He took his cigarette out of his mouth and blew out a puff of smoke. "What was that guy trying to pull over there? Did you see that? Hey, are you one of those Muslims? Those Moonies? I think maybe I seen you somewhere before."

Janice felt her face flush. "I don't think so," she said, turning away. She glanced around, trying to see where Dan had gone.

"Wait a sec." His hazel eyes squinted at her above a day's growth of dark beard. "Would you mind grabbing that pack of cigarettes for me? Pretty please?"

Janice glanced at the package on the floor. The man was staring at her, his eyes glittery, his mouth twisted into a sarcastic smile. She picked up the cigarettes. "Here," she said, tossing them into his lap, but as she turned away again, he grabbed the edge of her robe.
“Good girl, huh? Real sweet and polite?” Pulling her close to his chair, he lifted the hem of her robe, peering underneath. “Nice legs,” he said.

As she snatched her robe out of his hand, a clerk, an older woman in a red vest, hurried past her. “Young man!” the woman called. “Get back here!” Janice glanced over to see Dan heading out the front door. “I saw your face, young man! I know what you look like!”

Several customers, including Janice, crowded out the door, watching, but Dan was already halfway down the block, striding quickly away. The woman started down the sidewalk after him, then stopped, her hands on her hips. Shaking her head in disgust, she marched back to the store, brushing by Janice impatiently as she pushed through the glass doors.

The man in the wheelchair came up behind Janice. “I told you he was up to something. Hey, where are you going?” he said, as she set her basket on the ground and walked away past the line up of carts in front of the store. “Wait!” she heard the man call after her, but when Dan glanced back in her direction, she gathered her robe up in her hands and ran, the cool air blowing against her bare legs. As she reached the truck, Dan threw something in the back, then opened the door and jumped in, unlatching hers from the inside.

She slammed the door and he revved the engine, pulling away from the curb.

“Did you see that old lady? She’s probably calling the cops right now,” he said, laughing. “What were you doing in there? You took long enough coming out.” He glanced in the rearview mirror as he drove down the street.
She grabbed the dashboard as he swerved around a corner. “I didn’t know where you were, and then this man—in the wheelchair. Did you see him? He said... ‘nice get-up.’ And then he said...” She started laughing, a flush of heat spreading over her face. “It was just weird. Did you get anything?”

He pulled a can of whipped cream out from his shirt and held it out. “For the pie. Case of beer, too.” He leaned back against the seat, feeling around in his pocket. “Want some?” he said, holding out a package of Cheetos. He tossed them in her lap, then reached over with his free arm and hugged her. “Your eyes look all bright.” He glanced at her. “What’d that guy say to you?”

He turned the corner onto Roosevelt and then made a right onto Twelfth Avenue. “He thought I was a Moonie, whatever that is,” she said, when she saw that he was waiting for an answer.

“What, did you try to sell him a flower?”

She laughed. “No. I think he just wanted an excuse to talk to me.” She could see Dan’s jaw working on a piece of gum. “He said he wanted to fuck me,” she said, glancing at Dan, a sudden tight feeling inside her gut. She leaned over, pulling his face to hers, and kissed him, her tongue inside his mouth.

“Oh yeah?” he said, his mouth still on hers. He twisted slightly so he could see the light. “What else did he say?”

“He wanted to suck my tits,” she said. It had taken her a long time to learn to talk like this, but suddenly she wanted to. She groped for his thigh. “He wanted to stick his cock in me.”
She saw him swallow. “Remember that time we went to the park that one night? Behind the bandshell? There’s probably no one there now. Nobody would notice, behind those bushes.” He threw his gum out the window, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. “Maybe you could tell me what else he said.”

She tightened her hand on his thigh, and as the light changed, she felt his muscles tense, and he floored it through the intersection. “They act like they’ve got the whole afternoon,” he said, impatiently, switching lanes as he passed a blue Toyota. “Hey,” he yelled out the window. “Can’t you drive up to the speed limit at least?”

The woman inside glanced at him, and the older man sitting beside her lifted his head wearily from the seat and held up his third finger. The woman swatted his hand down and rolled her window up. Janice could see her mouth working as she spoke angrily to her husband.

Dan pressed the truck up to sixty, passing a mini-van and some kind of a Dodge.

“Dan! It’s only thirty-five!” Janice said, clutching the edge of the seat.

“So? You want to get there, don’t you? Hey! What the hell?” They were almost to the corner of Lakeview Avenue, near the park, when he put on the brakes. He pulled the truck to the side of the road and pointed to a gravel driveway, across the street from the Gem Stop. “Is that Zinnie?”

Janice glanced over and saw a girl getting out of a car. As they watched, she reached back inside, then fell forward into it, as if she’d been jerked. They could see her wrangling with the man inside, then him grabbing her head and shoving it down.
“Hey!” Dan jumped out, ran over beside the car. “Hey, buddy! What do you think you’re doing?” He reached for the side of his boot where he kept his knife.

“Dan, wait,” Janice called, something inside her sinking. “Dan!” She leaned out the window. “Let’s just go!”

The man jumped out. “Who are you?” He was wearing work boots and had a red bandanna tied around his bicep. “Her boyfriend?”

Zinnie crawled out of the car, clutching her backpack, and stood slightly behind Dan.

“Her husband,” Dan said. Janice could see him gripping his knife, low, beside his leg.

The man laughed. “Yeah right,” he said, glancing down at the knife. He squinted at Zinnie for minute, then looked at Dan. “She told me she was kidnapped,” he said, hooking one thumb in his belt loop. “She said some guy’s been forcing her to stay out at his house and could I give her a ride to the cops.”

Dan looked at Zinnie. She crossed her arms and sighed. “What?” she said, finally. “You believe him?”

“Dan,” Janice called out again.

The man glanced at Janice, then back at Zinnie. “You ain’t married. Jesus. What do you think I am, some kind of an idiot?” Janice glanced at the red and blue lines on his shoulder. It was a tattoo of an eagle in flight, transposed over an American flag. “Who’s that in the truck then, the Virgin Mary?” he said. He jumped in his car and slammed the door. “I am going to go to the cops,” he said through the open window. “Tell them some hippie freak was threatening me with a knife.” A
blackbird that had been perched on the hood flapped away into the sky, squawking, as the man backed out of the driveway and roared off.

Dan turned to Zinnie and she slung her backpack over her shoulder. “I just... I wanted a ride to town, to see what you guys were doing. I thought I could find you.”

“She was leaving,” Janice called, getting out of the truck. “She was going away and never coming back.”

“What? You knew about this?” Dan shoved his knife back in his boot, then looked at Janice.

“No!” Janice got back in, and unwinding the veil from around her head, she crammed it in the glove compartment. She could feel her hair plastered to the top of her head, and she ran her fingers through it as she watched Dan and Zinnie talking. Zinnie crossed her arms, moving her toe around in the dirt. Janice’s hands were shaking and she could feel her heart thrumming in her chest. She tried to clasp her hands together in her lap, but after a minute, she couldn’t stand it any longer. “Dan!” she called out the window. “Will you please come on?” She felt like she could hardly breathe.

Finally Dan started toward the truck and after a minute, Zinnie followed him, scuffling through the gravel.

“He took my backpack,” Zinnie said as she got in beside Janice. “He was going to.”

“I saw,” Janice said, looking straight ahead. Zinnie’s arm was pressed up against hers and Janice shifted to get away from her, but there was no more room.
Dan stuck the keys in the ignition. "Talk about a freak. That guy was a jackass." He glanced at Janice, but she crossed her arms and didn’t look at him.

When no one said anything, he cranked open his window and adjusted the sideview mirror, looking into it for a long time. "The fog’s about cleared off," he said, finally, rubbing a spot on the windshield with his sleeve, then started the truck and backed out onto the road.

"Dan!" Janice said.

"What?"

She shook her head, unable to bring herself to say anything.

He rubbed his thumb hard in the palm of her hand. "What a fucker," he said, putting his arm around her shoulder as they drove down the street.

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The pig hung over the fire that George had built, its skin burnt and black-looking, and as it cooked, drops of moisture and fat sizzled and popped on the red embers below. Janice sat on a tree stump, her chin in her hands, trying not to look at the way its ears stuck straight up, its mouth stretched into what looked like a grin.

"You guys were gone a long time this afternoon." Amber shoved a bottle of beer into Janice’s hand. "Phew," she said, waving away the smoke that was roiling up from the barbeque pit.

George and Dan were leaning against the side of the shed, George laughing as they clinked their bottles together, his voice drifting across the smoky pit. "We went to the store," Janice said, glancing at Zinnie, who was huddled beside the side of the
house, her arm wrapped around her knees. “Dan almost got into a fight with some
guy. Is George drunk already?”

Amber shrugged. “He’s mad because I keep bugging him about where he was
the last few days. He was probably at some strip club.”

“What strip club?”

“Boise has a bunch of them. Didn’t you know that? Even Meade has one
now. My friend Darlyn works there.”

“As a stripper?” Janice looked at Amber. Her eyes looked too bright,
somehow, and she kept rubbing at a red spot on her face, as if she couldn’t hold still.

“Yeah. She makes a ton of money. You want to go there sometime? We
could apply for a job.” She grinned.

“Just to make George mad?” Janice asked.

“Maybe.” She thumped her finger against her bottle several times, then
scratched at her face again. “He must have been sleeping somewhere the past four
nights.”

Janice looked over at him. He hadn’t bothered to cut his hair lately and it
hung over his glasses in messy strands. “Maybe he was just riding around on his
motorcycle.”

As they watched, he sniffed the air, then went over beside the pig and poked it
a little. “Meat’s almost done,” he announced. The light from the fire caught his
glasses as he held his bottle up in their direction. “Here that, girls? Hey you, over by
the tree? Hear that?”
“I think that means we’re supposed to go over there,” Amber said, rolling her eyes. She’d unwrapped a piece of gum and was chewing nervously on it. “What’s the matter with her?” she said, pointing to Zinnie, who had her head down on her knees now, her arms covering it.

Janice looked at Amber, then away again. “She said she doesn’t feel good.”

“Hey,” Dan said coming over beside them. He looked at Amber, taking a swallow of his beer. “George got some party favors. For tonight. After we dunk her.” He gestured in Zinnie’s direction. “And eat some of that pig flesh. And Janice’s pie.”

“Cool,” Amber said, clinking her bottle against Dan’s. “Party favors.”

Dan grinned. “You’re my kind of girl.”

Amber leaned over and kissed him on the mouth, then threw her arms around his neck. “You still love me, don’t you,” she said, clinging to him.

“Course I do,” Dan said. He kissed her on the forehead.

“Dan loves everyone,” Janice said, then looked down at her hands.

“It’s all about the blood. Community and blood. Right?” He unwound Amber’s arms and looked at Janice, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at him.

They’d had a conversation after they got home in which he told her she needed to try harder to accept Zinnie as part of the group. “It had to be fate, or divine intervention,” he’d said. “The way she ended up here? She’d probably be in jail right now, otherwise. Or dead, maybe. She could be dead. Do you realize that? We saved her. I saved her. We can’t just abandon her.”

She’d agreed, but now she didn’t know why.
Dan nudged Janice’s foot with his. “It’s blackberry, isn’t it? The pie?”


“You get to squirt whipped cream all over it, though, right?” He grinned, swatting at a large moth hovering near his head. “You guys should go talk to her.” He motioned to Zinnie again, with his bottle. “I think she’s a little nervous.”

“Why? What’s going on now?” Amber looked at Dan.

“She’s getting baptized tonight,” Janice said.

Amber glanced at Janice, then looked at Dan. “Oh. So now I’m number three in line?”

Janice looked down at the ground, her throat tightening. I’m Amber, she thought. I’m going to be just like her in a few years. Taking drugs so I don’t know what’s going on. She could feel the breath coming quickly in and out of her lungs.

“She said she wants to.” The moth fluttered past Dan’s head again and he swung wildly at it with his bottle. “Jesus,” he said, as it dropped to the ground.

“Dan! Why did you do that?” Janice said, the words exploding out of her. She squatted down beside it. “I hate it when you do things like that.” She looked up at him. “It was one of those pretty ones. At night they look like little ghosts flying around.”

Dan shook his head. “It was just a moth,” he said. “A bug.” He looked at her for a minute, then walked over to the roasting pit and stared at the pig, one hand on his hip.
George jumped off the card table he'd been sitting on and came over beside Dan. "The ribs are the best part," he said to Dan. "Give me your knife." He hacked off a piece, then chewed, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. "Holy shit. Try some. This ham should be good, too." He started cutting into the rump, handing Dan a hunk of meat.

"When do you think that farmer's going to notice one of his pigs is gone?"

Dan said, swallowing.

"I thought you said it got hit by a car," Amber called out. "Liar."

"Would have gotten hit if I hadn't shot it," George said. "It was running straight for the road."

Dan laughed, dropping his head.

"He had a whole herd of them, shrieking and rooting around in the dirt. You should have seen me riding home with that pig on the back of my bike. Should have propped it up and put a helmet on it." He laughed as he gouged out another hunk of meat. "Want some more?" he said, holding it out. "How about you girls?"

"You women," Amber said, a slightly hysterical note in her voice.

"Oh, excuse me," said George. He came over beside them, holding out the meat. Juice ran down his arm. "Would you women like some?"

Janice shook her head.

"Come on. You want some. Amber, I know you do."

"Fine. I'll be back in a minute," she said to Janice. "You sure you don't want some?"

Zinnie got up off the ground and started over to the table.
“I’m sure,” Janice said.

“You might as well eat something.” Amber was still looking at her. “It’s not going to make any difference if you don’t.”

“I can’t! Anyway, it’s too smoky out here,” Janice said, and started unsteadily toward the house, pulling her shirt up to wipe her eyes. No one stopped her, and after a minute, she turned toward the river. The other night she’d dreamed that she was in the water, roots sprouting from the side of a small island, gnarled and tangled tree roots, and she had grabbed onto one, trying to climb out onto the island, but the roots were slippery and she kept sliding back into the water. Then something tangled around her leg—it felt like her skirt, only longer, hanging clear down below her feet—and she kicked, trying to loose herself, but the skirt twisted tighter and tighter around her legs, and she could feel herself sinking down and down into the dark water.

Her palms began to sweat, thinking about it. She looked out at the river, trying to take a deep breath. It seemed so different now, compared to the daytime, when it stretched flat and wide across the dry landscape. The moon was just rising in the dark sky, and the water looked almost like a mirage somehow, something mystical and unreal about it, the edges lined with thick green vegetation, as if a jungle had sprung up suddenly along the bank.

She walked down the ridge toward the water, suddenly remembering the house she’d lived in when she was a little girl, in Boise, before all the stupidness between her parents started, long before they’d moved to Meade. It was brick, that house, like all the houses in that neighborhood, and the back yard stretched out for
what seemed like forever, to a wooden fence covered with winding tendrils of honeysuckle. In the summer, on Saturday evenings, her father cranked open the irrigation valve—one of the few of that type left in their neighborhood—and the water gushed out onto the lawn, flooding it, up to her ankles. She remembered running through it in her summer p.j.'s, sliding her feet along the slick, cool grass, running clear to the swing set near the fence, then looking back at the house, seeing her father waving at her, far, far away, across the large body of water, the ocean of irrigation.

*Where is he?* She lifted her head for a minute, as if he might be there now, on the other side of the river, but there was no one there, just a pelican, its long beak pointing down, its wings tucked close against its body as it floated along on the current.

She turned slowly away from the river, trying to swallow the lump in her throat.

Glancing back at the others around the roasting pit, she saw that Dan was looking at her, gesturing to her to come back over, but she pretended she hadn’t seen him and ran off down the bank, and into the woods.

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On the other side of the uprise that led to the bridge, Janice half-slid through the dirt, then held down the barbed wire fence and stepped over it, walking toward a stand of small willows. She knew where she was going—there was an old canoe—part of a canoe, at least—partly sunk into the dirt, in an area almost covered over with thick weeds and cattails, and she had a blanket there, and a lantern, its handle slung.
over the branch of an overhanging tree. She skirted around behind the willows and pushed through a stand of cattails. She was always a little afraid that somehow, when she got there, the canoe would be gone—someone would have excavated it somehow, and carted it off to a museum. It was really old, she was pretty sure—it looked like it was made out of petrified bark, and once early last spring, when the snow in the mountains melted all at once, in a wave of early spring warmth, the river had risen high enough to submerge it. Its bottom had been filled with a pool of dark water for a long time after that—and she had startled herself one evening by looking down into it and seeing her own white face there—but now the water had finally evaporated and it was covered with a layer of fine, dry moss and crumbling lichens.

Stepping around the last thicket of tall bushes and trees, she stumbled a little, then caught herself and bent over by the canoe, running her fingers along the rough edge that stuck up above the ground. She fumbled for the matches in her pocket, then felt for the lantern, lifting the glass chimney to light the wick. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and climbed into the canoe, leaned back against the bow. It was mostly dirt, the bow end, having been filled in over the years and packed into a solid dense layer, small plants sprouting from it now, clover and grass, even, and loops of bindweed that flowered into white blossoms throughout the spring and summer. Flashes of light from the swaying lantern illuminated the dark mossy sides of the canoe and in brief glimpses, the trees and bushes on either side. The voices that had followed her from the circle around the roasting pig had faded away, but somewhere in the distance, a frog peeped, a small sound that made it seem as though daylight was not that far away, even in the utter darkness. The bushes rustled in the
wind and she pulled the blanket up around her head. She wanted to think about
things. Just for a few minutes, just by herself, without Dan, without Amber. Without
Zinnie sitting by the side of the house, her head in her arms. The bushes rustled
again, and she raised her head, looking around.

“You guys! Cut it out.”

Janice sat up.

“What is that, Brandon? A stick?”

A girl’s annoyed voice was followed by laughter, then another boy’s voice,
also laughing. “It’s for the weenies.”

“Well, quit poking me with it.”

Janice scrambled out of the canoe and crouched down behind the tree that
held the lantern.

“I’m not poking you. I have respect for women.”

“You can poke me with it,” another male voice said.

“I’m not touching you, fag-breath.”

Janice peered out from behind the tree. There were four of them, passing
along on the bank of the river, and as she watched, one of the boys punched one of
the other ones. The girl stopped and looked at them. “I don’t know what you retards
are doing, but would you please cut it out? I thought we were going fishing.”

One of the boys burst out laughing. “Is that what you told your mom, Katie?”

