

5-10-2014

Receiver of Wreck: A Memoir

Brandi Lynn Perry

University of South Carolina - Columbia

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Receiver of the Wreck: A Memoir

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, 2011

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2014

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DEDICATION

To Bryan, who loved, supported and encouraged me through the writing process, and made sure I took care of myself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was partially supported by a SPARC Graduate Fellowship from the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of South Carolina.

ABSTRACT

Receiver of Wreck: A Memoir is a third-person, present tense narrative that covers the span of my graduate program at the University of South Carolina. This point of view was chosen as it provides a level of separation between the author, me, and the abuse and also the reader and the abuse - this serves the dual purpose of not retraumatizing the reader and allowing me more of a removed perspective to focus more on the exterior and less on the interior. The memoir has dual narrative trajectories: while I am recovering from sexual abuse and depression and becoming a writer, my marriage is failing. This work deals with sexual abuse/assault, depression, anxiety, drug addiction, recovery, and divorce.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
SECTION I: REPORT WRECK MATERIAL – FLOTSAM, JETSAM, DERELECT, AND LAGAN	1
CHAPTER 1	2
CHAPTER 2	8
CHAPTER 3	9
CHAPTER 4	17
CHAPTER 5	20
CHAPTER 6	29
CHAPTER 7	31
CHAPTER 8	36
CHAPTER 9	38
CHAPTER 10	47
CHAPTER 11	49
CHAPTER 12	56
CHAPTER 13	58
CHAPTER 14	70

CHAPTER 15	72
SECTION II: SETTLEMENT OF SALVAGE - SETTLEMENT OF OWNERSHIP	81
CHAPTER 16	82
CHAPTER 17	89
CHAPTER 18	101
CHAPTER 19	114
CHAPTER 20	125
CHAPTER 21	141
CHAPTER 22	161
CHAPTER 23	169
CHAPTER 24	178
CHAPTER 25	194
CHAPTER 26	204
CHAPTER 27	213
CHAPTER 28	232
CHAPTER 29	246
CHAPTER 30	255

**SECTION I: REPORT WRECK MATERIAL - FLOTSAM, JETSAM,
DERELICT, AND LAGAN**

RECOVERY OPERATION

She has to take responsibility for the wreck,
mediate between the two halves: owner and finder.
Both are her, both must be reconciled into one.
There is flotsam, that which floats along
the surface - the barrels, bits of crates, wooden hunks
of hull. There is jetsam, that which she cast overboard
to lighten the load - casks and heavy trunks that may
or may not skip along the surface. The lagan,
that which has sunk to the bottom but can be reclaimed,
salvaged only through great effort.
Most difficult is the derelict, that which
cannot be reclaimed - the heaviest and most
damaged, most damaging. Both the cannonballs
and the cannons that fired them, the blank spaces,
that will never be filled, the anchor. But first,
before it is sorted, she must receive the wreck.

CHAPTER 1

She hurries across the University of Colorado Campus, slightly out of breath from a mixture of the exertion and the cold, October air. Her long, dirty-blond hair hangs damply and she silently chides herself for once again failing to use the hairdryer before she left the house. She wasn't stylish by any means - usually wearing clothes that were on sale rather than what she'd actually pick for herself. Nice clothing was one of the sacrifices she made when she stopped working and went back to college full time at twenty-seven. Her husband, Nick, hadn't asked her, but she felt guilty spending money on things that were not necessities. It was only partially money though; part of her believed that since she was a bigger woman, she didn't deserve nice things. She wears no makeup and little to no jewelry.

On this particular day, she is heading to Jazzman's coffee shop to meet her mentor, Dr. Ortega, who was helping her with her graduate school applications. It was early - she always likes to arrive early - so she

orders a peppermint latte, her latest obsession, and grabs one of the few tables nearby. Normally, she'd be writing in one of her notebooks or reading while she waited, but today she is too nervous. She stares out the windows, checks the time on her phone, and chews her fingernails to pass the time. Once, she opens her notebook and flips to a clean page, but it is no use. Her thoughts are eclipsed by one decision, one step into the future.

"Hey Brandi," Dr. Ortega says as she places her satchel in an empty chair.

"Oh, hi. I didn't hear. I was off in space," she laughs.

Dr. Ortega goes to the counter to place an order of her own and then returns to sit down across from her at the table. She had just come from her office hours and her cheeks are slightly pinked.

"Did you get my email?" she asks.

"I did," Dr. Ortega nods. "What made Nick decide he was willing to move for you to go to grad school? He seemed so against it last time we talked."

"I don't know. I'd been looking at low-residency MFA programs and they cost a lot. I told him that I might be able to get funding and paid to teach if we move. He actually seemed excited about leaving," she stares down at

her coffee cup. "He hates his job. Of course, this gives me two months to get my applications done. I'm excited but overwhelmed."

"Have you decided on any schools then?"

"University of Wyoming, Notre Dame, Emerson, University of Colorado, and University of South Carolina," she counts them out on her fingers as she names them. She'd researched so many schools in the last few months, it was hard to keep track.

"Those sound like some good choices. I'm happy for you. I will warn you though, going to graduate school is one of the most selfish things you can do. It will put a lot of strain on your marriage. You may have to make a decision at some point. I know, I've said this before. I'm not trying to scare you but to prepare you."

"I know, I appreciate it."

She listens to the warning but doesn't give it much credence. How bad could it really be after all? Nick and Brandi's marriage had been going well recently. Yes, there were parts she wasn't happy with. Money was always an issue, and they rarely had sex, but they didn't fight as much as they used to. When she returns home to her one-bedroom apartment, she decides to call her sister, Elise.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," says Elise.