“I told her I was staying overnight with Megan.”

“Oooh, a chick party! Were you gonna sleep in the same bed?”
“God, Jason! I’m going home.” The girl pushed past the boys and started back in the other direction, but the third boy, who hadn’t spoken until now, grabbed her arm.

“Come on, Katie. I’ll take you home in a little while.”

“Promise?”

“Sure,” he said.

The boy’s voice sounded familiar, and as they passed almost directly in front of her, Janice stood up to get a better look, her head knocking into the lantern.

“Hey,” she heard one of the boys say. “Do you guys see that light over there?”

Janice grabbed for the lantern and lifted the chimney to blow it out, but it was hot and she dropped it. She crouched back down, shaking her burned fingers.

“What was that? You guys, wait,” the girl said, as the boys crashed into the trees.

The shattered glass crunched under her feet as Janice stepped back, then ran through the bushes, shoving her way into a thick tangle of sagebrush and cattails. She pulled a hunk of loose tumbleweed in front of her and peered out at them. One of the boys held up a lighter. “Doesn’t anybody have a flashlight?” he asked.

One of the other boys pulled one out of his pocket, but it produced a feeble beam, then went out. “Batteries are dead,” he said, shaking it, and clicking it on and off a few times.

“What’s this?” the girl said, leaning down. When she stood back up, Janice could see that she was holding some small pale garment. “It looks like baby clothes.”
“Maybe there’s a baby out here.”

One of the other boys laughed. “Yeah, right. Just wandering around out in the woods.”

“This is scary,” the girl said. “Let’s go back.”

“Here’s the big baby.” One of the boys imitated her in a high voice. “I’m scared. Let’s go back.”

“Leave her alone, Jason. Anyway, there’s nothing to see.” The boy with the familiar voice held his lighter up and for a minute, Janice could see his face and the outline of his shoulders. He was wearing a dark-colored t-shirt, which fit snugly over his arms and chest, and a baseball cap. It was Matt Cooper, she realized with a start, only older and bigger. It was like he had put on a whole new body over his old one since she saw him last—layers of muscle and flesh—and he was taller, too, by several inches. And his face looked less impish, his eyebrows furrowing his forehead as he squinted at the others in the darkness.

“Maybe it was a ghost,” one of the other boys said, grabbing the girl’s waist, then jumping away again. “And it left its clothes behind.”

Janice stared at Matt. This is what it’s like to see a ghost, she thought.

“Look you guys, there’s nothing out here. It was probably just some animal, its eyes glowing. Or maybe an alien.” He laughed, and for a second, he sounded more like the boy she remembered from high school. “Matt,” she whispered. For a second, she imagined getting up and running out from the trees, then wondered what she would possibly say to him. She glanced down at her grubby skirt, the moons of
dirt under her fingernails. She touched her cheek. There was a small cut on it, from a piece of the shattered lantern.

“You guys!” the girl said. “What if it’s a UFO?”

“A girl was abducted out here,” one of the boys said. “I saw it on TV.”

Matt shoved his lighter back in his pocket. “What, by some little green men? This is lame, you guys. I’ve got to be to work at eight tomorrow.” He started off, back down toward the river. “I’m going to take off,” he called back to them.

“Matt,” the girl called. “Wait a minute, okay?” Janice could hear the flirtatious tone in her voice, along with a faint undercurrent of fear. She likes him, she thought. She’s hoping he’s going to ask her out, but so far they’ve just been hanging out together sometimes, and she knows he isn’t really interested in her. She peered out at them. Her senses felt extra sharp, as if she could almost see the aura of insecurity that surrounded the girl, sense the series of decisions that had led her to come out to the river in the middle of the night with a bunch of boys, none of whom apparently liked her that much.

The girl ran after him, and after a minute, the other two boys trailed back down along the riverbank. They must have a car, out near Victory Road, she thought. It wasn’t the road she and Dan usually used, but it worked, if you were willing to wind south through the farms and hilly roads. She pushed her way out of the bushes and crawled down along the bank, watching until they were out of sight. The small garment that the girl had been holding lay discarded in the dirt and Janice lit a match. As it flared up into the darkness, she could see that it was a tiny white undershirt, with metal snaps, small enough for a newborn ghost, she thought.
She held it, looking at it for a minute, then felt around on the ground to see if they had dropped anything else, but there was nothing, just rocks and weed stubble and the hard edge of the buried canoe. She was surprised they hadn’t noticed it, or stumbled into it by accident, but the sagebrush growing up around it made it easy to miss. Wrapping the tiny shirt inside the blanket, she stuffed them both inside the canoe, then counting how many matches she had left, she stood up and began wending her way back through the trees.

After she had walked a ways, she glanced up, a movement catching her eye. She crouched down again, thinking maybe it was the high school kids coming back again, then realized she had come farther than she thought, and it was just the shadowy figures of Dan and George, moving around the fire.

**

“I know a good one,” said Amber. She and Dan were sitting at the card table, passing a joint back and forth. Someone had set up kerosene lanterns all around, and clouds of moths and gnats hovered around them, light shining through the haze of smoke and insect wings. “Except this one’s true.”

“Yeah?” said George. He stuck a long, thin branch into the fire and when it began to smolder, pulled it out again. “The Force be with you,” he said, waving the flaming stick in Amber’s direction.

“No, listen,” she said. “There was this big empty field behind our house when I was a little girl, and one time, me and this girl named Heather, who my mom didn’t like very much, sneaked off to this house way on the other side of the field. They had peacocks, and you know that weird sound they make? Like a child screaming?
Anyway, we thought maybe there was a kid over there, being murdered, but instead it was just these big peacocks, fanning their tails around.”

“That’s a great ghost story,” said George, pinching out the burning end of the stick with his fingers. “Shit! Ouch.” He picked up a bottle of beer and poured some over his fingers, then swigged down the rest of the bottle.

Amber gave him a look. “Anyway, we were standing there, looking at these peacocks, and a little girl came running out of the house and asked if we wanted to come in and play. She was skinny, I remember, and she had little wisps of blond hair that was so white that her scalp almost showed through. You know what I mean? And glasses. Pink-framed glasses. So we went inside and played with her for a long time, lighting little pieces of paper on fire, with this box of matches she had, and then finally, I got worried my mom was going to be mad at me, so we said we had to go home. And the little girl told us to come back the next day, so we did, but guess what?”

“She was dead,” George said. He had tipped back another bottle of beer and Janice could see his Adam’s apple moving up and down. “She had turned into a peacock.”

Dan laughed, shaking his head.

“No! She wasn’t there.”

“She wasn’t home? Wow, that is scary,” said George. He thumped the bottle down on the table and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms.

“George! I mean she wasn’t anywhere. We knocked on the door and this old woman came out and we said we wanted to play with the little girl that lived there,
and the old woman said there was no little girl. We told her we had played with her just the day before, but she just looked at us really weird and said, ‘no one else lives here,’ and shut the door. So see?” Amber looked around, triumphantly. “I think she was a ghost, that little girl. I can’t think of any better explanation.”

“It was probably just the wrong house,” said George.

“There wasn’t any other house,” said Amber.

Everyone was silent for a minute. Janice glanced over at Zinnie, who was sitting on a log on the edge of the river, her arms wrapped around her knees.

“Some people call those birds of paradise. Peacocks, I mean,” George said, stumbling over a branch as he went over to the stash of beer in the cooler. “Isn’t that right, Dan?” he started, but in the distance a coyote howled, and his voice trailed off as a chorus of them started in, yipping and barking.

“Hey you guys?” Zinnie said. Her voice sounded faint. “What is that?”

“It’s the pig,” George said. “I mean, it’s coyotes. They want it. They can smell it.”

“What’s she doing over there?” Amber asked. “What are you doing, Zinnie?”

Zinnie glanced over at them. “I don’t know. Dan said to wait.” She put her head down on her knees and Janice could hear her crying.

Dan sat there, jiggling his knee up and down, then shoved back from the table and walked across the sand to her.
"Yeah, put her out of her misery, why don’t you," George called after him, twisting the cap off another beer. Throwing his stick into the fire, then stood there staring at the pig.

Janice glanced at Zinnie. Dan was standing beside her now, talking to her, and after a minute, she got up and started taking off her clothes, bending to untie her shoes, then pulling her pants down and stepping out of them, grabbing onto Dan’s arm to keep her balance.

When she was completely undressed, Dan took off his own shoes and waded out into the water.

George took a flask out of his pocket and took a long swallow, then stuck it in his pocket. “I’ve got a story,” he said, picking up Dan’s knife.

“Shut up, George. Here,” Amber said, handing Janice a joint. “Let’s get high. Might help a little.”

Janice looked at her, then took a drag.

“No, I’m serious.” He heaved the pole with the remains of the roasted pig off onto the ground and picked up Dan’s knife. “It’s about some Indians in Venezuela,” he said, and started hacking at the pig. “Tropical Forest.”

“Sounds like some kind of fruit punch,” Amber muttered.

George glanced over at Dan again, then went on talking. “You know how they catch fish, those Indians? They put poison in their streams, some of them, where they make a dam from sticks and mud. Some kind of poison.”
Behind her, Janice could hear snatches of Dan’s voice. Christ’s blood was shed for you. She glanced over and saw Zinnie huddled naked on the bank, her arms crossed over her chest.

“What they do is, wait for the fish to be stunned by the poison, then the women scoop them up in baskets,” George went on, his voice thickening. He bent over the pig, sawing at it. “The little ones die right away, but you know what the women do? They bite the big ones behind the head, to kill them.”

“Is that what you were doing down by the river this morning?” Amber asked.

“Biting the heads off the fish?”

George worked at the pig with the knife, then squatted down, pulling at it with his hands. “No,” he said. “I was trying to cook this fucking thing,” he said, throwing the knife down. “Hey Dan!” He shouted. He held something up in his hands, then carried it over to the shed. Propping a ladder against the wall, he began to climb and when he was on the roof, Janice could see what he had under his arm, the snout, the pointed ears, the whole of the pig’s head, its teeth still intact somehow, grimacing in the darkness.

This do in remembrance of me. Dan held out his hand to Zinnie and she took a step toward him, her arms still clasped around her chest.

“Dan,” George yelled again, then flung his arms forward, throwing the head to the ground, where it thumped heavily, rolling to a stop beside a large rock. “Did you hear what I said?” He jumped down, grunting as he landed on all fours, then ran unsteadily down to the edge of the river.
"Dan," he said again, splashing out into the water. "Dan. I need to tell you something."

Dan turned to look at him. "What?"

"This girl." He gestured to Zinnie. "She isn’t wearing any clothes."

Zinnie hesitated by the rock, still hugging herself with her arms. Her t-shirt and panties and jeans lay crumpled on the ground.

"What’s wrong with you?" Dan said. "You’re wasted."

George grabbed Dan’s arm. "No, no, drink is good. Drink is good. But this girl—" He slung his arm around Zinnie’s neck. "This girl is naked, Dan. With her little tits and things."

"That’s because I’m baptizing her. Don’t you get it? She’s going to stay here now. In this house."

"But why do you get to baptize her?" George sounded like he was almost crying. He floundered into the water and clung to Dan’s arm. "Why do you get to?"

"God sent her here, and He told me what to do." Dan punched his fist into George’s shoulder and pushed him into the water. "Get hold of yourself, man. Go take a swim."

George came up gasping for breath, then pulled off his shirt and grabbed Dan’s arm again. "You take a swim, why don’t you. You’re the one with the rocket in your pants."

Dan pushed George aside and waded out of the water, but George staggered after him, punching him in the back. Dan bent over for a minute, coughing, then
lunged at George, pushing him to the ground. He pinned his arms against the dirt, but George wrenched one arm free, and swung at him, hitting him in the jaw.

"Ow, godammit. I am the Christ, the Son of the living God." He punched George in the stomach. "Those are the words. Those are the words. Don’t you get it?" He kept punching until George bellowed, crawling away over the sand.

"Stay put. I’ll be right back, you son of a bitch." Dan ran over to the shed. "Move," he said to Amber, then swept the paper plates, beer bottles, matches, everything, off the card table onto the ground. Janice could see Dan fumbling with something in the dark.

"Dan! What are you doing?" Janice cried out.

Dan just laughed, pouring the contents of a small box that’d he pulled from his pocket onto the table, then dragged George across the sand and heaved him onto the table. George yelled as the carpet tacks sank into his bare skin. Janice had seen them both use a razor blade to slash their foreheads, other times while he and Dan were fighting, then laugh crazily as the blood streamed down their faces.

"Who’s going to baptize her now?" Dan shouted.

George lay on the table, rolling from side to side, half-laughing and half-crying.

Amber jumped up. "You guys are idiots! You think I’m crazy!"

George had closed his eyes closed and was pounding his arms back and forth against the sides of the table. In the glow from the lanterns, Janice could see some tacks protruding from his skin. As George plucked one from his elbow, a small geyser of blood spurted up.
“George!” Dan shouted.

Janice and Amber both turned to look. Dan had scrambled up onto the top of the shed, and as they watched, he leaped off onto George, the table collapsing underneath their combined weight.

“You fucker!” This time George’s mouth opened in a scream, and he swung wildly at Dan, punching at his back and sides. In the semi-darkness, Janice could see what Dan apparently couldn’t, that George’s ankle was pinned underneath the table. Behind the table, the pig’s head lay discarded in the dirt, its snout pointing to the sky.

George finally shoved Dan off, and he stumbled and fell backwards.

“You can’t even fight, you’re so wasted,” Dan shouted, from where he was lying on the ground. He jumped up, then grabbed a baggie of weed from his coat pocket and began rolling it into a joint. Making his way back over to Zinnie, Dan put his arm around her shoulder. She was crying and had started to get dressed again, but stopped when he came over beside her. “Here. Just relax. Everything’s all right,” Janice heard him say. She could see his chest heaving. He and Zinnie stood there together, smoking the joint, her pants pulled halfway up, then he waded out into the water. When he was up to his calves, he held out his hand.

**

Janice opened her eyes, squinting in the moonlight. A dog was barking somewhere, faintly, in the distance, and Dan’s side of the mattress was empty. She’d been vaguely aware of that for hours, as she slept, a slight feeling that something wasn’t quite right, a coolness coming from his side, where there should have been heat and heavy warmth, and now she sat up, glancing at the corner where his boots
usually sat, but they were gone, too. Maybe he’s fishing, she thought—he took his
gear and went out in the night when he couldn’t sleep sometimes, or just walked the
river, memorizing the locations of the largest rocks, where the bank had washed down
into low silt and mud, where the fish jumped most readily. Once he’d walked clear to
Swan Falls, in the river, had seen a hawk circling around in the darkness—it had
landed on his head for a minute before it flapped away again, he’d told her, excitedly,
showing her the dig marks on his scalp, underneath his hair.

Maybe you scraped your head on a branch, she’d said, peering at him from the
bed.

No, he said. I didn’t. Don’t you believe me?

Lying back down now, she tried to close her eyes again. Somewhere far
away, the dog barked again. It sounded lonely, as if it were shut in someone’s barn.
You’ve seen the catfish. They’ll eat a piece of fried chicken off the line. She could hear his voice, convincing, eager. They get huge out here. She turned over, trying to get comfortable, some thought niggling at the back of her mind, something she couldn’t quite bring to the surface.

I don’t kill fish. I’ll hold the fishing pole, but I won’t bring them to their death.

Was that Zinnie?

She flung her blankets off, got up and went to the window. She could see George’s motorcycle, near the shed, its bulky shape outlined it the dark. Zinnie had pointed to it, lying half-hidden in a drain ditch, as they were driving home earlier. She had apparently taken off on it, then run out of gas a couple miles from the house.
After they were home, Dan had walked back to get it, wheeled it to the house before George had even noticed it was gone.

That’s how things would always be for Zinnie, Janice thought. People wanting to be around her even when she acted like an idiot. Making excuses for her, not holding her responsible. And she seemed to sort of expect that, that she was free to do whatever she wanted, and people would still love her.

The dog barked again, plaintively, and Janice realized she was gripping the windowsill, her fingers pinching tightly against the wood.

Even George, she thought, remembering the night before, him lying on the ground, his forehead and one of the lenses of his glasses smeared with blood. The last she had seen him, he was limping away toward the woods, carrying the knife he had used to cut up the pig. “I’m not coming back, Dan,” he had shouted. “I told you before I wasn’t going to do this.” He’d sounded like he was almost crying. “I’m going to the hospital.” “I’ll go,” Amber had said, running after him. Zinnie was wrapped in one of the white robes by that time, shivering and wet, and Janice had turned away, walked up the ridge to the house. “I’ll be inside in a minute,” Dan had called after her, but now she wasn’t sure that’s what he’d said.

Or if he’d come in at all. Amber or George, either. The dog barked again, more insistently now, and reaching for her sweatshirt, she grabbed the big flashlight Dan kept by their bed and made her way down the creaky stairs.

“How long have you been in there?” she said. She ran past the flattened card table and yanked open the door of the shed. The dog sprang out from the dark interior, barking, his tail whipping around in a frenzied circle. “How long have you been in there?” she said.
“Did someone shut you in there?” He sat, panting, still wagging his tail. She touched his nose. It was warm and dry. “Where’s George and Dan?” she said, grabbing the dog’s collar and leading him down over the ridge to the river. When they got close, he bounded ahead of her to the edge of the water and began lapping, noisily.

He sniffed around the bushes and bounded off again, up the ridge and back toward the house. She followed him, running after him through the silent darkness, past the house, past the root cellar, the beam from the flashlight bobbing ahead of her. She pointed it up toward the sky for a moment, looking for bats, or owls, or the hawk Dan had seen, but all she could see was George’s antenna, silvery, trembling, on the top of its tall pole. “George,” she called out, as she approached the mud hut. A small light flickered through the crevices in the woven door of the hut and Janice pushed it open. A candle in a tall glass jar had been left burning on George’s desk, and a humming sound was coming from his ham radio, the metal knobs gleaming in the flickering light. She aimed her flashlight at it, then leaned over and touched one of the knobs. A torrent of voices flooded the small hut, and she jerked her hand back. The radio seemed alive, almost, as if it might open its mouth and call her name. She looked at it for a minute, then tapped the microphone lightly with her finger.

“Hello?” she said, bending down to it. “Hello. Come in. Hello.” Lifting it, she spoke into it, the way her father used to. “CQ, CQ. W7GCF. Hey, Dad, are you out there?” she said. She waited, pressing her mouth against the cool metal. “Dad. Come in, Dad.” she said once more, turning another dial, but there was no reply, just static, and the drone of low voices calling out over the airwaves.

Boy-Dog whined, and glancing over, she saw him sniffing something, and
then a shadowy movement. "George?" she said, pointing her flashlight into the corner, but it was Dan, lying on the ground, his arm around Zinnie, holding her against his chest. "Dan? What are you doing?"

His eyes flew open, startled, uncomprehending, and then he blinked, recognizing her.

She faltered toward the door, then turned around again.

They were both naked, the white robe Zinnie had been wearing earlier crumpled in the dirt. "Maybe you should . . . hey," Dan was saying, nudging her. His voice seemed a little slurred and he tried to lift Zinnie to a sitting position, but her head drooped, and he glanced up at Janice, a panicked flash in his eyes. "She had a little—" he started, shaking her again, but when she didn’t respond, he seemed to drift away, as if he were thinking about something else, and after a minute, he leaned back against the wall of the hut. "She’ll be all right," he said, letting her slump slowly to the ground. After a minute, he glanced up again. "If I stop praying, everything will stop. The whole world."

"What?"

"I’ve been praying all night."

"What are you talking about?" Janice said, pressing her hands against her forehead.

He shook his head, as if she were being ridiculous. "Come here." He beckoned to her.

"No!"

"Come here," he said. He sat up and grabbed her hand. "$I want to show you
something."

“Where’s George? I was just looking for George,” she said, her voice rising.

“Just for s second,” he said. He pulled the hair away from Zinnie’s neck.

“Look what I did.” He sounded pleased with himself. “Right here.”

“No!” she said again, but there was something black behind Zinnie’s ear and
Janice glanced at it, thinking for a second that it was an insect, a locust or a praying
mantis, attached to her neck, its black claws biting into her skin. “What is that?”

“It’s a tattoo. The early Christians had tattoos. On their faces or arms.
Remember? I told you that.”

He took the flashlight out of her hand and pointed it at Zinnie. The black
thing was a mark, shiny and flat, two small devils cavorting behind her ear, one
kicking its slender leg out, holding a nail, the other holding a tiny hammer. On the
ground beside her was a pen, a small round black motor attached to it, with a wire
hanging off the back.

“I’m going inside,” she said, trying to stand up again, but Dan pulled her back
down.

“No. Don’t you see?” he said, when he saw she was about to say something.
He picked up the tattoo gun and held it up. “It’s for the seal.”

“What?”

“The seal of God. She’s safe now.” He touched the tattoo lightly, as if her
skin were made of silk. “Touch it. It feels nice. Just once.” He grabbed Janice’s
hand and put one of her fingers on Zinnie’s neck. It was warm and Janice could feel
a flutter of pulse there, Zinnie’s blood beating delicately underneath her skin.
“See?” Dan said. “She’s fine. I had to give her something, put her out for a little bit. She’ll be fine.” He looked up at Janice, then slowly pulled her finger into his mouth.

Her stomach started to tighten and she jerked her hand away. “Don’t!” she said. “Don’t touch me!” She stood up and turned to the door, but he grabbed her wrist.

“Wait,” he said. “Don’t go. She’s asleep. You’ll like it, I promise.” He ran his finger down Janice’s lips and chin and over the hollow of her neck. “Kiss her. Right there. Where the mark is. Just try it.”

“I can’t!” she said. “I feel sick, Dan.” Something was rising up in her, a panicked thumping. My heart, she thought. It’s my heart and it’s going to lodge in my throat and choke me.

“I could give you one, too. A tattoo.”

“No!” she said.

“She let me,” he said. He was still gripping Janice’s wrist, and with his free hand, he touched the little pulse moving up and down behind Zinnie’s ear. “She let me do it.”

“She didn’t want you to! She doesn’t know what she’s doing!” How had this happened? She felt like she had fallen over the edge of a cliff, or into some deep well, and would never be able to claw her way up again. I’ll call the police, she thought. I don’t have to stay here. I’ll tell them Zinnie’s a runaway and they’ll have to put her in jail. I’ll tell them I’m a runaway. She tried to swallow, but her throat was dry and she choked a little, coughing into her hand.
“Come on.” He scrounged around in his pocket and held out a handful of pills. “Here. Take these. Party favors. George brought party favors, remember?”

He tightened his grip on her wrist. “Kiss her. Right here.”

“I can’t!” She twisted her arm, trying to pull away. “I don’t know how,” she said, desperately.

His mouth lifted a little, into a grin. “You can. Sure. Sure you can. Right here.”

This is what I want you to do, his eyes said. Just this one thing.

“No!” she said, then felt the dirt grind into her knees as he grabbed the back of her head and pulled it down.

“You’ll like it,” he said. “I promise.”
Janice pulled the hood of her sweatshirt jacket up over her head and scrunched down in the seat, but even so, through the windshield, she could see the flat sky pressing down, the heaps of grayish snow piled in the gutters. The street and the sky and the sidewalks were all the same color, except for the red and green tinsel Christmas decorations hanging from the light poles.

"A perfect score on the language arts section! That's amazing." Janice's father pulled the car door shut, then reached over and patted her knee. "Tomorrow we'll get you registered for school. It's late, for spring semester, but I think I can pull a few strings at the college. Since you did so well on the GED."

Janice glanced over at his slightly hunched shoulders, the way he was gripping the steering wheel. "It's not like I aced the SAT."

He passed one hand over his balding head. "Maybe you could get a job on campus. Give you a chance to get involved. Get to know the other students."

Janice felt her stomach sinking. "I don't want to get to know the other students."

"Why not?"

"I just don't, Dad. Don't make me."

"I'm not making you do anything."
She looked out the window. “Anyway, I have a job. Right?” she said, unable to resist egging him on a little.

“Well, it’s a job,” he said. “I just keep thinking—”

“I like it there,” she interrupted, crossing her arms. After being driven away from Dan’s house, in the back of the police car, she had looked out the window and had noticed the new thrift store on the corner of Holly Street in downtown Meade. A few days later, she had walked by and stared in the window. She’d still been dressed up, from her appointment with the attorney, and the man at the front desk of the store had seemed overjoyed with her application, had hired her on the spot. Her parents came in to see her once, a few days after she started working, and her mother looked like she was trying not to breathe. Now Janice glanced at her father again. “At least people don’t act so fucking fake there all the time, like they do everywhere else,” she said.

Her father blinked, underneath his glasses. “I wish you wouldn’t talk like that.”

“Like what?” she said.

Her father gave her a look. “Half of the customers are illegals. They can’t even speak English.”

“So?” Her father seemed sad and shrunken since she’d come home, like a withered apple, and everything she said seemed to make him wince. He was so much smaller than she remembered, she thought now, looking at him. And her mother kept driving off to Boise every morning, in the new Mustang she’d bought with money from the interior decorating job she’d started during the last year. Janice glanced at
her father. In her most lucid moments, her parents looked like two fragile strangers to her, like people whose bones had been plucked apart, then sewn raggedly back together. Then one of them would speak and the only words that would come out of her mouth were angry and accusing.

Her father drove along a block of older houses with chain link fences, their yards filled with deserted plastic toys—Big Wheels, a wagon tipped over on its side, a faded orange and blue slide—then pulled the car up in front of a rambling house with a For Rent sign in the window. Across the street, a cat scuttled away underneath an old wooden trailer.

"This is where you want to live?"

She peered out the window. "There’s two apartments upstairs, the man said. And one down.” As if he knew they were speaking about him, a stooping man came out of the small house next door and walked toward them, his hands behind his back. A line of three cats trailed after him. "That’s him, I think. The landlord,” Janice said. "He said there were rosebushes.”

Her father squinted at the house. "Those dead-looking things by the front steps?"

They both looked at the house.

Her father cleared his throat. "Well, the rent is decent. Might as well take a look."

The falsely cheerful note was back in his voice. "You don’t have to come in if you don’t want to,” she said, opening the car door. “I can do it myself.”
"I know you can," he said, knotting his scarf around his neck and getting out of the car.

She glanced at him, thinking she detected a note of sarcasm or anger in his voice, but he was retying one of his shoes, and then they were out and walking up the sidewalk together, going in to see the apartment.

**

The week before, Janice had stood slightly behind her parents, shivering, while her father rang the bell at the attorney’s office.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" her mother asked when no one answered.

"1504 13th." her father said, looking at a scrap of paper in his hand.

"It’s just someone’s house," Janice said. "Why isn’t there a sign?" She pulled her coat sleeves over her hands. "We should just go home."

Her mother gave Janice a look. "We’re not going home." She had on bright lipstick that just matched the color of her shoes, and Janice kept having the strange impression that her face was made of wax. Earlier that morning, she had seen her mother carefully adjusting her slip, leaning toward the mirror in the bathroom to peer at some small imperfection.

"People treat you better if you try to look professional. Or at least clean," she had said, turning to glance at Janice’s hair, which she had pulled back into a messy ponytail.

Janice crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you going to work today again?" she’d asked.
"I have an appointment later with a new client."

"Seems like you always do lately," Janice had said. She met her mother’s eyes in the mirror for a moment. "I didn’t even know you even wanted to be an interior decorator."

Her mother had looked flustered. "I’ll be home later, after dinner," she said. "If you’re not asleep already. Just like ten or so."

"Oh," Janice said, turning away. "I think I’m going to be out."

"Really? Where are you going?"

Janice had shrugged. "I don’t know. Somewhere."

Now she glanced at her mother, but she was digging in her purse, looking for something. More lipstick, probably, Janice thought.

"Here comes someone," her father said, stuffing the paper into his pocket as a man walked toward them, carrying a cup of coffee.

"Sorry to keep you folks waiting," the man said, as he came up the steps.

"The great thing about having your own business is that you can set your own hours. I used to work over at Needham and Glenn," he said, gesturing with his thumb in an office building down the street. "But I went out on my own about three years ago. Best decision I ever made. Make more money than I ever did before, too." He unlocked the front door and held it open for them. "See that picture over there? That’s my wife, Consuela. She teaches Spanish at the high school. I’m Ed Ratcliff," he said, holding out his hand, but Janice’s father was unbuttoning his overcoat. Mr. Ratcliff slapped him on the shoulder. "Hang your coats right over there," he said. "I
usually have a secretary here, but she’s in class over at the college. And you must be
Janice, right?”

Before she could reply he had turned back to her parents. “Why don’t you
two have a seat out here and I’ll talk to this young lady in my office.”

Janice glanced at her parents, but her father had taken her mother’s arm and
led her over to the chairs.

“Just let me have a few words with you first,” the attorney said. “Then they
can come in and join us.”

“My dad was the one who called you,” she said as she followed the attorney
into his office.

He shut the door and motioned to a chair. “Have a seat. Actually, it was your
mother.” He sat down behind his desk and looked up at her, smiling. “So let’s just
go through a few things,” he said. He shuffled through a pile of papers. “It says here
you’re nineteen, turned nineteen in June. Right?”

She nodded.

“And you were seventeen when you’re parents first reported you missing.”

He glanced up at her. “So you were gone a year and a half almost.”

“I guess.”

“Wow.” He shook his head. “That’s a long time. When I heard on the news
that you’d been found, I thought, that girl’s got to have been through something.”

She looked down at her hands.

“I know your parents are mighty glad to have you back. I guess that goes
without saying.” He leaned back in his chair. “Do you know how many missing
people go unfound every year? It’s wonderful that it worked out so well. I want you to know that that’s really the most important issue here.”

Shifting in her seat, she glanced at the wall behind him, a tall bookcase filled with piles of papers and books and beside that a window, with a mini-blind that was pulled clear up to the top.

“So here’s the thing.” He shoved his chair away from the desk, then scooted it forward again. “Whenever the state spends some money looking for someone—a missing person—there are always questions to be asked, afterwards. No one wants to push you or anything, but the police—well, they always have their paperwork to fill out. So I’m here to kind of act as a liaison between you and them, help get straight what the official word on all this is going to be.” He looked at her carefully. “I mean, we’ve got the other girl’s statement—what was her name? Zandra? Zandy? —but we wanted to hear it from you, too.”

“You talked to Zinnie?”

He shuffled through the police report. “Zinnie. That’s right.” He took out a pad of paper and looked up at her. “So, you know, just a few more specifics. How exactly you ended up out at that house. What it was like out there for you. So the police can know how to proceed.”

“Proceed with what?”

He took a sip of coffee. “Well, they obviously want to find the person or persons who did the abducting. So every detail you can tell us is important. Do you understand what I mean?”

“I don’t—” Janice looked at him, then looked away again. “I mean, it was—”
"I know it's probably hard to talk about. That's why I wanted your parents out there in the reception area—so you could talk to me openly. Maybe there are things you don't want them to know." He shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just saying this is private, between you and me. And then the police, eventually. But you're my client and I won't tell your parents anything you don't want them to know."

Janice looked up at the ceiling, trying to blink back the tears that were forming in her eyes. The room was silent, except for an occasional gurgle from the water cooler in the corner. The last time she had seen Dan he was crawling out of the hut and striding off across the dirt yard. The faint wail of sirens had just begun floating through the air and he had made some gesture to her with his hand, but she couldn't tell if he meant for her to stay where he was, or come with him. She had glanced back at Zinnie, who was lying in the dirt still, her pale face turned to the side, and by the time she looked out again, Dan had slammed the door of his truck, was driving straight across the yard. "Dan!" she yelled after him, her heart beating in her throat, but he was already swerving around the rocks and up onto the dirt path that led to Victory Road. A police car rolled up to the house from the Greenhurst side, and then a second one, and the policemen jumped out and ran to the house, banged on the front door. She was cowering inside the hut, still wrapped in the blanket Dan had brought outside the night before, when a policeman stuck his gun inside the door of the hut, and then his head, and told her to come outside. One of them called an ambulance for Zinnie, then they decided to take her themselves, carried her to one of the police cars and drove off with the lights flashing. After they patted Janice up and down, they made her sit in the back seat of the other car and she watched from the
back window while they looked all around the property and started bringing out items from the house and from the root cellar. It seemed to take them forever, as they slowly trod in and out of the house, stuffing things in plastic bags, finally slamming the trunk of the car. Even though it was a month ago already, she could still smell the vinyl interior of that car, feel the cold, slick seat under her legs.

“What did you tell the cops when they got there?” Mr. Ratcliff leaned toward her. “The report doesn’t give much information about that, although they might have had a video camera.”

Janice glanced back at the window. A little bird was hopping along on the windowsill. It cocked its head, peering at the window with its beady eye, then flew off in a flutter of brown wings. “Nothing,” she said, finally. “I just got in the car when they told me to.”

“So this guy—I mean, we’re pretty much assuming there was at least one male out there. There was male clothing all over the house, used condoms in the trash. Cans of Budweiser. I mean, that’s got to be a guy, right?” He gave a short laugh. “So, look, we know it was a male, okay? A couple of them. Were these guys pretty heavy drug users? From the meth lab out there it appears so. And from the marijuana growing in the root cellar. Did they force you to use drugs?” He took another drink of his coffee. “The report says you had a couple of joints on you when they picked you up.”

“What did Zinnie tell you?” she blurted out. “Did she say she was abducted, or whatever?”

He looked up at her. “What are you saying? That you weren’t?”
"I don’t know. I’m not saying anything.” Her stomach was twisting as if it were being pulled tight by a rubber band.

"Listen, I’m your friend here, in this situation. I’m your best friend in the world right now. I’m the guy who’s going to help you get this thing behind you so you can get on with your life. But you’ve got to be straight with me.”

She looked at her hands. “What if I don’t want to get on with my life?”

He leaned back in his desk chair. “Have your parents got you into any counseling?”

She shook her head.

“No?”

“Not yet.”

The attorney tapped his desk with his pencil. “Here’s the thing. You did actually have a couple of joints on you, and in some places, that wouldn’t be a big deal, but in Idaho? This is a conservative state. If you were out there on your own, for some reason, which I can’t really imagine, then the possession, the meth lab—all of that is going to be a bit of an issue. A runaway situation is completely different from a kidnapping. I was imagining—I mean, the whole thing would go away if I could explain to Jerry Bradley—he’s the prosecutor for your case—that none of this happened to you because of your own choice. That’s what everyone thinks, has thought all along.”

She stared at the trashcan next to his desk. She felt almost numb, as if she’d been asleep for a long time and couldn’t quite wake up.
After a minute, he spoke again, a little more quietly. “You know, you’re a lucky young woman in some ways. If that ham radio geek—James Hillsborough—if Mr. Hillsborough hadn’t picked up on that signal—heard you calling for your dad—and called the police right away, you’d might still be out there in that crap hole and who knows what would have happened?” He leaned forward again, looking at her. “That was no place for a beautiful, intelligent young woman like yourself. Do you understand me? That guy, whoever he was, he was no good for you. You deserve a thousand times better than that. Nothing good would have come from that situation for you. Do you hear me? You wanted to be found.”

She kicked her heel against the edge of the carpet. “Maybe.”

He sighed. “So this guy you were with out there. What was he like? Was he nice to you? Did he hurt you in any way?”

“No,” she said, then glanced up at him.

“Hmm,” he said.

“What?”

“Well, the guy’s gone, right? He didn’t exactly hang around once the cops showed up to make sure you were all right.”

Her throat felt tight and achy. “You don’t know him! You don’t know anything about him. I want my parents.”

“Just hang with me for a minute. I don’t mean to make you feel bad, but this is important. I’ll ask you one more time and then we’ll get them in here, if you don’t want to talk anymore. Let me just ask you this straight out: were you forced to go
out to that house? Or were you at any time held out there, by any person, against your will?"

She looked at the window again. The little bird was back, pecking at a pale green bug. After a minute, it flew away again with the bug in its mouth, leaving one insect wing stuck to the window, glistening and trembling in the pale winter light.

**

The sun was going down by the time Janice and her father got back home from looking at the apartment. The one on the first floor would be ready by next week, the landlord had said, after they looked at it, and Janice had signed the lease before she and her father rode home silently in the car. Her mother was just pulling up in front of the house and when they went inside, she flopped down in the living room as if she were exhausted. A half-empty beer can sat on the coffee table and she picked it up took a drink.

"Angie, that's been sitting there since last night. Here," her father said, taking it from her and heading toward the kitchen.