"You have to do this."

"Yeah, I don't know," she is lying in bed with the lights off. Something she does often when she feels sad or confused.

"Don't know nothing, you're doing it," Elise laughs.

"What if I find out I'm not good enough? What if I don't get in or I don't get funding. What then?"

"You worry too much. It'll be fine. You're good."

"I wish I felt that way."

"Well, I feel that way. Dr. Ortega and Dr. Thompson do too. Look at all you've done already."

Elise was right; Brandi already had numerous publications and awards. Still though, she didn't consider herself a writer. It was a title that always seemed out of reach. When she first went back to school, she told herself that she could call herself a writer if she had a publication. Then, after getting published in the school literary journal, she modified it. She could call herself a writer after she published in a national journal. After she accomplished that, she told herself that it would wait until she published in a well-known journal or published a book. Given her method of establishing ever higher requirements for a title that merely represents an action

and a commitment, the bar would always be out of reach.

"Still, what if it ends my marriage?" she asks.

"Is it really that great to begin with?"

"I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. He's still my husband."

"Yeah, but you put up with a lot of shit I wouldn't."

It is true. She puts up with a lot. Still though, it is better than her first marriage. Her first husband was abusive, drug addicted, and a cheat. Anything is better than that. Besides, she worries that with her size no one would ever love her. She isn't convinced that Nick truly loves her either. He'd made comments about her weight that shattered her already fragile self-esteem. He always apologized, said he didn't mean it, but she couldn't let go of it. His words often repeated in her head, especially in the quiet hours of late evening when all else was silent. This is one of the reasons she tries to keep herself busy.

"I guess. It's not something I can know about now anyhow. I'm going to let you go so I can work on my applications."

"Get to it missy!" Elise laughs.

She is still concerned after they hung up the phone, still dissects Dr. Ortega's words. Maybe the change

of scenery would actually help their marriage. Nick had said something to that effect already. Besides, one of the schools was in-state anyhow. It would be good to be working and bringing in a paycheck again. She hated that he had to pay for everything for the last two years. Sure, she took on odd jobs, but the bulk of the responsibility still fell on him. Long ago, she'd given up the dream of being a homemaker and a mother. She learned through experience that the only person she could count on was herself. With a sigh, she gets out of bed and heads to her computer.

CHAPTER 2

Two pairs of legs worked under the waterline of an in-ground swimming pool. The water was bright, shot through with summer sunlight reflecting off of the rippling waves. A pair of thick male legs, covered in black hair, approached. He stepped forward, his blue swim trunks puffing out in the water like a jellyfish. The other pair of legs were thin and pale, too thin to be those of an adult. They kick at the water, trying to keep her afloat. The sunlight does not fade, even after he slipped his hand into her bikini bottom. The rhythmic movement of his fingers was visible through the thin fabric. A well of water formed in the space between his palm and her pubic bone. The water sucked at her skin as his fingers crawled inside of her.

CHAPTER 3

They arrive in Columbia, South Carolina in mid-July. The temperature is already over one-hundred degrees and Elise, Brandi, and Nick perspire as they unload the car after the three day drive from Colorado. Their bodies are distinctly different - Nick is thin, with a slight belly, Elise is athletic, and Brandi is thick, overweight. She feels the extra weight in her movements, particularly when she is around others. The moving truck with the rest of their things would arrive in a few days. Elise was there to help Brandi unpack and set up the new home while Nick looked for a new job. He'd done some searching online before they left but claimed to have found no prospects. She worries about the cost of the apartment and how they'd afford it if he didn't find work soon. There was still some money left in savings, even after she paid for the move. Still, she worries.

The apartment is a one-bedroom in an old cotton mill, Whaley's Mill, near the university's campus. Already, she is in love with the light that pours in from the six-

foot window in the living area. In her mind, she has already planned where her paintings will hang, where she will place her easel, and where she will set up her writing desk. It'd been days since she had written and she was worried about losing momentum on the memoir project about her struggle with compulsive overeating. It was the project that got her into graduate school, had helped her begin to understand why she ate the way she did. Though the writing was therapeutic, she saw no change in the way she ate or in her weight. She hates the way she looks, hates looking at herself in the mirror. When she catches glimpse of her body in the mirror, it is as if it is someone else. The mental image does not match up with the reflection. She knows he hates the way she looks, even though she was large when they first met. She hates the way she looks but seems powerless to change it without severe dieting, which leaves her resentful and even more tired than normal.

The moving truck is late, so late that it does not arrive until the day before her sister is to fly back to Colorado. Without anything to unpack, they have little to do besides sit on inflatable mattresses and watch television. It is too hot to walk around outside and the smell of ozone triggers Brandi's asthma. Nick doesn't want to go outside and look for work either. Instead, he applies

for jobs on the internet without really researching the area to find out what is nearby. He doesn't shave, his sandy blonde stubble getting thicker each day. His previous job, the job they both worked at when they met, was at a call center for a cruise line. She understands that he wants to find something comparable but without a college degree, that would be difficult. He resents her for her education, the education he worked to support her through. It wasn't that he had not had the opportunity to go back to school, but that he kept changing programs or dropping out so he made little progress. It was his depression, she knew, and his belief that he was a failure for not being rich by twenty-one that led his disappointment.

She goes grocery shopping with her sister and returns home to find Nick watching television. "Hi honey," she says, "any leads today?"

He stiffens, his jaw becoming hard set, "No. I applied for some jobs on Monster.com. There's just no work out here."