Her mother's feet were splayed out, her knees sticking out from under her black skirt. "So what's it like?" she said to Janice. "The apartment. It's not one of those furnished places downtown, is it?"

She was wearing more make up today, Janice noticed, some thick eyeliner that made her eyes look smoky and half-hidden. "It's in an old house. There's three apartments—the two upstairs ones share a bathroom, but I'd have the downstairs one to myself."
Her father cleared his throat as he came back into the room holding a bottle of beer, then squatted to plug in the old-fashioned colored bulbs on the Christmas tree. Above the fireplace hung three felt stockings that had *Del, Angie, and Janice* embroidered across the white tops. The one that said *Janice* was in the middle. “It’s not too bad. It’s basically clean and everything. The guy repainted it after the last tenant, he said. It’s got a couch, and one of those old kitchen tables, you know, with the formica tops?”

“So it is furnished.”

Her father handed her the beer. “Just the couch and table.”

“And a lamp,” Janice said, crossing her arms. “There’s a lamp on a little table by the couch.”

“I told her we could take her bed over.” Her father sounded almost as if he were apologizing. “And her dresser and desk. The landlord pays for utilities. It’s cheap—three-seventy-five, plus the deposit.”

Her mother picked a piece of lint off her skirt and crossed her legs. “When are you going to talk to the lawyer again?”

“He was mean. I didn’t like him,” Janice said.

Her mother looked at her and then at Janice’s father. “Will you say something, please?”

“He was a little abrasive,” her father said.

“That is not the point, Del!”
Her father cleared his throat. “We’re just trying to help, Janice. The lawyer is, too. Get this all straightened out.” He sat down on the edge of the chair, the bottle of beer still in his hands. “I know it may not seem that way to you, but—”

“You made me leave,” Janice interrupted.

“What?”

“You did. I had to go out there, to that house. It was the only way I could be okay.” She was crying now, the hotness in her eyes spilling out over her cheeks.

Her mother flopped one arm onto the couch.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Her father looked at her. “We didn’t make you.”

“No, you did. You did.”

Her father stood up, shoved his hands in his pockets. “The police assumed you’d been kidnapped, and that’s what everyone thought. And now the attorney is telling us—and you’re saying—” He shook his head.

Janice swiped away the tears on her face. “Can we just talk about this later? I have to go to work. Will somebody take me, please?”

Her mother stood up. “I have an appointment I have to get to.”

“This late?” her father said, turning to her.

“And I don’t want her moving into some dumpy apartment.” Her mother got up, her heels clicking as she walked across the hardwood floor.

“Angie,” her father called after her. “Wait a minute. We’re trying to have a conversation here.” He started after her, then turned back to Janice.

“That’s what she always does,” Janice said.
Her father looked at her, his hands on his hips.

“She does.”

“Come on. I’ll give you a ride.” He put his coat back on and held the door open as Janice picked up her backpack. The two of them walked down the sidewalk, Janice scuffing her feet through the snow. Her father turned back to look at her.

“You’re going to need a car of your own, to get around in. If you move into that apartment. Have you thought about how you’ll manage that?”

“I’ll walk,” she said, trailing slowly after him. She didn’t care if she was late to work anymore. She felt empty and sad, like a sagging balloon. “Or take the bus.”

“There isn’t any bus, not a city one.”

“In LA there is. Or San Francisco. Or Seattle.”

“So now you’re thinking of moving to a different state?”

“Maybe,” she said, kicking at rock in the driveway. “I don’t know.”

Her father opened the door on the driver’s side. “I don’t think you can, actually. Until this court case gets settled. Leave the state, I mean.”

Inside, she snapped her seatbelt into its latch.

“In case you forgot,” he said, as he got in.

“Well I didn’t,” she said. She wrapped her arms around her backpack, hugging it to her chest. Long pointed icicles were hanging from the eaves of the houses, and as they drove down the street, she stared at them gleaming in the moonlight.

**
The thrift store was filled with long couches and other chunky furniture, and empty spaces where items had been rearranged and never moved back again. Kneeling near a row of shelves cluttered with Pyrex dishes, Janiee began sticking price tags to a pile of paperback books. The only good part about working here was that when she worked in the back room, sorting through the items that people donated, it was perfectly easy to stuff whatever she wanted in her backpack—a pair of black flip-flops, a red and black flowered halter top. A pair of Levis that looked almost new. She picked up another book and pressed the trigger on the pricing gun, but it made a rattling noise and nothing came out. She pressed it again. It always did this, and in a minute, Mr. Casey would be leaning over her with his balding head, fumbling with the gun with his pale fingers. She sat back on her heels, trying not to listen to the Hank Williams' rendition of *Little Drummer Boy* that was playing over the store’s loudspeakers. There were some candles in glass jars with pictures of Mary in a blue robe on them that she wanted—she was going to try to get them before she left today—and a classic, brown-toned picture of Jesus, his hair flowing over his shoulders, but it was pretty big, in its wood frame, and she didn’t know if it would fit in her backpack. She glanced over at the row of religious figurines on the next aisle over.

“Those are mostly junk,” a voice behind her said.

“What?” she started, glancing around. “Oh.” She looked up at Mr. Ratcliff, the attorney her parents had arranged for her. “I thought you were Mr. Casey. The manager.”

“So you work here?” he said, thumbing through one of the paperbacks.
She nodded, trying to ignore him.

“Well, I hope you aren’t wasting any of your time reading these.” He held up a copy of a book titled *Love’s Burning Embers.* “You want to know a good book to read? *Catcher in the Rye.* J.D. Salinger.”

“I read that my junior year, actually.”

He set the romance novel down and picked up another one, flipping through the pages. “But how did you read it? Most people think of Holden Caulfield as a hero. But Salinger meant it as a cautionary tale. I mean, the guy ends up in a mental institution, for Christ’s sake. Holden, I mean.”

Janice could feel Mr. Ratcliff hovering behind her. “Oh. Yeah, I guess.”

“No wonder old Salinger went into hiding, after everybody in the country interpreted his book wrong. That must have been a little frustrating, don’t you think?” He tossed the paperback back into the box.

She fiddled with the pricing gun.

“What are you doing there?” He squatted beside her. “Want me to take a look?”

“I should find Mr. Casey, probably. He told me it jams sometimes.”

“Oh. Okay.” He stood, glancing at his watch. “You have an appointment next week, don’t you? Early, like Monday? See you then.”

As he walked away, she lifted her hand, trying to pretend to be polite, then hurried to the back room, where Mr. Casey was dumping used clothing into bins.

“Mr. Casey?”

He looked up at her.
“Could you help me with this?”

He took the gun and pressed the trigger a couple times, then pried it apart with his fingernail. “It’s jammed again,” he said, sucking in his lower lip.

She watched him for a minute. “Is it all right if I take my break now?”

“Ten minutes,” he said. “Come right back. I should have this working by then.”

She grabbed her coat and purse from where it hung beside the door. Avoiding the paperback aisle, she pushed out through the glass doors and walked around the corner of the brick building, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of her purse. She’d started smoking since she got home, but she was going to stop soon, she kept telling herself. She peeked around the corner, watching for Mr. Ratcliff to come out of the store. As she lit her cigarette, a young Hispanic man came out of the restaurant next door.

“Hey,” he said, sauntering over beside her. She turned away, but after a minute, he spoke again. “Hey, you want to buy something? I got something, if you want.”

“I don’t think so.” After a minute, glanced back at him. “How much?” she said.

“Twenty five,” he said.

She shook her head.

“Twenty.”
She dropped her cigarette and ground it under her heel. “Let me see it,” she said. He turned slightly so that his back was facing the street and pulled out a baggie. She dug around in her purse and handed him a twenty dollar bill. “Is it any good?”

“Don’t worry, baby. You got nothing to worry about. My name’s X. For Xavier. See you later,” he said, grinning at her. He sauntered back down the sidewalk and took up his stance in front of the restaurant, leaning against the brick wall. When she looked over, he lifted his chin briefly, grinning at her.

As she turned slightly, to roll a joint, the door of the thrift store opened and Mr. Ratcliff came around the corner.

“Oh Christ,” he said, walking toward her. “Don’t even think about it.” She started to stuff the baggie and joint in her purse, but he grabbed them and crammed them in his pocket.

“Hey! You can’t just steal that from me.”

“So call the police. Tell them some guy in a business suit ripped off your weed.”

She pushed past him. “I have to go.”

He touched her arm. “Come see me tomorrow. I’ll give it back to you then.”

“I don’t have an appointment.”

“I’ll squeeze you in. First thing. Eight o’clock.”

“I can’t. I have to work,” she said, heading toward the door.

“Take the morning off,” he said. “And don’t do anything stupid before then.” Pulling her coat more tightly around her, she watched him as he walked away.
Inside the store again, she went into the small restroom and locked the door. She stared at herself in the mirror for a minute, then leaned her head against it. Her mother had tried to get her to eat some breakfast before she left this morning, but she wasn’t hungry then, and now she could feel her pulse throbbing in her empty stomach. Finally, she opened the door and walked back to the storage room. “Mr. Casey,” she said. “I’m not feeling well. Would it be okay if I went home?”

“Again? If you’re going to be one of those kind of employees that I can’t count on, tell me right now, so I can hire somebody else.” He put his hands on his hips. “I mean it. I thought you were a nice, dependable girl. You look like a nice girl.”

“I am.” She felt herself blinking back tears. “I just don’t feel well. I promise, I’ll be in tomorrow and stay the whole time.”

“That’s what you said the other day.” He plunked the pricing gun onto a chair by the door and looked at her. “Go on. But if it happens again”— he ran his finger across his neck.

“It won’t,” she said. “I promise.” Picking up her backpack, she hurried toward the front of the store, then paused, looking around the store. She zigzagged back through the aisles to the shelf with the religious figurines, and glancing around, she squatted down and crammed the picture of Jesus into her backpack. It almost fit, and she zipped the backpack halfway closed, and hurried out of the store.

**

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“So what, you were spying on me?” Janice said. “Did my parents send you?”

She plunked down in the leather chair in Mr. Ratcliff’s office and glanced at the clock behind his desk. “I have to be at work at nine-thirty.”

“I was actually just looking for used books. I like bargains. But it’s lucky I showed up, isn’t it?” His finger wagged back and forth.

She pulled out a cigarette and started to light it, but Mr. Ratcliff shook his head. “No smoking,” he said.

She sighed and dropped the cigarette back in her purse. “My mom smokes,” she said. She looked at the paperweight on Mr. Ratcliff’s desk. It was a glass turtle, its legs spread out as if it were swimming through the river of papers on his desk.

Mr. Ratcliff leaned forward. “I’m just not sure you realize how serious this whole situation is. If you get caught with weed”—he lifted two fingers to his mouth as if he were puffing on a joint—“or doing anything illegal at this point, it’s not going to look good at all for you. I’m trying to help you here. I’m on your side. But you’ve got to be on your own side, too. You know what I mean?”

She looked at her hands.

“Your parents said you were a good student, when you were in school. You could have a lot going for you, once you get through this.” He crossed his arms. “I’ve got four kids myself. I caught one of my boys with weed in his bedroom one day and you know what I did?”

“What?”
“I turned him in. I called the police and reported him. It was the best thing
that ever happened to him. Because it was a first offense, they just gave him
probation. It kept him on the straight and narrow clear through college.”

She crossed her arms and tried not to look at him. From the corner of her eye
she could see him pick up the glass turtle and turn it over in his hands. “I just want to
get out of here.”

“Well, what would look good would be if you were enrolled in school—like
you’re making an effort to make a new start. Your parents ought to get you into
counseling, too. I think I mentioned that before. Maybe even a drug program of
some kind.”

Janice sighed. “I just meant I have to get to work.”

He leaned forward. “Here’s the thing. Why don’t you just tell me what
happened. That’s the quickest way out of here. Then you can be on your way.”

She could see Dan suddenly, leaning over her in bed to kiss the side of her
neck. “I just don’t know what to say.”

“Just tell me about it.”

She looked at the floor, crossing her arms.

The room was silent. “Look,” he said finally. “You can keep on with this
adolescent stubbornness or you can act like an adult and tell me what happened, and
I’ll help you get through it. Right now you’re wasting my time. So which is it going
to be?”

She felt tears springing up in her eyes. “I don’t know!”

He shoved his chair back and stood up.
“Wait a second,” she said, something panicky rising in her chest.

He stood there for a minute, then sat back down.

“What am I supposed to tell you?”

“Everything. How did you meet him?”

“He was just hanging around at my school all the time,” she said finally, choking a little. “When I walked home from school. And he kept coming around my house at night. I would see him out there sitting in his truck.”

“Why didn’t you tell your parents?”

“I did! My dad just lay there in bed and wouldn’t do anything. My mom tried to get him to the next day, but he said he didn’t want to make the guy angry. He said peeping toms don’t usually do anything except look, and then he offered to walk to school with me.”

“The guy was looking in your window?” Mr. Ratcliff shook his head.

She hadn’t thought about that for a long time, the headlights circling the block, his face peering in at her between the parted curtains. How as she got out of bed, her leg muscles trembling, he’d pushed his way out of the bushes, his narrowly muscled arms pumping as he bolted toward the sidewalk and down the street.

It was so long ago now, it seemed almost like it had been some other girl that had jumped up and pounded down the hall to her parents’ bedroom, whispered, “Hey, Dad,” from the doorway. She remembered how her father had shifted under the covers, squinting at her in the darkness. “Can’t it wait till morning?” he’d said, before he flopped back onto the pillow.
"And then what?" Mr. Ratcliff interrupted her thoughts, his pen hovering over his notepad.

Janice couldn't quite bring herself to look at him. "One day after school, I got in his truck and went with him. He wanted me to. He kept telling me that."

"So you liked him."

She nodded, trying not to cry. "I guess. Yes. Do you get it?"

"And then he took you out to his house?"

She nodded, watching as he jotted something down on his pad of paper.

"And what happened then?"

She shook her head, unable to speak. She could feel her thighs sticking to the seat underneath her. "It's too much to tell."

"Did he have a gun?"

"When?"

"In the truck. When you went with him. Did he use it or point it at you?"

"No! I mean, I don't know. He had lots of stuff."

"How about at the house? Did he have a gun there?" He was looking at her intently.

"Yes, but it was just for hunting. He and George both did."

He wrote something else down on his paper. "But he didn't threaten you with it?"

"It wasn't like that."

"So you could have left if you had wanted to?"

She sniffed, trying not to start crying again. "I would have had to walk."
“So where did he go? Why did he take off like that when the police showed up?” He scribbled his pen around dryly on the paper, then tossed it in the trash can and opened his drawer to get a new one.

“I don’t know. Don’t ask me that.”

He looked at her for a minute, then scooted back from his desk, handed her a box of Kleenex. “I know this is hard for you.” He sat in the chair beside her. “If you can just get through this, things are going to be better. I promise.”

She shook her head. “Everybody just says that.”

He sat in silence for a moment. “So you don’t have any idea where he is now.”

“No.”

“For real? You haven’t seen him since then?”

She shook her head and jerked another Kleenex out of the box.

“How about a last name?”

She wiped at her nose with the wadded Kleenex. “His mother was a prostitute who left him in an orphanage in Mexico. That’s what he said. I don’t think he even knows what his name is.”

“Well, what did he say it was?”

“Daniel Cristiano Jesús.”

“Jesús? So he was some religious wacko?”

“No! Don’t say that! That was his given name! From the ceremony! It was from the ceremony, blessed be the name.”

“What did you say?” He peered at her.

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She started crying harder and Mr. Ratcliff looked at her for a second longer, then shook his head. “So you had a name, too? From this ceremony? What was your name?”

“Janice Evangeline,” she said. “But it wasn’t like you think! I keep saying that and no one will listen to me!”

“What was it like, then?” She could see that he was trying to sound reasonable and soothing. “Just tell me what happened.”

“I don’t know.” Janice put her head down again and started to cry. “Why don’t you ask Zinnie? And ask her about the baby, too!”

“What baby?”

Janice’s head jerked up and she saw the startled look in his eyes. “Nothing,” she said. “Never mind.”

He sat back down and leaned toward her. His voice was serious. “If there’s something else you need to tell me, now would be a good time to do it.”

“It’s nothing,” she said again. “I . . . I thought I was going to have a baby. But then I didn’t. I wasn’t pregnant after all.” She glanced at him.

“You thought you were pregnant, but you weren’t.”

She nodded. “What difference does it make, anyway? What difference does anything make? He’s gone.” The inside of her stomach was shaking and she couldn’t make it stop. She pulled a cigarette out of her purse and this time he didn’t seem to notice.
Mr. Ratcliff dropped his head, sighing, his hands folded between his knees.

“Okay. So after he took you to his house, what was it like? Just tell it one thing at a time,” he said. “Start at the beginning.”

**

The apartment had a sliding glass door that led out onto a patio and Janice’s father kneeled to squirt graphite along the bottom edge of the screen door, then slid it back and forth. The day before, after her mother had gone to work, he had gone with Janice to give the landlord, Mr. Garmendia, the deposit and the first month’s rent.

“You could pick up one of those Hibachi grills, cook out every once in a while,” he said to her now. “Hey Janice?”

“What?”

“There’s a big fence back here, for some privacy. And you can almost see the mountains.”

Janice left the box she was unpacking and went into the kitchen. A gray and white cat leaped to the top of the fence and sat observing them with yellow eyes. Beyond the fence lay another apartment house, its roof covered with dark gray shingles, and above that, the tops of the Boise foothills.

Her father slammed the door shut and the cat fled, disappearing back over the fence. He looked at her. “It’s not so bad. For a college-kid apartment.”

“Except I’m not a college kid.”

“You could be, though.”

A spider plant hung from the ceiling in a green plastic pot. Janice touched one of the browning leaves and it flaked off into her hand.
Her father walked over to the wall and flipped the light switch on and off, as if he were testing it. “Just something to think about. I’m going to go get the last couple boxes out of the car.”

“Dad?”

“What?” he said, turning back.

“Is Mom mad at me?”

He had started to open the door, but now he shut it again. “She’s just been really busy with her job, I think.”

“Why is she working all the time now?”

He paused by the door. “Well, you were, you know . . . gone. She needed something to do.” His voice trailed off, and Janice looked at the floor. “I’m going to go get the rest of the boxes,” he said finally, and going over to the door, he opened it, then shut it again quickly.