"I doubt that's true. Did you look at local places to see who was hiring? There are tons of businesses around. You may just need to beat feet and see what's out there." She stands near the doorway of the kitchen, where her sister is putting away groceries.

"I've looked them up, no one is hiring." His body tenses and he stares at the screen as he speaks.

"Not even the restaurants? You mentioned wanting to be a waiter again. Maybe even fast food. There are places around and any job is better than no job."

The argument felt eerily familiar. She remembers having the same discussion with her ex-husband when he refused to take anything below management work even though he had no education or management experience. Her breaths deepen as she prepares for the argument that she knows is coming. It is something she can't get away from even with advanced warning.

"The restaurants are hiring and, no offense, I don't want to work fast food," he looks at her now. His eyes appear dark in the bright light of the living room.

"Well, you may not have a choice. It would just be temporary," she sighs. "Have you at least called to check on your online applications?"

"No, I shouldn't have to do that," he says.

"But you need to. Do you know how many applications businesses probably get? Some of them wait to see who calls. It is a way of figuring out who is really interested."

"I'm not calling anybody. They should be

reviewing all applications," his voice begins to rise. She can hear her sister's moves in the other room slow; she is listening.

This is another point of contention between them. He doesn't like to be told anything about the way companies work or hiring. At the call center, she was promoted over him as a supervisor, a fact he hated. It led to fighting. She didn't understand why he couldn't just be proud of her. Later, he applied for the same position and was denied twice. It was because of his interview skills, he had been told. When in the office with the managers, he looked at the floor, frowned, and sat in a defensive posture. He stuttered, became confused, and gave bad answers to their questions. She offered to help him, but he refused. He hated when she talked about the policies at work and gave him advice for getting a day off that was closed out or using his sick time. He questioned her, didn't believe her, couldn't believe that she had some knowledge and wanted only to help him. To him, she was rubbing her promotion in.

"Honey, you have to call. That's the only way you're going to find a job. What if you drive around tomorrow looking for businesses?"

"I'm not going out there in that heat. I'll find work online. I'm fucking sick of you telling me what to do.

I'll take care of this myself. I don't need you telling me what to do," his voice is loud now.

Brandi stands there, knowing that any response would set him off further. Tears brimmed in her eyes, but she doesn't reply. It will only make things worse. She is used to him talking to her like this and then ignoring her. He will be mad at her for being upset too. There is no consolation, not even when she can't control her tears. If they were in bed, he would simply roll over and turn his back to her.

The movement in the kitchen stills for a moment before her sister comes marching out. "Don't you dare talk to my sister that way," she leans over him, her tall, athletic figure casting a shadow over him. "You don't get to talk to her like that. I'm tired of hearing it. She hasn't done anything to you and you are treating her like trash. You are a grown ass man and need a fucking job, so go find one. She doesn't need to support you. You are lucky that she loves you, otherwise I'd kick your ass."

He sits motionless for a few moments, save for the grinding of his teeth. They stare at each other, neither wanting to back down. Brandi is relieved when he finally closes his laptop and retreats into the bedroom, his feet hitting the carpet hard.

Hands in fists on her hips, her fine brown hair falling in a sheet over her right eye, Elise turns to face her. "Does he talk to you like that often?"

"All the time. Even for little things." Her lower lip starts to quiver, and she places the tip of her index finger against it to still it. "I feel like I can't do anything right. Still, it's better than it was with Jerry."

"That doesn't mean it's good either. Are you happy?"

"No. We don't have sex either. It's been months. He blames his depression, but I think it's me. He makes me feel like a monster," she looks down at the tan carpet, trying to keep the tears from spilling.

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry," Elise moves to her and hugs her. "It'll be ok."

"I don't know that it will. I don't know what I want, but it's not this. I thought we left all this behind us." She begins to cry.

So much water, there had always been so much water. For her, it is a struggle between turning to stone inside - unmovable, untouchable - and turning to water - fluid, easily loosed, wounded. Perhaps she is much more like wreckage, with casks and barrels that pop uncontrollably above the water, but also cannons and the

ship itself that sink to the bottom, never to resurface. It is a paradox of existence, that she can be hard but also broken. The confusion was enough to make her distrust her emotions, to distrust how she felt about her life with her husband.

CHAPTER 4

It was evening and she was sent to her bedroom again. Her anger turned to self-loathing as she sat on the floor and rocked while weeping. She knew she is stupid and unlovable. Those facts were clear to her - already unmovable and unshakable. She had hardness in her heart for herself. Since it was before dinner, she wasn't allowed to eat with the family. She decided she needed to punish herself and, at the same time, make them sorry for treating her this way. Somewhere in her mind, a little voice chimed up: *You should stop eating. You should never be allowed to eat.* The thought ceased her crying. Here was the potential for power, to gain some sort of control. It made her feel strong even though her stomach already hurt from hunger. Maybe she would get thin this way, and then her family would stop calling her Butterball. She looked down at the small tummy that pressed against the fabric of her pink, teddy bear swimsuit. She hated it, wished she could tear the flesh from her body. *Starvation would take care of two*

problems, she reasoned.

Her little brother Howard was sent upstairs with a plate of food for her. It was Cheeseburger Mac Hamburger Helper, two canned biscuits, and green beans. He didn't say anything and she waited to set the plate on her night stand until after he left the room. By now her stomach had started to growl. This was one of her favorite meals and her body wanted it. She stared at it from across the room, watching the steam slow. On her knees, she shimmied across the hardwood floor and looked at the food. Not able to stand it, she took the plate and sat on her twin-sized bed. She ate quickly, not really tasting the food but needing to fill her stomach now. It filled her, yet at the same time left her feeling empty. She hated herself for giving in, for needing anything outside of herself.

The upstairs was quiet and she sneaked past her parents' bedroom and into the bathroom. For a moment, she was blinded by the bright light reflecting off of the white tile and porcelain. She shut the door behind her, slowly enough that the click of the doorknob wasn't perceptible. Her reflection in the bathroom mirror stared back at her and she wanted to smash it - smash it like she smashed a coffee cup in the kitchen a few days ago. She went to the toilet, lifted the seat, and leaned over. Her small fingers

snaked into her mouth, seeking the pulpy flesh of her soft palate. She found it and pressed, opened her mouth wide to press all the way to the back of her throat. She gagged and coughed, tears spilling down her cheek. Still, she didn't throw up. She tried several times more, but she couldn't make herself vomit. Finally, she washed her hands and went back to her bedroom.

The empty plate, smeared with cheese sauce, confronted her as she walked in. Her little hand made a fist and she begins to punch herself in the stomach repeatedly, while chanting the word stupid.

CHAPTER 5

Moving to South Carolina is like entering another world. Oak trees grew next to palms and holly. The air is damp and, in the heat of summer, often smells of ozone. Gone was the newness of history that she felt in the west, a sort of temporality to everything resulting from migration - from beginning and then picking up and beginning again somewhere else. Here the structures are much grander and have an aged feel. The capitol building still flies the confederate flag and has carved stone stars that cover the bullet holes from when Sherman marched on Columbia in 1865. All over the city historical society plaques abound, detailing the Civil War, including the role students played and how the university she now attended shut down because the entire student body volunteered for military service. Colorado hadn't even been granted statehood until 1876, before that it was a territory with ever changing borders.

She heads to campus on a September afternoon for

her Southern Literature after 1900 course, feeling, again, like she somehow doesn't belong here. It is a fear that she is unequal to the challenge of graduate school - that her worst fear, that she is stupid, is true. She worries about her classmates discovering her faults - imposter syndrome it's been often called. The weather is warm, still over one-hundred degrees. Even in a tank top and flip flops, she sweats. After arriving here, she understood why many southerners in films always have a glistening sheen of sweat. She is embarrassed by her body and worries that others will think that the sweat is due more to her size than the heat, so she wears a grey, Tigger hoodie to cover it up. Before class, she goes to the bathroom and uses paper towels to dry the sweat that streams from her forehead. This is part of the reason she arrived early. The other part is that everyone arrived early where she was from. Out here, it seems everyone arrives just on time or even a little late.

She waits in the overly cold classroom in the Humanities Building. The cold makes her sweat even more for some reason so she grabs some paper towels from her backpack and again dabs her forehead. Over and over, she checks the time, afraid that class has been canceled and she doesn't know. She is relieved when other students begin

to arrive two minutes prior to the start of class. Today they are reading *The Fugitive Poets*. For the life of her, she can't figure out why a group of white males called themselves fugitives. It isn't a question anyone asks, and she doesn't want to be the one to ask it. Instead, she scans the pages when Dr. Powell asks for volunteers to read. She tries to see if it is safe for her to volunteer or not. There are many foreign words. It took her a while to learn to pronounce Appalachia correctly: App-uh-lat-chuh and not App-a-lay-schuh. It is like reading another language, rooted in another place and time.

Other students volunteer to read, moving through lead bullet words that she is sure would only misfire in her mouth. They lob terms like Agrarian, blunt as cannonballs across grassy earth and she scrambles to comprehend - to pull meaning from shrapnel. They move on to Donald Davidson's "Lee in the Mountains." She keeps her eyes on the page, scanning frantically. She doesn't know that Pickett is General George Pickett and Davidson is writing about Gettysburg, doesn't seem to have the same base knowledge as her classmates. She wonders if Appomattox is a city, a battle, or a river. Often the words she doesn't know are all three, which confuses her further. She scribbles notes in her text - valley, mountains, river,

Psalms 139. In this desperate grasping, the beauty of the poetry is lost on her. She can focus only on direct meaning and, therefore, has little to say in class. No one seems to notice, but she knows it is just a matter of time.

After class, she meets her friend Emilie at the Colloquium Cafe, just across from the Humanities Building in the brick courtyard. She's glad to have found a friend, another nonfiction student like herself, to talk to. Moving has isolated her more than she anticipated and her clinical depression, something she suffered from since childhood, became much worse. Just coming to campus today felt like an achievement. Really, what she wanted more than anything was to lie in bed or, preferably, just to disappear completely. She isn't presently suicidal but fantasizes about not existing - the end was there, but she hasn't considered the means. No one in Columbia knows about her depression. It is easier to keep herself closed off. She doesn't view it as a weakness of self, but an opportunity for others to hurt her if they find out. She is used to others hurting her, using personal knowledge about her life to plan underhanded attacks. If it happens again, she doesn't know if she can handle it along with the pressures of graduate school. No, she chooses to say nothing and also no longer take her anti-depressant. Her health insurance had lapsed and she

doesn't feel like she is bad enough off to need medication again.

Emilie is already in line inside the cafe. She wears brightly colored clothes that complement her short blonde hair and pale skin. Brandi envies her slim figure, sunny disposition, and elegant sense of style. Where Emilie is always polished, put together, Brandi had torn the pocket on her two-year-old hoodie she permanently borrowed from her father. The pocket remains unrepaired and hangs away from her body haphazardly. She wonders if it bothers Emilie. It is a simple repair but on some days, it is an effort just to get out of bed and get her feet on the ground.