Standing up, she went to the window and watched as he opened the trunk of the car. Mr. Garmendia had come out of his house next door and was shuffling toward the car through the new layer of snow that had fallen. She watched them talking for a minute, then sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall, remembering the night before. Her mother had brought a box of kitchen utensils to Janice’s bedroom and clunked them on the bed.

“What’s that?” Janice had said.

“Just a few things,” her mother said. “Can’t really live in an apartment by yourself without a can opener.”

“I guess not.”
Her mother hesitated by the bed. “I just can’t believe we’re letting you do this. You just got home. How am I going to even know where you are? How am I going to know you’re home safe at night?”

“A lot of kids my age live away from home.”

“I suppose.”

“Anyway, usually it’s me waiting up for you. Lately that’s how it’s been.”

Janice stood up and went over to the window. Next door, she could see the Goat Man shoveling hay into the troughs for his goats. He had on an overcoat and a pair of boots, but his head was bare and his ears were sticking out in the cold air. He looked just like he always had, except underneath his coat, he had on something that looked like striped pajama pants. She wondered if she went outside, he would wave at her like he always used to. “So how’s your job going?” she asked, turning away from the window. “You haven’t really told me much about it.”

“So that’s all we’re going to say then? About you moving out?”

“I don’t know what else to say. It feels weird to be at home.” She glanced at her mother.

“Have you thought about calling one of your old friends?”

“Like who? Kelly? She’s probably married or something.”

Her mother shook her head. “You have to start somewhere. Maybe you could get a job at Pizza Hut. I’ve seen a lot of kids in there.”

“What would I even say to them?” she asked, but her mother was looking at her hands, and didn’t respond.
“Do you remember how we used to sit together, in that big green rocking chair and watch TV?” she said, finally, looking up. “When you were about three or four?”

“Seems like a long time ago.”

“It was fun, though, wasn’t it.” She patted the bed and Janice sat down beside her.

“So are you really an interior decorator now?”

Her mother laughed, wiping at her eyes. “I really am. You remember Renee Wolstenhome? My old friend from college?”

“I think so.”

“She called me a while back and wanted to know if I wanted to go in with her. Her old partner quit and I think she forgot I never finished my degree.”

“It doesn’t matter, does it? About your degree?”

“Not really. You just have to know what looks good. For people who can’t figure it out themselves. Anyway, it’s kind of fun. You know. Gives me a little money,” she said.

Janice glanced at her. “I thought maybe you were . . . maybe you had a new boyfriend.”

Her mother shook her head. She was still looking at her hands. “I guess I deserved that,” she said, after a minute.

Janice looked at her and they sat together in silence.
Her mother pressed her fingers to a spot on her forehead. “I should go check around and see if there’s anything else you might need,” she said. Janice watched as she walked, a little unsteadily, out of the room.

“Mom?” she said, but when she went to the doorway, her mother had already disappeared down the hall.

“Hey,” her father said now, pounding on the door of the apartment.

Janice jumped up.

“Could you give me a hand here?”

She held open the door, and stomping the snow off his feet, her father handed her a pile of blankets.

“I think that’s everything,” he said. He carried the last boxes into the bedroom and came back out. “That landlord seems a little obsessive,” he said. “He wanted to tell me that he mows the lawn every Monday morning at six, so you’ll need to keep your things off the grass.”

“You mean, like next spring? What kind of things?”

He tried to grin. “I don’t know. I think he’ll be all right. He just doesn’t have much else to do, I’m guessing. He’ll probably want to come over and bend your ear every once in a while. Pretty young girl like you.” He rubbed her arm with his thumb. “I should probably get going. Unless you want me to help you unpack.” He hesitated in the doorway.

“Hey, Dad. Did you see this big closet in the bedroom?”

He followed her back into the bedroom.

“There’s lots of storage space,” she said.
That's great. It should be good," he said. "You going to be warm enough?
It's freezing in here." He flipped the switch on the space heater. "You probably
ought to run this for a while, to warm things up in here." He stuck his hands in his
pockets. "So I guess you'll be in and out a lot, right? At home? And Christmas is
right around the corner. We'll have Christmas Eve just like normal." He looked at
her. "Right?" He glanced at his watch.

"Will you come by later? Or ask Mom if she wants to?"

"Sure," he said. "Maybe we could all go out for a bite to eat."
She trailed him out to the living room. "Dad? I love you."

He grabbed her into a tight hug and didn't let go for a long time. "Bye
sweetie," he said, then went out, leaving her standing by herself in the middle of the
living room.
CHAPTER 9

February, 1997

Mr. Garmendia stood at the front door, gesturing at Janice with the end of a dripping hose. “Irrigation doesn’t come on until April,” he said. “This is house water. It costs money. And it will flood the basement.” Janice squinted at him, trying not to look at the way his lower eyelids drooped down, exposing the red part inside. “Tammy, right?” he said, accusatorily. A bit of moisture ran down his cheek, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Janice,” she said. Usually he thought her name was Jenny. She peered out the door at him.

“Well, tell that husband of yours to take off that monkey suit and wash his car on his own dime. Can’t use house water to wash your car. Says right on the lease.”

“My husband?” She cast around in her mind trying to think what he was talking about. “I don’t have a car, Mr. Garmendia. Remember?”

His work gloves were stained with dark water from the hose. “The last tenant that was in here used it to wash his car,” he insisted. “Even in the winter.”

Janice grabbed her coat and backpack and squeezed past him out the door. She’d been up most of the night—she’d stayed up watching some movie on TV until almost four before she finally fell asleep, and now it was almost noon. “I have to go to work,” she said. “But I’ll be back later this afternoon. If you want to talk about it then.”
“Eh?”

“I promise I won’t turn the hose on,” she said, loudly.

He shook his head, then, and mumbling, started winding the hose into a coil over his arm.

“My dad is coming over later. So don’t worry if you see his car,” she said, but he was already shuffling slowly back across the yard toward his house. Zipping up her coat, she walked down the sidewalk. A gray striped cat jumped off the hood of the neighbor’s car and ran past her, its tail waving, slipping into Mr. Garmendia’s house just before he closed the front door. She paused by the car, peering at her reflection in the window. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d taken a shower. Yesterday, maybe. Or the day before.

“Hey baby.”

She turned to see Xavier hunching behind her, his hands in his pockets.

“Hey,” she said, heading down the sidewalk. “I’m not buying today.”

He loped after her. “What makes you think I’m selling? Maybe I’m just trying to be friendly.” He jumped ahead of her, his hands still in the pockets of his baggy jeans.

“Don’t you have to go to work?”

“Wait.” He grabbed her arm. “Do you want to come over to my place tonight? It’s my mom’s bingo night. Her and my grandma. We could watch a movie. Have the place to ourselves.” He grinned.

“You have a grandma?”

“So?”
She shook her head, almost laughing. “Does she know you’re a drug dealer?”

“Sshh!” His hair stuck up in greasy spikes on top of his head. “She knows I have a cool car and a nice stereo. That’s all she needs to know.”

“Which you got from working at the Koffee Pot, right?”

“What do you care? You’re the one that buys the shit from me. Come over tonight, okay?”

She started down the sidewalk again. “I can’t. My parents are coming over. My dad, anyway.”

“Again? What for?” He stumbled over a cracked piece of cement, trying to keep up with her. “Seems like you’d might want to hang out with me instead of your dad once in a while.”

“I couldn’t sleep last night, Xavier. I don’t feel very good.” She jerked her gloves out of her pockets and pulled them on. “They keep putting off my hearing. I think he wants to talk about it.”

“Okay, okay. Fine. See you later, then,” he said, cutting across the street.

“Where are you going, to the park?” she called after him. “Xavier!”

“What?” He looked back at her.

“So do you have anything?”

He trotted back across the road, half-grinning. “How much do you want?”

She handed him twenty dollars and he slipped a baggie into the pocket of her coat. “I knew you’d come around. Hey, you know what? A girl at work gave me her phone number today,” he said, looking at her carefully.
The sun was shining, but the air was cold and Janice pulled her scarf more tightly around her neck. “Oh yeah? Well, see you,” she said, starting off again.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be jealous!” he shouted as she headed down the block.

She looked back at him and waved.

**

“I thought maybe Mom was coming.” Janice held the screen door open for her father. “You can come in if you want.”

She sat down on the couch, then got up again to straighten one of the pictures on the opposite wall. She had several now, besides the original one that she’d taken from the thrift store back in December, prints of Jesus feeding the five thousand, the blind man at Damascus. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. And underneath the pictures, a small prayer bench, with a padded kneeler, and a narrow shelf along the top lined with candles.

Her father was still hovering in the doorway.

“Where did you get all those?” her father said, looking at the pictures. “Every time I come over you have a new one.”

“I stole them,” she said.

Her father laughed. “Oh. Right.” He shook his head, sitting down on the edge of a chair, then leaned forward, his hands clasped between his legs.

“What? Why don’t you ever believe me?” she said. He was looking at her the way he did when he had some bad news.
"Listen, what I came over here to tell you is that the police have caught some guy that they think is . . . the guy you were with out there. They want you to come down to the police station tomorrow to identify him."

"Are you serious? How do they know it's him?"

"I guess they have some reason to think it is."

She plunked back down on the couch and crossed her arms. "What if I don’t want to?"

"With the charges that Mr. Ratcliff filed—coercion and statutory rape—I think it's going to look pretty bad if you refuse to show up to identify the guy."

"I never even told anyone what he looks like."

"Mr. Ratcliff said you mentioned something about dark hair. Long hair, I mean." He looked at her. "I don’t really see what you have to gain by not going down there." He was starting to sound impatient.

Janice pulled at a strand of her hair, twisting it around her finger. "I just don’t want to."

"Have you been seeing him again? Is that what this is all about?"

"See? You never believe me."

"Yes, I do." The room was silent. Finally her father stood up. "You know, I forgot something in the car. I’ll be right back."

She watched as he opened the door of his Impala and the light came on inside. He got in and leaned his head back against the headrest. He’d finally gotten it fixed and she’d seen him out there other times, before he came up to her door, just sitting,
his eyes closed. Now he sat there for a long time, staring at the ceiling, then finally got out and came back inside.

“Your mom made some cookies she wanted me to bring over. I must have left them at home, though. Sorry.”

“Mom made cookies?”

Her father’s face reddened. “No. I just... listen, how about if I pick you up around four tomorrow and we go down to the police station? Would that fit into your schedule?” He sounded as if he were trying hard to be polite.

“I guess,” she said. She could hear the sulky sound in her voice, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at him.

“Good girl. You never know how you’ll feel when you get down there.” He patted her shoulder hesitantly. “I’m pretty beat. I think I’m going to go home and go to bed. But I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, opening the door again.

“I’ll probably be out stealing stuff,” she said, watching as he went down the steps, but he just waved and went down the steps.

**

She’d worked all morning running the cash register—Mr. Casey had finally decided it was within her capabilities to ring up purchases and count out change—and it was time for her shift to be over, but for once she didn’t want to leave. Pushing out through the glass doors, she walked slowly out into the chilly air. Two and a half hours still, she thought, glancing at her watch, a pink Cinderella wristwatch that she’d found in her bedroom before she moved out in December, tucked away in an old jewelry box. It was so dorky-looking that it was almost fashionable, she thought,
looking at its creased wristband, the small pink hands that ticked around the picture of Cinderella in her ball gown. In the last couple months, she’d begun dressing differently than she had in high school—a combination of smallish, faded t-shirts and knee-length cotton shirts that reminded her of the ones she’d worn when she was with Dan. And a frayed jean jacket. And sometimes, when it was really cold, she wore jeans and Converse tennis shoes and a black coat.

"With Dan," she said out loud as she walked along the sidewalk, trying to gage how it felt, like tonguing a sore spot in her mouth. She’d lugged most of her old clothes to the Salvation Army and dumped them in—she didn’t feel like seeing them for sale on the racks of the store where she worked, all her matching kneecaps and headbands, her plaid skirts and white shorts that she used to wear in the summer.

She wandered down Seventh Street, glancing over at the block where she used to turn to get to Kelly’s house, but she couldn’t see much beyond the corner and a big maple tree, its stark branches jagged against the gray sky. She crossed the railroad tracks, then started running, her backpack bouncing against her back. The old Dairy King was still closed, the windows boarded up, crows squawking as they flapped away from their perch on the roof.

She stared at the vacant lot behind the building, thinking about the first time she had seen Dan there, almost two years ago now. One of the crows had flapped to the ground and she watched as it pecked at something that someone had dropped there. She kept getting glimpses of him around town—or of some man who reminded her of Dan—he was crouching beside a car changing a tire one day, and another time she saw him at a convenience store, his back to her as he walked inside. She had
been sitting outside the library one evening, shivering on a park bench as she waited for Xavier, when she saw him walking down the sidewalk, on the other side of the street, carrying a bag of groceries. It was getting dark already, but as he passed under the streetlight, the swathe of pony-tailed hair hanging between his shoulder blades looked so familiar that she stood up and called out to him. He was already disappearing around the corner by that time, but she started after him, walking quickly down the block. She turned the corner, walking down the cracked and broken sidewalk, but he was nowhere. She looked at the row of run-down houses that lined the street, hesitating in front of one with the porch light on. The siding was a faded salmon-pink color, and in the semi-darkness, she could just make out a push mower leaning against the fence, next to a metal bucket and a sagging cardboard box. As she watched, a light came on in one of the front windows, and she could see the outline of someone inside, bending over a table. She started into the front yard, almost stumbling over a tricycle someone had left there.

"Hey, baby," a voice said. "What's happening?"

Janice turned quickly to see Xavier standing behind her.

"Scared you, huh? What are you doing, spying on somebody?" He laughed. "Why don't you just go up and ring the doorbell?"

"Xavier, shhh! I thought you were going to meet me in front of the library."

"Well, here I am. Or are you too busy snooping around in somebody's front yard to talk to me?"

"It's nobody," she said, pushing past him onto the sidewalk. "It's nobody I even know. I'm going home."
“Do you still want the stuff?” he said. “I’ve got my car right over there.” He pointed down the street to his Pontiac.

“No thanks,” she said.

“You want a ride,” he asked, trailing behind her. “Come on. It’s freezing out here.”

She glanced back at the house, then reluctantly followed him to his car. When he pulled up in front of her apartment, she opened the door.

“You could say thank you at least,” he said, leaning toward her across the seat as she got out. He tossed a baggie of weed at her.

“Thank you,” she said, then slammed the door and walked slowly inside, as the sound of his engine disappeared into the quietness of the winter night.

Now she looked at her watch again. Still two more hours. She stamped her foot at the crow and it flapped away, the thing it had been pecking at still on the ground. She went over to it and squatted down. It was just a cigarette butt, and grinding it into the dirt with her heel, she started toward home.

**

The police station was one of the newer buildings in Meade—a square structure, on Main, made from light-colored bricks with steel rails along the sloping walkway, and in front, a fountain, the dark metal swan in the center holding its wide beak open, as if swallowing the icy rain that was spattering down from the sky.

Janice and her father ran up the steps, her father holding and umbrella over their heads, then paused at the front desk.
“We’re looking for Detective Osburger,” he said, shaking off the umbrella. He handed it to Janice, then pulled out a business card from his pocket and glanced at it. “Could you tell us where we might find him?”

The woman behind the counter, wearing high-waisted navy pants belted over her poochy stomach, and a police hat, leaned forward and pointed down the hall. “Straight down that way, first right and then you’ll see his office on your left. His name is on the door,” she said. She winked at Janice. “Don’t worry. He’s a pretty nice guy. Oh, just a second. It says here he has an appointment.” She picked up a list on her desk. “With . . . oh.” She looked up again. “Are you Janice? You don’t look much like your picture, honey. What was that, a couple years ago now?” She leaned forward. “I can see it in your face though. That you’ve been through something.”

“Um, thanks,” Janice said, edging away from the counter.

The woman leaned forward. “Everybody is sure glad to have you back, safe and sound. This whole town was worried about you.” She shook her head. “There are so many crazy people out there.”

“First right, you said?” Her father glanced at the woman.

The woman nodded. “I bet you don’t let her out of your sight now, do you?” She let out an uncomfortable high laugh.

“Yes, thank you,” her father said again, taking Janice’s arm.

“I knew it was going to be like this. Can we please just go home?” Janice whispered at her father.
“It’s right here. We’re here already,” her father said, knocking on a metal door. A chair scraped against the floor inside and then a man with square black-framed glasses opened the door. “Detective Osburger,” he said, holding out his hand. “Come on in. Mr. Ratcliff is here already. He said you requested him to be here?”

Mr. Ratcliff looked over the top of his reading glasses, then stood and shook Janice’s father’s hand. “Hey, there,” he said, looking at Janice. “So you made it down here. Your father said you were feeling a little worried about it.”

“It won’t take long,” the detective said. He glanced up at her. “If you have something you need to get to.” Janice looked at his nametag, which said Michael. He was surprisingly young-looking, she thought, something a little vulnerable in his eyes. “We just need you to take a look at a series of photos, and tell us if any of them is the man you . . . the man known as Daniel Jesus. Just have a seat right over here,” he said, handing her a manila folder.

“Just look inside at the photos and tell us if you recognize any of the men.”

She opened it and began sorting through the pile of photographs. There were shots from the front and from the side, each of the men Caucasian with longish, dark hair. Her hands began to sweat and she could see the small moist marks of her fingerprints on the edges of each photo as she turned them over one at a time. She wiped her hand on her jeans. She glanced up at the detective. “None of these are really . . . I don’t know. It’s hard to tell.”

“Just keep looking,” he said. “Take your time.”

Her father and Mr. Ratcliff were both looking at her anxiously. Her father hitched his chair a little closer to hers, but Mr. Osburger made a slight motion at him

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to stay back. “She has to do this on her own, without any prompting,” he said.

“Otherwise we won’t be able to use her testimony.”

Janice glanced at Mr. Osburger. There was something about the way he was looking at her that she liked. He looked kind, and interested, as if he was pretty sure she hadn’t done anything wrong. She began sorting through the pictures again, looking carefully at each one. The men in the pictures all had sort of unsmiling, defeated expressions on their faces. Dan had never looked like that. She peered at one photo closely. Something about the cheekbones and forehead looked almost familiar, but the eyes were too dark, and there were creases around the man’s mouth that didn’t look quite right. She stared at it for a minute more, then closed the manila folder. “These aren’t him.” She glanced at Mr. Osburger and saw a fleeting, disappointed look pass over his face. He took the folder out of her hands.