"Hey friend, how ya doing?" says Emilie as she prepares a cup of hot tea.

"Hey. I don't know. Class didn't go so well and I'm pretty tired." She orders a large hazelnut latte. She loves whipped cream but is again trying to watch what she eats. Her feelings on food shift violently and she goes from periods of caring immensely about what she eats to not caring at all. There is no happy medium.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Emilie smiles.

"It's ok. I just don't think I'm doing very well here. It's like I can't keep up with the reading. There's

always too much work to do. I never have any time to myself anymore. I worry that it's just going to get worse." She hates the laundry list that comes from her mouth but can't stop herself. It feels like she is bitching and she chides herself as they walk over to one of the booths and sit down.

"I know how you feel. This semester is kicking my butt," Emilie looks at her directly.

Brandi still isn't used to people making eye contact and shifts her gaze after a few seconds. "We're just supposed to work, take classes, publish, and somehow have time to write. This isn't how I thought it would be," she sips her coffee and instantly regrets getting a hot drink. It is a lack of forethought, further proof, she tells herself, that she has no idea what she was doing.

"Amen to that. My head's barely above water, let alone finding time to write."

"I'm so lost, in all of my classes. I mean I did my undergrad in English and I feel like I never know what the hell anyone is talking about. It's not just the Southern Lit class either. What if I made a mistake in coming here?" What she actually wonders is if they made a mistake in choosing her, in offering her the James Dickey fellowship in order to recruit her. The fellowship meant

the difference between supporting her household and having to take a second job because Nick still isn't working.

"I didn't do my undergrad in English. At least you've had some preparation. You should hear the way the students talk in my classes. I'm not convinced they even know what they are talking about. It sounds good, but I think it's gibberish."

"That's true. In my undergrad, it was usually those that talked the most who hadn't done the reading. They were just well versed in the art of bullshit. I guess I kind of forgot that I don't have to do all the reading either. It just makes me feel like I'm less of a student if I don't. Like I'm not doing what I should be doing in the program. I mean, isn't this what we came to grad school for...to specialize? What's the point if I'm just skimming to get by?"

"I hear you, but it's impossible to read everything. The system isn't set up that way. I don't like it either, but we both have to deal with it."

"Yeah, you're right. It also kind of sucks that I'm not sleeping," Brandi says.

"Oh?"

"I have insomnia. Have had it for a long time. I just lie in bed and think about things. It's like I can't

shut my brain off," she sighs and runs her hand through her frizzy, dishpan blonde hair.

"What sort of things do you think about?"

"I don't know...about finishing my work, writing my book, Nick not working yet."

"He still hasn't found a job?" Emilie cocks an eyebrow.

"No, he says there isn't any work out here, but he really isn't trying that hard. He thinks putting in applications online is sufficient. He hasn't even called one place back to check on his application," she looks down at her coffee. "If he doesn't find something soon, I don't know what we'll do. I was supposed to be able to start paying on my student loans and now I don't know how we will support ourselves over winter break and then the summer. I spent all of the money from my wreck on moving here."

"From when the drunk driver hit you?"

"Yes. I didn't get very much. It's sad you know," she pointed, "I went through eight months of physical therapy, migraines, night terrors, and the injury itself and I only got \$7,000. Those commercials on TV are bullshit."

Emilie laughs, "I'm sorry. It will all work out friend. Just keep pushing forward."

"I'll try," says Brandi.

What she doesn't tell Emilie is that she doesn't want to push forward. The reality of graduate school and the state of her marriage was so draining, so overwhelming, that no turn of the ship's wheel could right her course - there was no right course, no escape from being her. She was lost at sea.

CHAPTER 6

The side door of her parents' house was unlocked. It's after midnight and she waited in the darkness. The smooth satin of her red nightgown was cool on her skin. Even with a high ponytail, the way he liked it, she felt like a grown woman. At thirteen, her body was still clearly that of a girl, but she didn't see it - only knew that she knew about sex well before she should have. In the still air, her washroom bedroom felt even smaller - it was only large enough for a full size bed and a bookshelf. She shifted, trying to find the perfect seductive pose for when he arrived, though she didn't imagine he will turn the light on. Any moment, she expected to hear the door creek and to feel his hands on her body. It would be the first time they could spend much time alone.

At his home, their touches were limited. He jammed his hand down her pants as soon as his wife's car left the driveway. It wasn't pleasurable for her - in a way it was painful. She'd rather dream of this moment, now,

when he would touch her delicately, make love to her without interruption. With her family's bedrooms on the other side of the house, it wasn't likely that anyone would hear him enter. She was counting on that and held her breath each time she heard a noise. She wouldn't let anything ruin this for her.

Time passed and she became drowsy, falling into a deep slumber that no prince would wake her from.

CHAPTER 7

Nick is coming home in an hour and she wants to do something nice for him. He is working a temporary job testing medical equipment in Lexington. He seems glad to be working again but also overwhelmed by the hours and getting up in the morning. Neither of them are morning people, preferring instead to stay up late into the night. Often, he goes to bed after she does - a fact that leaves her feeling alone. Sometimes he is up playing on the computer or programming. Other times, he is using pornography. She can't understand why he uses it instead of being with her. The last time they had sex was six months ago, despite her lack of trying. Eventually, she gave up. It is difficult if he won't even come to bed at the end of the night. She feels betrayed and abandoned. Many fights start over his addiction but are never resolved. Like his depression, it is a problem he refuses to work on despite the number of times she complains.