“Okay,” he said. “That’s okay. You’ve got to tell us the truth.”

“What about that last one?” her father said. “You were looking at him.”

Mr. Osburger stood up and put the file in his drawer, and closed it. “She’s given her statement. We just don’t have the right guy yet.”

“Janice?” Her father was leaning toward her. There was a sheen of moisture on his forehead. “Do you want to look one more time?”

“Look, I know you want this to all be over,” said Mr. Osburger. “But it will be over when we find the right guy, not when we arrest just anybody.”

Janice’s father stood up, paced to the door. “It’s just—maybe she isn’t—maybe she can’t quite remember accurately.”

“Dad!”
"No, I’m serious. Maybe she—maybe he brainwashed her. We don’t know what happened out there!"

"What, you want to us give your daughter a polygraph test?" Mr. Osburger looked at Janice’s father.

Her father wiped his hand across his mouth. "I don’t know. Maybe." A vein throbbed in his temple.

"What she’s said is considered legitimate testimony. We have to pretty much take her word for it."

Mr. Ratcliff cleared his throat. "Listen, do you two need a ride home? Maybe we could talk about this outside."

"No, we don’t need a ride home," her father said.

"Janice? A ride?" Mr. Ratcliff asked. He glanced at her father.

She shook her head, then glanced at Mr. Osburger. "Listen, I’ll be back in touch, okay? We’re going get this taken care of—" he started, but her father had his hand on the handle of the door.

"Thanks. Let’s go, Janice," he said shortly, stepping out into the hall.

She followed her father out of the office and down the hall. The woman at the front desk looked up, but this time she didn’t say anything, just glanced back quickly at her computer as they walked by.

**

The sun had been a flat red disk all day, glowing from behind a layer of thick gray clouds. "It’s mostly smoke," Janice’s father said, peering up at the sky, as they
drove down the street toward the freeway. “That’s what makes the sun that weird orange color.”

“What’s burning?” Janice said. It had been several days since the meeting in Detective Osburger’s office and her father had stopped by her apartment that morning and asked her to go for a ride.

He adjusted the sun visor. “It’s that big old apartment building over on Sixteenth. That three story one. They’re having a hard time getting it out.” He glanced over at her. “I was listening to the news.”

They drove in silence for a little ways.

“Want to drive over to Boise?” he said, finally. “We could go to the Co-op, sit at one of those little tables.”

“Couldn’t we just go to McDonald’s?”

The radio was still on, the voice of the newscaster droning on faintly in the background, and her father snapped it off. “So you’re still mad at me, is that it?”

She looked out the window. She hadn’t been able to sleep again last night and when he knocked on the door this morning, she’d just drifted off. She’d been having the dream again, the same one she always had lately, about a roomful of little twittering birds. She was worried about them for some reason, in the dream, and right before her father had knocked on the door, she’d caught one, but its warm body had slipped through her fingers like a little soft rabbit. She went to the door, still half asleep, the twittering sound still in her ears, and then there was her father, standing there, his shoulders hunched, the wind flapping his overcoat around his pants legs.
And now the whole town was apparently on fire, the smell of smoke coming in through the heating vents of the car.

Her father swung the car around in a wide u-turn and headed back toward town. The air grew smokier as they drove along. “I just can’t quit thinking about it,” he said. He wheezed a little as he spoke, then coughed, clearing his throat. “Whether or not that was him in that picture.”

She looked at him, wondering if it was the dull glow from the red sun that was making him look so pale. She pinched the skin on her hand and saw that it looked white, too.

Her father had turned the corner and was heading toward the north side of town.

“Aren’t we going to get some food?”

“I just want to see what it looks like for a minute. The fire.”

They bumped over the railroad tracks and turned onto sixteenth. She glanced out the window and saw the fire engines down the street. “It’s really bad out here. Do you have your inhaler?”

He pulled into a parking lot down the block from the burning apartment building and opened the glove box, groping inside. “I’m all right,” he said. He unlatched his seatbelt. “The smoke is really billowing up. Doesn’t look like they’ve made much headway.”

Flames were shooting out of the top of the old building. A crowd of people had gathered, some of them standing around, others in their cars. A few people had
set out lawn chairs and were sitting there, watching. One woman shaded her eyes, then shook her head and got back in her car.

“I’m just thinking maybe we could go back down there,” Janice’s father said. “To the police station. You could say you changed your mind. About the pictures. You could even do a polygraph test, like Detective Osburger mentioned.” He coughed, trying to clear his lungs.

“You want me to take a lie detector test?”

“It’s not that I didn’t believe you.” He looked at her anxiously. “I did. I do. I just think it’s hard to—” he swallowed. “I think it’s easy to feel nervous in a situation like that.” He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose.

“Sometimes people look different in pictures,” he said. “Maybe you just need to look at them again.”

“We should go home,” she said. “You can hardly breathe.”

“No, it’s fine. I’d rather go back to the police station.”

“Dad—” She shifted in the seat. “He didn’t even do anything. Not really.”

“What are you telling me? That it was him? In the picture?”

“I don’t know!” she said. “No.”

Her father closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the seat, as if he were exhausted. Finally, he spoke, a little stiffly. “Well, I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

Across the street, near the crowd of people, a child had dropped a bag of popcorn on the ground and a flock of pigeons had gathered. Janice watched as the birds fluttered around, pecking at the kernels of corn. A woman grabbed the little
boy’s hand, pulling him away from the birds, just as a man emerged from the burning building, surrounded by firefighters. His face was blackened from smoke, and two of the firefighters were supporting him as they walked along. They paused near the sidewalk, one of them trying to talk to him, but he jerked his arm away and shook his head, coughing. “Leave me alone. This is your fault,” he shouted hoarsely. “The wicked of the earth shall be overcome.” He stumbled a little, making his way over to the curb, where the little boy had tossed the bag of popcorn.

The pigeons fluttered at his feet, squawking and crying, pecking furiously at the ground, flapping at each other with their wings. The man stood there for a minute, looking at them. “The wickedness shall cease,” he shouted, squatting down, then slowly held out his arms, and as she watched, the birds began fluttering onto them, and onto his shoulders and head, feathers floating down to the ground. Janice rolled down her window a crack, watching as the man stood, the birds still clustering around him. Through the window, she could just make out what he was saying. His voice sounded croaky, as if he were calling out from a dream. “And a great star blazing like a torch fell from the sky and a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea . . . woe! woe to the inhabitants of the earth.”

His hair hung over his shoulders in long strands. It’s him, she thought. He’s preaching. To the birds. The air was hazy with smoke and Janice peered through it, trying to see. The people in the crowd were watching him, now, instead of the fire. One woman whispered something to another woman, and then a man wearing a denim coat stood up from his lawn chair. “Hey buddy,” he called out. “You all right? This ain’t church.” He laughed and looked around, but no one looked at him.
The man with the birds clustering around him turned slightly, but Janice still couldn't see him clearly. "Woe unto you," he said again, more loudly. He coughed, clearing his throat. "You unbelievers, you children of the world. And a third of the men will be killed by the fire and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, and the other men will be bitten by serpents, for their power is in their mouth, and in their tails, and with their heads, they do hurt!"

The man in the denim coat picked up a handful of gravel and tossed it at him. "Oh, for God's sake. Go on home," he said.

Some seagulls had flapped down to the ground, too, their cries filling the air. "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than these?" the man called out. "Who are you, that pretend you do not know the truth? The actions of man will determine the future of the world!"

The man tossed his cigarette butt down and folded up his lawn chair, shaking his head, as he walked away. The birds were still fluttering around, the sidewalk covered with their feathery down. A woman ran over to one of the fire trucks and Janice saw her talking to the fireman inside. Janice glanced at her father. He was coughing again and she rolled up her window. In the distance, a siren began to wail.

"What's going on?" Her father looked up, squinting out the window. "What's that guy shouting about?"

"Could we go please? I want to go home," she said, and as he started the engine, some of the birds rose up and flapped away in a cloud of feathers and smoke.
"You okay?" he said, looking at her sharply, but she just scrunched down in
the seat. He hacked into his handkerchief, trying to get a breath.

He pulled out of the parking lot, and Janice twisted to look back at the burning
building, but after a block or so, she could barely see the man at all in the haze of
smoke.

"What’s happening back there?"

She didn’t answer.

"Janice?"

"Could you please let me out? I want to walk home."

"What? Why?" He coughed again.

"That way you can get home faster. If you don’t have to drive me," she said.

"Please? You can hardly breathe."

He pulled over to the curb. "What’s this about, Janice?"

"Nothing! Just let me out!"

"Don’t speak to me like that." He let out a wheezing cough, then held up his
hand. "Fine. It’s not that far, I guess. But cover your face with your scarf," he called
after her as she got out. "And call later and let me know you got home safely," he
said, coughing against the back of his hand.

She slammed the door and nodded and waved. As he drove off, she turned
and ran back down the street, her eyes stinging from the smoke. Out of breath, she
reached the burning building just as a police car was pulling slowly away. In the
back seat, she could see the man, his shoulders slightly bowed. She watched as the
lights on top of the car flashed against the glowing pink sky.
At her apartment, Janice lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, then got up and went to the front window. She glanced at her watch. They must have him at the police station by now, she thought. Maybe he was in a cell somewhere, maybe down in the basement.

She paced into the kitchen and opened the cupboard, looking at the boxes of macaroni and cheese, the cans of tuna fish. She pulled out a box of graham crackers and took a bite of one, then put it back in the box. It had looked so much like him, the set of his shoulders, the narrow hips.

She shut the cupboard door and leaned her head against it, trying to picture him sitting in a jail cell. She wanted to go down there, and see him, somehow. She sat down on the couch and put her head in her hands. Picking up the remote, she switched on the little television her parents had bought for her, then switched it off again. She stared at the little white card on the table beside the couch, the one that Detective Osburger had given her.

She grabbed the phone and dialed his number. The line rang four times, then went to his voicemail. “Detective Osburger? I was just wondering if anyone else had been picked up, like today, or if maybe you had some other pictures you wanted me to look at. This is—” she started, then felt ridiculous and hung up. She snatched up her coat and ran out the door, heading back toward downtown and the police station.

There was a different woman at the front desk this time and Janice hesitated outside the glass door for a few minutes, the hood of her coat pulled over her head.
She wrapped her scarf around her neck, then went inside, stood in front of the counter.

The woman continued to type on her keyboard.

"Excuse me?"

"Can I help you?" the woman said, finally glancing up.

"I was looking for Mr. Osburger."

"It’s nine o’clock. Everybody’s gone home except the night duty officers, unless you’ve got an emergency of some sort. You got an emergency?" The woman tapped a pencil against the desk.

"No, I just wondered if—" she faltered. "There’s some things I forgot to tell Detective Osburger."

"Why don’t you just come back in the morning. Okay?" She turned back to her computer.

"But was anybody brought in tonight?" she blurted. "I saw a man in a police car." "Earlier, outside. I was just wondering."

The woman looked at her. "What was it you were wanting to tell Detective Osburger? I can take a message for you, if you want."

"I was going to tell him . . . he has wings. The man they were looking for. I thought maybe they brought him in tonight."

The woman raised one eyebrow. "Nobody’s been brought in tonight. I guess maybe he flew the coop," she said, laughter in her voice.

"No, I mean he has tattoos. These feathery wings. They cover his whole back. I never told anyone that. When they asked me to describe him."
The woman was still looking at her.

"Never mind," Janice said, turning to go.

"Why don’t you come back in the morning," the woman said, in a slightly kinder voice. "Like I said, everybody’s pretty much gone home for the night now. You want me to give Mr. Osburger a message?" The woman was standing up now, her hands on her hips, but Janice was already outside. When she glanced back, the woman was sitting back down at her computer, shaking her head.

Janice’s eyes teared up as she walked down the sidewalk and stepped into the alley beside the police station. Leaning against the side of the building, she lit a joint, sucked on it and let the smoke out slowly. Maybe Amber had been right after all, she thought. To just try to block everything out. She closed her eyes, but she could still see the burning apartment building, the smoke billowing into the sky. And Dan, the pigeons fluttering around him, his tangled hair hanging over his shoulders. It was all she could think about.

Down the alley, and she walked back out onto the sidewalk, past the police station. No matter what she was doing, he was always there, in the back of her mind. She threw the last bit of her joint on the ground and watched it smoldering on the cement, then walked down the street, toward the railroad tracks and the north side of town.

**

She must have been standing in the alley for longer than she thought, because by the time she crossed Twelfth Avenue and walked the last few blocks to Sixteenth, the yellow traffic lights were blinking on and off.
The air was still smoky and as she got closer to the burned apartment building, she saw that the whole roof was gone, just the sooty, charred walls still standing. A few feathers were scattered on the ground, and she picked one up and tried to rub the grime off it, but it was permanently blackened, and she let it drift back onto the sidewalk.

Somewhere, a kitten was meowing faintly and she walked along the side of the building as the mewing grew louder and more insistent. She squatted beside a cardboard box. A piece of wood had fallen onto it, half-crushing it, and underneath, a nest of white kittens lay curled together. That’s weird, she thought, wondering why someone hadn’t noticed them earlier. She picked one up. Its tiny heartbeat thumped against her chest. The others all began to mew, stirring against each other, and suddenly a straggly-looking cat sprang from the steps leading to the apartment building and streaked past. It had a limp kitten in its mouth and when it dropped it, the kitten didn’t move. “Oh!” Janice said. The cat leaped into the box, and Janice peered up the steps to the doorway. A feathers were strewn over the steps, and Janice half-expected to see a dead bird lying somewhere, one of the pigeons that had been fluttering around earlier, but there was nothing, just the doorway, leading to a long dark hall. The smell of burned wood and something else—a hot electrical cord—was thick in the air, and she pulled her shirt half over the kitten she was holding and tried not to breathe.

She walked up the steps and peered down the hall, not sure what she was looking for. As she stumbled over a pile of loose boards, she clutched at the kitten, and it yowled, twisting out of her arms and skittering off into a dark corner. “Kitty!
Here kitty,” she called. She heard it mewing and took a few steps forward, pressing her hand against the wall. She felt a door, then rough plaster, then another door, which swung open as she touched it.

“Here kitty,” she said again, peering into the room. In the glow of the streetlight coming through the window she could see rows of old filing cabinets, and shelves filled with pottery and woven baskets, small beaded moccasins. A mannequin of a woman wearing a fringed leather dress, a papoose strapped to her back, stood in one corner, and beside her, a pioneer man holding a shotgun. Off to the side, a stuffed, two-headed calf was poised on a wooden stand.

“Janice?”

Her heart pounded. “Dan?”

A man stepped out of the shadows and she felt his sinewy arms around her. “Your hair smells like smoke,” she said. Tears burned in the corners of her eyes.

Dan kissed her neck and then her cheek. He held her away from him for a minute, then grabbed her again. “Don’t cry,” he said. “It’s all right.”

His eyes were bloodshot, she noticed in the quick glance she got of him—one was tearing a little, and there were some small, downy feathers sticking to his shirtsleeves. “What happened to your eye?” she said.

“Nothing. It hurts.”

“Do you need to see a doctor?”

His shook his head impatiently. “Look at all this stuff.” He strode across the room. “It’s so cool. Somebody took it. Whoever lived here.” He held up a box of papers. “Idaho Historical Society.” He laughed delightedly. “Somebody stole all
this crap, just carted it all off.” He took the shotgun out of the pioneer man’s arms and examined it. He glanced at her. “Look at this. It’s a black powder shotgun. 1869.”

“What are you doing in here?”

He just laughed, then went over to the window and jerked it open, stuck the gun out. He squinted through the sight. “Just looking around,” he said. “Hardly anybody out. Too bad.” He swung the gun back around inside and pointed it at the mannequin in the leather dress, thumbing back the shotgun’s double hammers. They locked into place with a distinct metallic click. “They smoked me out. The cops.”

“What do you mean? From this apartment?”

He looked at her. “From our house. I can’t go back there anymore. They’ve got fucking police tape all over the place. It was in the newspaper, for Christ’s sake.” He lowered the gun and turned to look at her. “So I smoked them out. They always think they can tell you what to do. But they can’t.” He pointed upwards. “He’s the only one that tells me what to do, blessed be the name. Not them.”

The kitten was rubbing against her ankles, mewing, and Janice reached for it, but it skittered away again.

“Hey,” he said, striding over to the two-headed calf. He squatted down and peered into one set of its eyes. “Isn’t this freaky? I’m going to take it with me. To Mexico. That’s where I’m heading. You want to come?” He glanced at her.

“Before they drag me down to that half-assed police station again?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Janice said slowly. The picture she’d had in her mind of Dan coming out of the burning apartment building that afternoon had changed
suddenly. He’d had his hands behind his back. In handcuffs. And they’d pushed him down onto the sidewalk, hadn’t they, the birds scattering into the air? Why couldn’t she remember?

She looked at him.

“IT’s loaded,” he said, running his hand over the barrel of the gun. “I bet it still works.” Before she could say anything, he pointed the gun at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. The blast was deafening and she ducked, covering her head as hunks of plaster rained to the floor.

The kitten was peering out from under a dresser, its eyes glowing.

“They have to know,” he said, looking at her. “They are not the rulers of the world. They are the whoremongers, the evildoers. The earth will be rid of them and the truth will be made known. The dirt will cry out. It will swallow them up.”

Janice still had her hands clapped over her ears and Dan strode over beside her, pulled them away. She could hear his breath coming quickly, his chest heaving. He gripped her, and she was crushed against him, the gun a hard iron rod between them.

She tried to move her lips, to speak, but he held her tight against his neck. Her head was pounding thickly, and when he stuck his tongue in her mouth, she clamped her teeth down hard.

He cried out, hoarsely, the gun clattering to the floor.

She froze. The room seemed to ring with silence, with the echo of the fallen gun. In the distance, a faint siren began to wail.
“So it’s like that, is it?” He sucked on his lip. “You don’t believe me, either? You don’t trust me?”

“It’s not that, it’s just—” Her ears were still ringing. “I don’t know. I just... I left something outside. I’m going to go get it, okay?”

He crouched on the floor, started stuffing things inside his pockets. He slid the fringed coat off the pioneer man and put it on, then jammed the beaded moccasins inside his shirt. He was scrambling desperately now, as the siren grew louder. He shook his head. “Fuck off.”

“Dan!” She looked at him.

“Are you coming or not?”

He was gathering things up in his arms, a glass case of arrowheads, an old piece of pottery. “This stuff is worth a lot of money. We’ll sell it and drive straight down to Ensenada.”

She hesitated by the door.

“Just go get your stuff,” he said. “Hurry. And come right back. Or no, meet me at my truck. It’s parked around back.”

“Okay,” she said, slowly. She stood there, watching him.

He sat back on his heels and looked at her. After a minute, he spoke. “Why don’t you just hurry up and leave then? If you’re not coming.”

“I’m coming, I just...” She grabbed up the kitten. “I want to put this back outside, with its mother. Okay?”

“Fuck.” He shook his head. “I thought you were going to help me.” He stood up, edging back a few steps, then grabbed a hatchet that lay on the floor beside
the pioneer man. He looked at her suspiciously. “You’re not going to tell them, are you?”

“Dan, the police—”

“Fuck the police,” he shouted, his footsteps echoing as he ran down the hall.

The door banged shut and Janice stood there for a minute in the silent room, then squatted to touch the gun, ran her fingers over the cold iron. She closed her eyes for a minute, then stood up and walked slowly down the hall.

**

It took her a long time to walk home, in the cold, and when she got back to her apartment, Xavier was waiting on the front steps. “Hey,” he said. “Didn’t you remember we had a date tonight? I’ve been waiting here forever. Hey, what’s this?”

She looked at him, then shook her head, trying to open the door to her apartment while the kitten squirmed against her chest. “What do you want, Xavier?”

“What do you have there? It’s so cute.” Xavier said, rubbing the kitten’s head.

“I’m tired, Xavier,” she said, tears coming into her eyes. “I just want to go to bed.”

He took the key out of her hand, put one arm around her shoulder. “How about if I go buy some cat food? And some milk.” He kissed her on the cheek, then opened the door for her. “Your kitty needs some food, doesn’t she? Come on, baby,” he urged. “Let me go buy some for you.”

His arm felt warm around her, and after a minute, she nodded.
He jumped down the steps. "I'll be right back," he said. "Just leave the door unlocked."
A series of droplets plinked slowly onto the still, cold water. “Go away,” Janice said, when Xavier pounded on the door.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know.”

“You just don’t want me to come in.” He pounded on the door again.

Janice plugged the faucet of the bathtub with her two fingers. A thin stream of water ran down her hand.

“Mr. Casey’s not going to believe you’re sick again.”

She took her fingers away and the dripping started up again.

“Why don’t you want me to come in?”

“It’s not that.” She pressed her forehead against her cold knees. “I feel like I’m dying,” she said into her thighs.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She sighed, then climbed out of the tub and peered into the mirror. Her face was pale and a string of hair fell over one eye. She flicked a clump of dried mascara off her cheek. *Oh I went to old Kentucky, that old Kentucky fair, and met a señorita, with buckles in her hair... Oh shake ‘em, shake ‘em, shake ‘em, shake ‘em if you can...* the two of them lying in the garden with the mud and green blades of long grass between their legs. *Dan.* She had tried not to listen, it made her
mad, the way he looked at her while he sang it, the way he teased her with the tip of a baby snap bean. *Shake 'em, shake 'em, shake 'em,* he'd grinned at her, trailing his finger down between her breasts. *Bell peppers are sexy, don't you think? Look at those curves,* he said to her, bending the pepper plant gently downwards, so that a ripe one, full and red, dangled near the bare skin of her abdomen. *Round and round and round she goes, where she stops nobody knows.* His hair hanging over his shoulders. When she squinted, it seemed to be growing and twisting like vines, like the tomato plants and pea pods that hung over their heads. Everything was green, the sky in little blue cutouts, between the stems and leaves.

Xavier pounded on the door again. "What'd you say? I couldn't hear you."

She opened the door. "Nothing. Never mind." *Dan isn't here.* Just her and Xavier, she thought. And the little yowling white cat that never seemed to get full no matter how much cat food it crunched down, always kneading and sucking on the pillow on her bed, her skirt. Her bare thighs. She hadn't seen Dan anymore, after that night in the old museum, hadn't even thought she'd seen him, although sometimes at night, when she lay awake, she could still hear the gun clattering to the floor, the sound of his footsteps pounding away down that empty hall. He probably took off, she thought, went clear to Mexico. She kept imagining him in Tijuana or out in the jungle somewhere, in Central America, living in an old shack. Where he could do whatever the hell he wanted to do. He'd told her once he wanted to find his mother. Maybe he'd gone to look for her, she thought.

Now Xavier reached his hand toward her tentatively. "God, get something on." He grabbed the soggy towel from the toilet seat and wrapped it around her.
“Why are you always . . .”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Doing stuff like this.” He pulled her to him.

She felt her wet hair soaking into his t-shirt. His thumb massaged her cheek and she leaned against his shoulder.

He kissed the top of her head. “You okay?” His thumb made circles down her shoulder. “God, Janice.” His thumb moved to her nipple, circling it, then pushed her back into the bathroom and against the wall.

She felt his fingers fumbling in between her legs, then pushing into her. “You want me,” he said, in her ear. “You’re wet for me, aren’t you baby?” He jerked down his shorts and leaned into her, trying to force his hardening penis into her. He pushed his face against hers, tried to find her mouth.

She turned her face to the side, and his head slipped past hers and thumped against the wall.

“Ow, goddammit.”

“I don’t feel good, Xavier.” She grabbed the towel back around her. “I have to go to my hearing this afternoon. And I’m going to be late again. I have to get ready.”

Xavier rubbed his head. “Why do you always do this?”

“Do what?”

He stood there, watching her as she picked up a comb and began jerking it through her wet, tangled hair.

“Will you take me somewhere later?” she said, looking at him in the mirror.
“Where, out to that house again?” He shook his head and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

She leaned her head against it. “After my hearing,” she called out to him, through the door, then bent over to towel dry her hair.

**

When Xavier dropped her off, Mr. Casey was waiting outside the front door, pounding a sign onto a wooden post. Donations Accepted Inside, it said, in bold letters. “Somebody emptied out the bins again,” he said, as Janice walked over to him. “I’m going to the police this time. The video camera was gone. And everything else. The bins were completely empty.” He shook his head. “I’m going to go down there again and insist. This is my business. These people are thieves. They are,” he said, looking at her.

She felt her cheeks reddening. “Donations inside the store is a good idea.”

“Oh, it will never work. People clean out their garages, they want to bring stuff down here and dump it right away. They don’t have time to bring in their things during the day.” He thumped the sign into the small plot of grass in front of the store with his hammer, then stood back to look at it. “It’s just a bunch of kids. You’re a teenager. Why can’t kids just be decent?”

“In Boise, a truck used to come around and pick up stuff that people wanted to give away,” Janice said. She looked at her hands. “I forget what it was called. Maybe it was the Salvation Army.”

“Do you have a truck to drive around in?”

“I just thought . . .”
He shook his head.

"Maybe they're just poor homeless people," she said. "Maybe they don't have anything else."

"No." He shook his head, giving the sign one last thwack with his hammer. "It's kids. They think it's a game." He glanced at her. "They think it doesn't even matter. Anyway, you stay here while I go talk to the police. I shouldn't be gone too long."

As he pushed open the door to let her inside a pick-up cruised down the street. Janice glanced at it as she followed Mr. Casey into the store.

"The cash register is opened already. Just take care of the customers—don't worry about stocking the shelves—and I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Maybe you could get a night watchman," Janice called out as he went out the door.

She opened the till and thumbed through the ones and fives, then squatted to turn on the radio. Tuning it to the classic rock station, she turned up the volume, then ran to the back of the store. It was pretty loud, but not too loud. She glanced at the front of the store as a customer—an older woman—pushed open the door. The woman looked around, a puzzled expression on her face, then shook her head and went out again. Janice laughed, then went out back to take a look at the vandalized bins. She scuffed through the gravel parking lot and peered in. Maybe it was Dan, she thought, then looked at the front of the empty bins. Cocksucker, someone had spray-painted in scrawly black letters.

A door slammed shut in the parking lot and she ran back inside, hesitating in
the back room, worried now about the music blasting over the loudspeakers.

Peeking out, she watched as Matt Cooper and Cory Henrickson walked through the door. She hadn’t seen either of them since she’d been back home and she ran her hands through her hair, her heart thumping.

“Hey,” she heard Cory say. “This rocks. There’s nobody here.”

The two of them began peering through the racks of clothing, then made their way back to the shelves of video games and computer equipment. “Hey Matt, look at this,” said Cory. “It’s Mario. I don’t have this one. We should get it.”

“Cool,” Matt said. “It’s only like two bucks.”

Janice leaned back against the wall. She was going to have to go out there. Mr. Casey could be back any time now.

“You’re shitting me, right? We should just take it. No one will ever notice.”

Matt came over beside him and looked at the game.

“Look, there’s a bunch of them,” said Cory

The front door opened and another customer came in, a young mother with her baby. She started looking at the baby clothes, and after a few more minutes, the door opened again and Mr. Casey strode in, looking around the store.

Janice swallowed, starting to walk toward the front of the store, toward Mr. Casey, as if she hadn’t noticed Matt and Cory, then glanced over and saw that both of them were staring at her.

“Hey, you guys,” she said, and tried to smile, as if it was no big deal to see them, then walked quickly toward the cash register. Mr. Casey, who was bending over behind the counter.
“I leave for twenty minutes and the place goes to hell?” he said, looking at her.

“I was going to turn it down,” she said. “It just... it was on the wrong station.”

Mr. Casey put his hands on his hips. “Oh really?”

“I’m sorry. There wasn’t anybody in here until about two seconds ago. What did the police say?”

“They said nothing, just like I thought. They said they’d send a patrol car by tonight, try to keep an eye on it. Like that’ll do any good. This is my whole business! Are those two friends of yours?” He pointed to Matt and Cory. “Keep an eye on them, will you? I’m going to see if I can put some sort of lock on those bins.” He strode off to the back room and Janice stepped behind the register. She pretended to sort through a pile of receipts in the cash drawer, glancing up as Matt and Cory came up to the counter. “Hey Janice,” said Matt. “So you work here, huh?”

She nodded. “I was in the back room,” she said. “I mean, when you came in.”

They both looked at her and Cory jammed his hands in his pockets. “We were just looking at this stuff,” he said, glancing at Matt. He plunked several video games on the counter.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “We want to buy it.”

“Is that why you brought it up here?” Janice said, trying not to laugh.

Matt fumbled with his wallet, as if he were concentrating on sorting through the bills inside.
“I heard you guys, but it’s not a big deal,” she said.

Matt glanced up her. “Cool,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Hey Janice,” Cory said. “So were you really kidnapped or what? Everybody saw it on the news.”

Matt looked at her. “He’s an idiot. You’re an idiot,” he said, elbowing Cory in the side.

Janice turned to the cash register. “It’s ten-fifty-five,” she said.

Matt threw a twenty dollar bill on the counter. “So have you seen Kelly?” he asked, as Janice counted out the change.

She shook her head.

“Me, either. Nobody has, really,” Matt said. “She went off to college at some place called Reed, in Portland.”

“It’s a bunch of druggies,” Cory said.

Matt elbowed him again.

“What? That’s what I heard. The school buys everyone pot. And they have a nudist day where everyone floats down the river naked.”


“The Willamette River, dopus.”

Matt shook his head. “Do you know how polluted that river is? They find people’s bodies in there sometimes, but I don’t think anybody floats down it.”

“Whatever,” Cory said, picking up the sack of video games. “Let’s get out of here, okay? My dad’s going to kill me if I’m late.”

“He’s supposed to be at the garage,” Matt said. “I have the day off.” He
grinned. His blondish-brown hair was sticking up a little in the front and he had on a t-shirt that said *Do it in the Dirt*.

He saw Janice glancing at it, and looked embarrassed. “Where do you work?” she asked.

“At an architect firm. This friend of my parents got me the job. It’s just kind of like an internship. I run errands, get people coffee. Stuff like that.”

The woman with the baby was standing behind them, waiting with a pile of clothes in her cart. “Are these on sale?” she said, leaning forward. “They all have a green sticker.”

Janice glanced at Matt and Cory. “I should get back to work.”

“Come on, Matt,” Cory said. “She has to work.” He grinned at Janice as they went out the door. She watched as Matt punched Cory on the shoulder, then sprinted off toward the parking lot.

“Sorry,” Janice said to the woman, then glanced out the window as Matt and Cory drove away, Matt’s arm resting on the edge of his rolled-down window.

The woman with the baby followed Janice’s gaze.

“It’s all right,” she said, picking the baby up out of the cart. “He’s cute. The one with the t-shirt? Is he your boyfriend?”

Janice shook her head, blushing. “He’s just a guy I knew in high school.”

“Oh. High school. That seems like a long time ago,” the woman said, smiling as she jiggled the baby on her hip. “For me, anyway.”

“Me, too,” Janice said. She glanced out the window again, then began ringing up the woman’s clothes and putting them in bags.
Janice’s mother glanced at her watch. “I can’t believe it’s taken this long to get this thing going,” she said. “It’s four-thirty.”

Her father shook his head. “That’s the way these things always are.”

Her mother crossed her legs, rolling her eyes a little. “How do you know?”

They were sitting in the courthouse in Boise, outside a closed office door.

“Remember that time I got all those parking tickets?” her father said. “I thought I was going to have to go to court that time.”

Janice and her mother both looked at him.

“They had a warrant out,” her father said. “I could have been thrown in jail.”

Her mother uncrossed her legs, sighing.

“We should go out for dinner after,” said her father. He peered around Janice at her mother. “Since we’re in Boise anyway.”

The three of them sat in silence.

“I don’t get why I even have to be here if we can’t go in,” Janice said. She looked down the long corridor. The only other person around was a girl sitting on a bench at the opposite end of the hall. She had a heavy sweater on and was looking out the window. “It’s so quiet in here.” She could hear the faint sound of Mr. Ratcliff’s voice going on inside the room and then laughter.

“What are they saying?” her mother said. “I can’t really hear them.”

“We shouldn’t be listening anyway,” her father said.

“Why not?” Janice said. “It’s my hearing.”

Her mother swung her crossed leg back and forth.
Janice watched the second hand on the big clock on the opposite wall, as it
ticked slowly around. Her hands were sweating and she wiped them on her skirt, then
glanced down the hall again, at the girl at the other end, but she was leaning over, her
head in her hands.

“What do you think’s the matter with her?” Janice asked, nudging her mother.

Her mother glanced down the hall. “Who knows? Probably getting a
divorce.”

Janice shifted, trying to get comfortable on the hard wooden bench. “Why do
you think that?”

“Most people do,” her mother said, digging in her purse. She took a package
of Lifesaver out of her purse. “They’re wintergreen,” she said, holding them out.

Janice took one and turned it over in her sweaty fingers. “I have to go to the
bathroom,” she said.

“Well, hurry,” her mother said. “What if they come out?”

In the restroom across the hall, Janice turned on the water and washed her
sticky hands. She’d had several appointments with Mr. Ratcliff over the last couple
months, and Detective Osburger, but nothing much had really happened, and they had
delayed and delayed the hearing. “You’re not going to find him” Janice had said to
Detective Osburger, the last time they talked. “He’s gone.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do,” she said, looking down at her hands.

“Ah,” he said. “I see.”

“Anyway, what difference does it make?” she said finally.
"I don't know. It probably matters to you. For whatever's going on inside you," he said.

Janice looked at him, then looked away again.

He smiled a little. "I used to be psychologist," he said. "But I got tired of working with people who didn't really want to solve their problems. So now I solve cases. At least some of the time."

"Is that why they assigned you to work with me?" Janice said. "So I could get some counseling at the same time?"

"How do you feel about that?" He leaned toward her, grinning. "I'm kidding. It was just coincidence. But I'm glad it worked out this way. I've enjoyed talking to you."

She looked at him, then down at her hands again.

"You're going to be all right," he said.

Now she looked at herself in the mirror as she dried her hands, pushed her hair behind her ears. She still had a little scar on her cheek from the jar of peaches that had smashed above her head, in the root cellar that one day. She touched it, remembering how upset Amber had been, sitting down there for hours, the rubber ball she'd bounced on the ground over and over. She wondered where Amber was now, what she was doing. Swallowing, she went back out of the bathroom. As she walked toward her parents, the office door opened, and Mr. Ratcliff came out, along with another man that Janice had never seen before.

Mr. Ratcliff sat down on the bench beside her father. The man who was with him glanced at Janice, then walked away, carrying a cup of coffee. "That was Jerry
Bradley, the prosecutor," Mr. Ratcliff said. "He and I have been trying to reach an agreement." He winked. "Brought him a couple doughnuts. That always helps." He laughed, shaking his head. "But seriously, here’s the thing. At this point, neither side has a case, really. And since you’ve had no further convictions of drug use—you’re going back to school, you’re doing well, etc—the prosecutor has agreed to release you on bond. Basically, you’re going to have to pay a fine, called a bond forfeiture, and the case is going to remain on file, forever pending. What that means is that it isn’t too likely anything else is ever going to happen with it. Now, if Dan were to reappear somehow”—he looked at Janice—“and the police were to arrest him, the case would reopen and the whole thing would end up in trial. And they’re going to be on the look out. But as long as he never shows up again, it’s likely that nothing else is really going to happen.”

“So I just have to pay a fine?” Janice said.

“Basically. And I expect that you’ll be the one paying it. Not your parents. Right?” He looked at her. “You’ll need to do it on the way out of the courthouse.”

“You can pay me back,” her father said, squeezing her hand. “If you don’t have the money with you.”

Janice lips were tingling, and she felt like she couldn’t quite get a breath.

“Thank you,” she said, not quite sure who she was talking to.

“Go straight downstairs,” Mr. Ratcliff said. “You’ll see the office where you pay directly to the right.” He shook her parents’ hands and then turned to Janice.

“So that’s it?” she said. “Just like that?”

“Well, I could get Jerry Brady back here and see if he’d give you some
community service if you want. Or a couple nights in jail.”

She laughed shakily. “I just . . . that’s all right. It just seems kind of quick.

Now that it’s over.”

He smiled a little, shaking his head. “Let me know how you’re doing. I’d like to hear that you’re doing well. I mean that.” He looked at her for a second more, then shook her hand.

“Thank you,” Janice’s father called after him, as Mr. Ratcliff strode down the hall.