She's making porcupines, meatballs covered with

rice and baked in tomato sauce. It is her mother's recipe and one of Nick's favorite meals. There is only one slice of wheat bread left, though she wanted two. His job means that he is spending money going to lunch and a coffee shop each day and their already strained account has dwindled. If they can just make it through until he gets paid, they will be fine. She toasts the bread and crumbles it into a bowl. To this, she adds salt, pepper, garlic, chopped Roma tomatoes, and an egg. To remind them of their former home in Colorado, she throws in a can of green chilies, cayenne pepper, and a touch of chipotle - here she differs from her mother's recipe. To the mixture, she adds two pounds of ground beef. She hates touching raw meat even though she would eat fingerfuls of raw hamburger as a child. Besides, she knew he hadn't had them in a while and would appreciate it. It is as if she wants to pour herself into something ingestible, something he would willingly accept. After all, he had completely uprooted himself to follow her to graduate school. Sometimes, in her disappointment over his lack of employment, she forgets this.

After she forms the meatballs, she rolls them in rice, arranges them in a single layer in a casserole dish, and covers everything in tomato sauce. The day is still bright and warm and she enjoys the peace of the house as

she cooks. He'd been home for days on end for months, which made it difficult for her to focus on her work. This last week provided a welcome break. If he keeps working, she believes they would get along better simply because they wouldn't be around each other all the time. It also made him feel better to work, though he already had plans to buy a new electronic gadget with the money he earned.

He comes home tired and sniffs the air of the apartment. "Porcupines?" he smiles.

"Yes. Though they've been in there for an hour and a half and still aren't done."

He rubs his belly and heads into the kitchen to check them. "I'm starving. I'm just going to take them out."

The rice was still crunchy on top. Edible, but crunchy. The dish really needed a second can of sauce that they just did not have. He serves himself a heaping plate full. She knows that after she gets hers, he will go back and finish the entire pan. They sit in the living room, in front of the television.

"How was your day?" she says.

"Eh, it was long, kinda shitty. I'm still not used to getting up early."

She takes a bite, "It's not too bad. What do you think?"

"It's pretty good," he shrugs.

She bristles at his response as this is his answer for everything. Nothing is ever wonderful or great. He says the same thing when she asks him how she looks before they go out to dinner. They eat in silence. Her - slowly picking at her food, him - quickly wolfing it back down and heading in for seconds. He sets his chipped plate back down on their black, particle board coffee table and stares at it for several seconds. The euphoria of the food dissolves and he frowns.

"The last time you made these, you left me," he says.

He means the time she left and stayed with her sister for two months. That was over two years ago. She stares at him, surprised at both the revelation and the exactness of his memory. It was the beginning of their marriage and they fought a lot. Back then, he would simply shut down when they fought and refused to talk to her. It made her furious and she let her anger show. She didn't like the person she was around him back then.

"Yeah," he says, "you took them out of the oven and you left. I had to eat them all by myself."

This is the closest he ever got to saying that she hurt him. She cannot even remember why they were

fighting or the exact reason she left. What she remembers was feeling trapped and unhappy. She doesn't respond to him but simply looks at him as he continues to eat. For once, no words come to her. There is nothing she can say to make it better.

"I shouldn't have gone back for seconds," he smiles as he holds and jiggles his belly the way he always did after a good meal. "It always gives me heartburn."

Her chest hurts, her heart tied into a sailor's knot and she doesn't know if it is overhanded or underhanded. She can't help reading into his words - sifting through layers of language. He shouldn't have gotten back together with her; this is what she hears even though it isn't what he said. It was possible that it was subconscious, but that didn't mean it wasn't true - didn't resonate with the way he felt about her. Then, maybe she was projecting her own regret on him.

CHAPTER 8

The air in Ricky's, her sister's boyfriend, apartment smelled like stale cigarette smoke. The apartment was a short, squat building made up of brown, painted cinderblocks. Boxes and papers were piled everywhere. On the wall hung pictures of scantily clad fantasy women and skulls. Krazy was a crystal meth addict staying with Ricky. He owed him money and was paying Ricky back by tattooing him. She is disturbed by Krazy's appearance - he had a broken jaw so his mouth was wired shut with his teeth visible. It was a pained grimace and he constantly had to suck the spittle back from the front arch bars and wires encircling his teeth. He could speak through closed teeth but was difficult to understand. His blue eyes were watery, wide open, and staring. His hair is bleached blonde with dark roots and he wore a leather vest with nothing underneath it. He looked like someone who had been electrocuted.

Her mother gave him twenty-five dollars in cash

and he set to work, sketching out the design on a piece of onion paper. To make the transfer, he rubbed deodorant on Brandi's leg, stuck the paper on, and pulled it off. It wasn't a dark outline, but it stuck. She sat near him on Ricky's faded, tan couch with her leg up beside her on a pillow, so he could easily reach her calf. He took out a glass tube full of long, thin needles. They were upright, held in place by a black tarry substance, like the bottom of a dissection tray. He pulled a needle out with a pair of pliers, put it in the tattoo machine, dipped the needle in ink, and began to trace the outline of the unicorn her leg. The pain didn't bother her until he got to the starburst, a glint of light reflecting off the top of the horn. As he carved the deep, straight lines, the machine made a slower, stilted, grinding sound. She grit her teeth and held on to the arm of the couch, praying that she wouldn't pass out. It was hot and she couldn't breathe. The feeling subsided as he started shading in broad strokes. She closed her eyes and envisioned the tattoo needle as a sewing machine, stabbing in and out of her skin with ink instead of thread.

CHAPTER 9

In May, she returns to therapy for the first time since she left the University of Colorado. She feels overwhelmed by all of the work she has to do for the program. There is no time to build a life, only homework and writing, which is going abysmally slow. The writer's block has returned and she struggles to complete assignments. Then, a few days ago, the voice in her head spoke up - the voice of fear and self-protection. *I should just pack up and go back to Colorado*, she thinks. It makes her cry to think such things, but she can't stop herself. This is the beginning of another depressive episode; she has enough experience to at least recognize the warning signs. The insomnia has increased. On most nights, she can't fall asleep until four a.m. When she does sleep, she is caught in dreams up until the moment of waking. The dreams leave her confused and it takes several minutes to realize where she is and, sometimes, who she is.

Getting in to see a therapist was simple. She

scheduled a phone screening and was then paired with Erin, a graduate student completing her internship at the university counseling center. As she makes her way up to the seventh floor of the Byrnes building, she becomes increasingly nervous and picks at her fingers. The counseling center is across the hall from the writing center, where she works as a tutor. What will her co-workers think if they see her there? What will the students she tutors think? It has to be done though. In addition to insomnia and fantasizing about running away, she finds it difficult to get out of bed in the morning. The worst times are at night, when it is quiet. Nick is home but works on his computer until late in the evening. She feels alone, unwanted, and overwhelmed. At night she thinks about the life she is living, thinks about Nick and the awful things he says to her about her body - how she doesn't think he really loves her. There is a divide between them, had been for a few years. He doesn't approve of her successes and it shows in his manner and speech. If left unchecked, she knows that she will soon become suicidal.

She enters the small waiting room full of blonde wood chairs with pink, faux leather padding. There are three others there, none of them talking or making eye contact. The walls are covered with washi paintings of

stylized Japanese women. She studies them as she waits for her new therapist, Erin, to call for her. It is early and, though interested in the art, she wishes she had brought one of the novels she has to read for her twentieth century women writers' course. There is always more to read than she can get done, but she tries to get as much done as possible.

Erin walks from the hall, into the waiting room and calls her name. Erin is tall, though not quite as tall as Brandi, thin, and has short brown hair. She appears to be in her late twenties and wears grey slacks with top the color of red wine. Her expression is one of warmth and Brandi is instantly relieved to be paired with her.

Erin's office is sparsely furnished. There is a desk, bookcase, end table, and chairs. Though there is furniture, it is the personal touches that are lacking. There are no pictures on the wall or personal items on the desk. The room feels cold and clinical. Unlike her therapist at the University of Colorado, Erin doesn't ask to record their conversations - a fact Brandi appreciates. She hates the thought of her private conversations being recorded, regardless of who is keeping them.

They go over Brandi's checklist, which Erin has placed on her lap. Yes, she has a history of sexual abuse.

Yes, she has a history of substance abuse. Yes, she has thoughts of suicide. Yes, she suffers from migraines and insomnia. Some of the questions seem pertinent, others just plain ridiculous.

"You didn't ask if voices from the television tell me what to do," Brandi laughs.

"You've been asked that before?" she raises an eyebrow.

"Yeah, it was on my first therapist's checklist."

"So, do you?"

"No, I don't hear voices. Well, I mean, I have my own thoughts and sometimes they are in second person, but those come from me."

"Ok, I get that," Erin nods as her smile widens. "So...what brings you here today?"

"Well, I've suffered from depression ever since I can remember. Lately, it's getting really bad. I mean, I was in therapy in undergrad for about nine months. It feels like I'm backsliding. Like I'm close to another depressive episode."

"When do you remember the depression starting?"

"Uh, when I was five or so. I don't know. Things get a little fuzzy. I have a lot of gaps in my childhood memory. I know I had started school. I wanted to kill

myself," she looks at the floor.

"Did you try to?"

"No. It just made me feel better to think about it."

"Have you ever tried to commit suicide?"

"No. I used to cut myself, but they were surface scratches. I couldn't take the pain to do it seriously. I did huff model glue and take pills."

"What kind of pills?" Erin asks.

"Aspirin. I had an economy size bottle. I started with four and each day; I would add two to the number I took. It didn't do anything. Can't remember how far it went before I stopped."

"When was this?"

"Uh, I was in junior high school," she says.

"And have you had any attempts since then?"

"No. Mostly I just think about running away. Sometimes I think about how it would be to kill myself. The thought makes me happy," she shifts in her chair - the same kind of chair that was in the waiting room. She feels the sweat start to run at the back of her neck and hopes Erin doesn't notice.

"And what kind of thoughts are you having now?"

"Just that I would like to leave my life. Just

vanish entirely.”

“Where would you go?”

“Um, back to New Mexico. I really love Santa Fe,” she smiles weakly.

“You’re married right,” Erin starts to flip through the stack of paperwork.

“Yeah, three years now.”

“And you don’t think he’d be bothered if you left.”

“I don’t know. Part of me thinks he would and part of me thinks he doesn’t give a shit about me.”

“You don’t think he loves you?”

“No. He’s said some things since we’ve been together...”

“What sort of things?” Erin asks.

“Things about my body and my weight. He told me that he doesn’t find me attractive and he took it back.”

“Do you think you’re attractive?”

She closes her eyes, “Not really. I mean, I know what I look like. I know what other people think of me.”

“How do you know that?” Erin’s brow furrows.

“I don’t look like people on TV or in magazines. I’ve been made fun of. It’s why I don’t exercise in public. Sometimes people shout things at me from cars. I disgust

people," she frowns.

"I'm sorry that happened to you. How do you know everyone feels that way?"

"Well," she sighs, "I don't know that everybody does. It's just the first thing people notice about me. It's like no matter how successful I become, I will be fat first and foremost. No one cares enough to get to know me."