“Zandra Rossman?” he said, as he approached the girl wearing the thick sweater. The girl looked up and met Janice’s eyes for a moment, then Mr. Ratcliff sat down beside her and blocked Janice’s view of her.

“He said straight downstairs, didn’t he?” said Janice’s mother, starting toward the elevator.

“Wait,” Janice said, trying to peer down the hall.

Janice’s father touched her elbow. “Let’s go, kiddo.”

“No, just a second,” she said, and followed Mr. Ratcliff to the bench where Zinnie sat waiting.

**

“Just drive! I’ll tell you where to go,” she said in response to Xavier’s impatient glances. She had the window cranked open and had to use both hands to hold the tangled mass of hair out of her eyes. It had been almost eight by the time she got back to her apartment and Xavier had been asleep on the couch, had looked groggily up at her when she jiggled his shoulder. “What happened?” he asked.
“Everything. I don’t even know how to tell you.”

“You’re not in jail?”

“No,” she said, indignantly. “I’ll tell you in the car. Come on.”

Now he leaned forward over the steering wheel. “It’s half-dark already,” he said. “Why don’t they put some street lights out here?”

“It might help if you took off your sunglasses,” she said, the wind whipping into her cheeks and bare arms. He’d gotten a new pair earlier and she’d seen him checking himself out in the mirror in the bathroom.

He laughed, embarrassed, tossing the glasses into the seat. “So you got off, huh? I knew they wouldn’t do anything to a chick like you. You know,” he said as they turned onto Lake Lowell, and began winding around toward the Snake. “So sexy and pretty.”

She leaned over and stuck her hand underneath his shirt onto his soft belly, then undid the top button on his jeans. He hadn’t shaved that morning and a sprinkling of black stubble was starting to show. She reached up and rubbed his chin. “You look really cool in your new glasses.” She picked them up and put them on.

He grinned. “So do you.”

Kicking her feet up onto the dashboard, she hooked her finger inside the waistband of his jeans.

“You can feel me up if you want to,” he said, still grinning. “I won’t stop you.”

She laughed. “Just hurry,” she said.

“Whatever you say,” he said, and stepped on the accelerator.
When they were done, she rolled down the window. They had parked by the river, beside a stand of low, scrubby trees, and she looked out at the sky as the moon appeared from under a layer of wispy clouds. She could see the top of the house over the ridge, had been looking at it for the past twenty minutes, whenever she could maneuver her head around Xavier’s. “I’ll be back in a little while,” she said now, fastening her pants.

“You gotta pee again?”

She hesitated, her hand on the door handle. “I just want to see something. I’ll be right back.”

“You’re going to freeze your butt off.”

“I’m not going outside naked.”

“No? Too bad,” he said, leaning his head back against the seat. He closed his eyes. “I’ll be here.”

She slammed the door and began climbing the ridge, digging her feet into the sand. She was still thinking about Zinnie, had been ever since she stood up from the bench at the courthouse, her pregnant belly bulging over the waistband of her jeans. She’d had a desperate look in her eyes, and she clutched Janice’s arm as if it had only been two days since she’d seen her, instead of five months. “I’m having this baby,” she blurted out. “And they’ve been asking all these questions, and I don’t know what to do.”

Mr. Ratcliff stood off to the side. “I’ll leave you two alone for a minute,” he said, stepping to the other side of the hall.
“Do you know where Dan is?” Zinnie pressed her hand to her forehead. “I had this boyfriend for a while, but he—”

“Janice,” her father called to her down the hall. “Your mother’s downstairs already.”

“I have to go,” Janice said. “My parents are waiting.” She turned away.

“Wait,” Zinnie said, obviously crying. “I just want to ask you something.”

Janice paused, looking back. “You can come over sometime if you want. I live on Ivy Street. In Meade,” she said, but Zinnie was scrubbing away the tears on her cheeks with a crumpled Kleenex and Janice wasn’t sure whether she’d even heard her.

Now Janice stood shivering at the top of the ridge. She didn’t really expect to see her again. She wasn’t sure she could stand to see her, anyway. She looked like she was about to give birth any day. Or within a few weeks anyway. It was Dan’s, she knew it was.

She blinked away the sudden tears in her eyes and looked up at the house, staring at it. Something about it seemed unbelievable to her, how it hadn’t changed it all over the past few months, except for the yellow police tape criss-crossing over the doorway, and the entrance to the root cellar. At home, whenever she tried to imagine it, it seemed blurry, barely there, like an image in a puddle of water. But now here it was after all, its outline dark against the starry sky.

She sank down onto the ground, watching as the screen door flapped open in the wind, then banged shut against the weathered doorframe. A small brown rabbit hopped out from behind the stand of dead sunflower stalks near the right side of the
house, sniffed the air, then leaped away, disappearing against the backdrop of the dry earth, the graying house.

"What are you looking for? Come on, let’s go.” Xavier grabbed her arm and heaved her up from the ground. “It’s not like there’s anything to see out here.”

She followed him back to the car and got in. He slammed the door on the other side. “You could just go, if you want,” she said, after a minute, when he just sat there. “If you don’t feel like waiting.”

“You want to stay longer? Why?”

“I just do. I don’t know why.”

“I can’t just leave you out here.”

“I’ll figure out something. I could get a ride.” She looked out the window.

“From who?”

”Don’t you have a flashlight in here?” She opened his glove box and peered in. “I want to be by myself, just for a little while. Okay?” She could hear the impatience in her own voice.

“So you just want me to leave.”

When she didn’t say anything else, he started the engine. “Fine, then.”

She opened the door into the chilly air and got out again.

“Janice!” He leaned across the seat.

“I’ll walk to the gas station and call you.”

“In the dark? It’s miles from here!” He looked out the front windshield. “So what was this, our good-bye fuck?”

“Why do you always say stuff like that? I’ll call you in a little bit. From the
“Right.” He put the car into reverse and put his sunglasses on, then tore them off again and held them up. “The frames are bent. Look what you did.” He pushed on one of the stems, trying to bend it back where it belonged. It snapped and he tossed them onto the floor, then reached over and pulled her door shut and backed out onto the dirt path.

She stood looking after him. The car jounced over the rutted, stony path and wound slowly up toward the road. “I didn’t mean to break your glasses!” she shouted.

She watched the red taillights until she couldn’t see them anymore, then turning on the flashlight, she aimed it toward the house.

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Pushing open the front door, she shone the flashlight around. “Dan?” she called hesitantly, even though she knew he wasn’t there. A bat flapped around the ceiling, squeaking, and she covered her head for a second, then hurried into the kitchen. She ran her hand over the big table and a beer can fell off and rolled across the floor. “Dan?” she said again.

The upstairs of the house was empty too, full of cobwebs and dust. She could tell where the police had rifled through their belongings—dresser drawers were pulled open, boxes of papers and clothes dumped out on the floor. Sorting through the papers, she looked for her diary, but it wasn’t there, and she had the horrible thought that Mr. Ratcliff or maybe Detective Osburger had it stuffed away in one of their desks somewhere, had read everything she’d written. She squeezed her eyes
shut, suddenly feeling as if someone had touched her in a way she didn't want them to, then ran down the stairs and out the door.

Kicking aside the piles of sagebrush that had blown up against the back of the house, she held the flashlight out, shining it around. She wished she could find the place the baby was buried, just to see it again, but she knew she never would in this darkness.

Heading back around to the front of the house, she ran down to the river, then walked along the bank of the river, past the bridge and beyond, to the stand of willows. Pushing through the cattails, she got down on her knees and clawed away the weeds. Some winged insect fluttered against her arm, but she shook it off, feeling for the hard edge of the half-buried canoe. When she found it, she slid her hand along the side, then plunged her arm into the bow end and pulled out the tiny undershirt she had stuffed there, months ago. It looked just the same, except it was cold, and she pressed it to her face, breathing in the smell of damp bark. She felt like crying, but instead she just sat there, her knees pressing into the half-muddy ground. Finally, she crammed it in the pocket of her jacket, and running back along the bank of the river, she headed up the ridge, suddenly hoping that Xavier hadn't really left after all. She ran down to the end of the dirt lane to Deer Flat, thinking maybe she could catch him, but the road was empty and dark. She stood there for a minute, beaming her flashlight up and down the road. A cloud of insects swarmed around the light, and slowly, she began walking. *It's not that far to the gas station. It won't take that long,* she tried to convince herself, then wondered how walking down this road could have taken her such a long time to begin.
“Hey, Mr. Garmendia,” Janice said, coming out of her apartment.

“Hey yourself,” he said, pushing the lawnmower over into the yard. “Where are you going, missy?” He clucked his tongue. “First mowing. I could use some help here.” One of his cats, the gray-striped one, crouched beside him in the grass, switching its tail back and forth.

“I could help when I get home,” she said. “I have an errand to run.”

“What?” He cupped his hand around his ear.

“I’m going to the school. The college,” she shouted. “To register for summer school.”

“Ah, you kids,” he said, grumpily. “All the time, you have to go to school. In my day, you just get a job and work. Hey,” he said as she started down the steps.

“Who was that girl that was here yesterday?”

“What girl?” As she looked at him, a car pulled up in front of the house and the door opened.

“You’re still going with me, aren’t you?” Matt Cooper got out and walked over to her, his hands shoved in his pockets. “They’re only open till five, I think.”

She smiled at him. “I just need to get my backpack. Come inside for a second.”

He followed her into her apartment. “Should I sit down?”

CHAPTER 11

May, 1997
“It’ll just be a minute. I have to throw my stuff together.” She went into the bedroom and started gathering up the papers she’d filled out.

“Hey, when did you get this Nintendo?” Matt called out from the living room.

“My dad got it for me,” Janice said.

In a minute, she heard the sound of Super Mario starting up.

“He got me like Final Doom and some Star Wars one,” she said. “I think he wants to come over and play with it.” Her papers were scattered over the floor and she got down on her knees to pick them up.

“What’d you say?” Matt hovered in the doorway. “Do you need some help? It’s kind of a mess in here.”

“Yeah? What about it?” She grinned up at him.

He smiled, watching as she peered under her bed. “We should go see that movie later. What’s it called? Romy and Michelle’s High School Reunion? It’s supposed to be pretty funny. It’s got that one chick in it. Lisa Kudrow. From Friends.”

“You just want to go to see the hot girls.”

He squatted down, looking at her seriously. “I want to go to prepare for our own high school reunion. In a spiritual sense, I mean.” He grinned. “It won’t be that long, you know.”

“Oh, God. I don’t think I’ll be going. I doubt I’ll even be invited.” She pulled an orange sheet out from under her bed.

“I’m inviting you right now.” He shook his head, smiling at her, then wandered back out to the living room.
Janice stacked her papers into the pile, and shoved them in her backpack. Matt had been coming over pretty often the last few weeks, since the night she'd run into him at Lake Shore Market. The walk from Dan's house had turned out to be a lot farther than a few miles, just to get to the gas station, and when she finally got there, her feet were blistered, her legs trembling. She went to the phone booth, and she'd been standing inside it, wondering where she could get a quarter, when someone knocked on the glass door.

"It's just me. Don't have a heart attack."

"Matt Cooper!" Janice had leaned her head against the cold glass.

"What are you doing out here? I'm heading back into town, if you need a ride." He held up a six-pack of beer. "Fake ID. Works out here better than any place in town."

She pushed the glass door open and limped after him to his Nissan.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm just... I'm really tired. I thought you had a pick-up," she said, to change the subject. It felt horribly embarrassing, suddenly, that she had been walking for three hours in the pitch dark. She didn't know how to explain it. She glanced at him.

"When you came to the store that one day."

"That was Cory's," he said. "My dad bought me this junk heap." He grinned.

"It's not that bad. I want an old Studebaker. Have you seen those trucks? There's one in the paper that sounds pretty cool. I went over and looked at it. It's black with flames painted on the window."

Inside, he started the engine, then opened his window. "Sorry I scared you."
What’d you do, fly out here on your magic carpet?”

She laughed. “Something like that.”

“Want a drink?” He twisted off the top of a beer bottle. “You’re not driving.”

She took the bottle from him and tipped it up.

He grabbed it back and took a swallow. “Just one,” he said. “It’s been a long day.”

“Oh yeah?” she said, then looked out the window on her side.

He made a sound as if he might say something, then didn’t after all.

They drove in silence, past the fenced green fields, the smell of damp grass and mud floating in the window. Every so often, a car flashed by in the other lane, its headlights sweeping over them, and then away, past them on the dark road.

“So did you have your hearing yet?” He looked at her. “Is that a bad question? I saw it in the paper.”

“It’s just over,” she said. “It’s like it never even happened.”

“Well, that’s good,” Matt said. He glanced at her. “I guess.”

Janice peered out her window at the stars. “Does it ever seem to you like time just kind of piles up on top of itself, like everything’s happening all at once? I mean, instead of one thing after another?”

He dropped his head, laughing a little. “I don’t know. You mean like how it still feels like we’re in high school, but we’re not?”

“Kind of,” she said. She looked out the window again. “It just feels different than I thought it would.”

“What does?” he said.
"Everything." She hesitated. "The other night I dreamed I was driving along, and in my dream my eyes were closed, and when I opened them, I realized I had somehow driven clear to the end of this long gravel driveway, and I couldn’t think how I’d gotten there, the place I was trying to go, with my eyes shut." She glanced at him. "It was scary, realizing I’d been driving with my eyes closed. But still, there I was, at the place I’d been trying to get to." She laughed, then shook her head, embarrassed.

"So you think you know where you’re trying to get to?"

"Not really. How about you?"

"Hell, no," he said. "I’m just doing what my dad wants me to for a while, so he won’t yell at me all the time. I hate that dumb job I have. Although some of the drawings that the architect guy does are kind of cool. Sometimes he shows them to me, or I see them on his desk. But half the time, he just sits around drinking coffee and checking his email. And flirting with the secretary. Grown-ups are weird." He laughed. "They’re all just pretending what they do is important."

She looked out the window again. They had turned off of the highway onto Twelfth Avenue now and she could see the lights of the town. "Turn left on Juniper. To get to my apartment. It’s on Ivy."

When he pulled up in front of her apartment, she’d just said thanks for the ride, and jumped out, but then he’d showed up the next night, with a pizza, saying he thought she might be hungry. She was, and he’d been thinking of excuses to come over quite a bit since then.

"Hey," he said now, from the living room. "Somebody’s here. Some girl."
Janice went to the front door and looked out as Zinnie got out of an old Datsun and walked across the street, her hair spilling over her shoulders in the sunlight. She walked slowly, her hand pressed against her back.

"It’s Zinnie," she said in a panic, turning to Matt.

"Who?"

"I don’t want to see her!" She glanced back outside. Her armpits had begun to sweat. "Or maybe I do. I don’t know!"

"What do you want me to do? Tell her you’re not home?"

But Zinnie was already halfway up the steps. "Hi," she said, rapping on the door. "Did you guys . . . did I interrupt something?"

Janice turned to the door, trying to act normal. "Wow," she said, clearing her throat. "Look at you."

Zinnie crossed her arms. "I know. I’m huge, aren’t? Hi," she said, looking at Matt.

"This is Matt," Janice said, making room for him at the door. "Matt, Zinnie."

"Hey," Zinnie said. She had on a purple t-shirt that said Roller Derby and a pair of holey jeans. The t-shirt had slid up over her stomach and she tugged it down again, self-consciously. "Feels like I have a bowling ball inside. With legs. I swear it kicks me all night long." She looked back at Janice. "So I was just wondering . . . I just thought I’d come by," she said. "I hope it’s okay." She stood there awkwardly.

"You didn’t go to Faith, did you?" Matt said.

Zinnie shook her head. "Not quite," she said, a sarcastic edge in her voice. "I went to a public school in McCammon. It’s a dumpy little town with about ten
people. East of here. I didn’t actually finish, though. High school, I mean.”

Janice and Zinnie looked at each other through the screen door.

“But look. I got a new tattoo,” she said, turning around lifting the back of her t-shirt.

There was a bluebird on her lower back, its feathery purple and blue wings uplifted, as if it were fluttering in the air, and it had a thin gold halo above its head and long eyelashes fanning out from its demurely closed eyelids.

“Did you see the halo?” Ziimie said. “Don’t you think that’s appropriate?” She tried to smile as she turned back around. She glanced at Matt. “I live in Boise now. In an apartment, with three other people. I do have a bed to myself at least.”

“Sounds cheap,” Matt said.

“Yeah,” said Zinnie. “It has that going for it.” She peered around them to the interior of the apartment. “So this is your place, Janice? It’s pretty nice,” she said.

Janice nodded. “I think stuff costs less over here. Than in Boise.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mr. Garmendia straighten up, glance over at them.

“Looks like there’s two Janice’s. One inside and one outside,” he called over to them.

“Is he blind?” Zinnie asked.

Janice laughed, some of the tightness in her stomach inside her melting away. “It’s just me, Mr. Garmendia. This is Zinnie.”

“Say-uh, missy, you can’t have people just moving in and out all the time,” he called out. “If she’s going to come in there, you got to sign a new lease.”

“We’re just talking,” Janice said. “Don’t worry.”

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"What?"

"We're just talking!" she shouted.

He muttered something, then bent over the lawnmower again.

Janice looked at Zinnie again. She was nudging a rock around with her toe.

"I just... I came over here because... I wanted to tell you I'm sorry." She pressed her hand against the underside of her stomach. "I wish I could say sorry to the whole world."

Janice could see that she was close to crying, and she started to open the screen just as Mr. Garmendia pulled the cord on his mower. It roared on and he began pushing it through the yard, leaving behind a swathe of new bright green grass.

"We were just on our way to register for summer school," Janice said.

"Oh." Zinnie tugged her shirt down again. "I should get going anyway," she said. She hesitated for a minute. "I like your apartment," she said a little wistfully, then started down the steps.

"Wait a second. I was going to say—I was just going to ask you if you wanted to come in. It'd be okay, wouldn't it, Matt? If we went another day?"

"It'll still be there tomorrow," he shrugged. "School's always there."

Janice had propped the door open with her foot and the smell of newly cut grass drifted through the screen. As Mr. Garmendia pushed the lawnmower around the side of the house, the gray cat came streaking across the lawn, and they all laughed.

"Are you sure?" Zinnie asked. She started to reach in through the half-open screen door to grab Janice's hand, then just looked at her for a minute.
Janice pushed the door open. "Yeah," she said. She looked at Matt and grinned. "Come on in."
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