"No one? What about your friends?"

"I guess they do, but I don't feel like anybody really knows me anyway. There's this part of myself I keep hidden from everyone. I just don't get why my body is open for discussion for other people in the first place. It isn't fair."

"It doesn't sound fair," says Erin. "What are your eating habits like?"

"I compulsively overeat. I've tried to get it under control, but sometimes food is all I can think about. I went to Overeater's Anonymous but couldn't stick with it. It's like I'm hated because I overeat and don't use compensatory actions like over-exercising or throwing up, even though the psychological underpinning is the same."

"Sounds like you've done some research on the topic. Would you say you have an eating disorder?"

"Yes," she says.

"And have you ever used compensatory actions?"

"I did in high school. I drank Creatine in water all day and didn't eat anything until I got home. I was in two exercise classes and on the cross country team." She shrugs, "I mean I still ate dinner and everything. It wasn't like I was anorexic or something."

"Why wouldn't you call it that?"

"Mmm, I guess I just think that to be anorexic you have to be thin, though that sounds silly now that I say it out loud. I was a size sixteen back then, and I hated it. What I'd give to be a size sixteen again. That doesn't translate into action though. Sometimes I care and other times I don't. Not sure how much of that is the depression."

"How long have you been depressed?"

"I remember wanting to kill myself when I was six or seven. Not sure, the timelines get all mixed up in my head. I wanted to throw myself out the window. The thought brought me a lot of pleasure. It's basically been all of my life."

"So you've been dealing with this for about twenty-five years?" Brandi nods at her. "Do you think it will ever get better?"

Brandi looks at the floor, "I don't know. I think

I can learn ways to handle it better but part of me feels like it will always be there. Like it will never go away.”

“Well, part of it may be chemical, which can be helped with medication. I don’t want you to rule out wellness. You can get better, but it will take some work and it will most likely get worse before it gets better,” Erin says.

Brandi runs the conversation over in her mind, pulling it up one word at a time like a length of heavy rope, hoping understanding will be at the other end. Instead she finds confusion. If part of it is chemical, then her mental illness, a term that makes her cringe, then it will never go away. She will always be dependent on the medication to keep her stable. Why kind of hope is there in that? How is it possible to recover and exactly how much worse would the depression get? Her eyes scan the cloudless sky, as though an answer is located somehow above herself rather than inside.

CHAPTER 10

It was evening and she fell asleep despite the boom of artillery from Fort Carson that rattled the window in her best friend's bedroom. Becky was already asleep. Between them lay Jason, the twenty-three-year-old man they both desired. Becky invited him to sleep in bed with them, secretly hoping that he would touch her in the night. Instead, it was Brandi who was awakened in the middle of the night by his adult hand slithering across her small belly. His hand moved lower and she tried to regulate her breath, didn't want to betray the fact that she was awake. She was frozen in place. Eyes closed, she could still hear the artillery in the distance, could hear his hand as it pulled at the waistband of her underwear and moved still lower. No longer timid, he began to stroke her and she pushed against his hand. The white, metal headboard squeaked with their movements. Then Becky was awake, staring at them. She didn't know if he said anything or if Becky said anything. He got up and went to sleep on the

sofa in the next room. She couldn't sleep and stared at the ceiling for hours.

CHAPTER 11

She rushes past Thomas Cooper Library toward the Byrnes building. Having just finished an appointment with her psychiatrist, she only has ten minutes to get to therapy with Erin. She overslept and didn't have a chance to eat before taking the shuttle to campus. Her stomach growls and she is drowsy. *At least it isn't raining*, she thinks. It is always raining in Columbia, something she hadn't expected. When it rains all day, it is harder for her to get her work done. She is sad and feels stuck inside, even though she may not have gone out if the weather had been better. After therapy, she has a literature class and then an evening writing workshop. The workshops have been difficult for her and she often dreads going. Usually, the pieces she finds most interesting get slammed during workshop and those she has issues with get praise. It makes her doubt herself - as though she doesn't understand what good writing is and doesn't belong. She arrives two minutes before her appointment and has just sat down in the waiting room when Erin calls her in.

"How are you feeling today?" Erin crosses her legs.

"Tired. I'm not sleeping," her shoulders slump.

"Even with the medication?"

"Yeah, Dr. Smith has tried me on a few different sleeping pills but nothing seems to work. The only one that did work was Ambien but I had a hallucination and passed out on that."

"What about the anti-depressants?"

"She has me on Cymbalta. It's too early to tell if it's working. She's going to try and get me on patient assistance so I can get it for free. Otherwise, I can't keep paying for it."

"Keep me posted on that. Why do you think you can't sleep?" Erin asks.

"I don't know, she shrugs. "I work until about two a.m., sometimes later, and when I lay down my thoughts are racing. It doesn't matter how tired I am. I lay there until about four or five and then I can finally sleep."

"Is there a way you can stop working earlier? Maybe have some time to wind down?"

"I don't know how else I'd get my work done. I'm taking three classes and tutoring at the Writing Center. There just doesn't seem to be enough time in the day," she

says.

"Is there a way to cut back on some of your responsibilities?"

"I guess I could present at fewer conferences. Still, most of the stuff is mandatory. I can't get out of it until next semester."

"What do you do for fun?"

"I don't read anymore, at least not for class. It makes me feel guilty to read unassigned work because all I think about is how I should be reading for class," she rubs her palms on the arms of the chair. "I sign up for things I want to do, like art workshops, but when the time comes around, I don't want to go anymore. Just tired all the time."

"Don't those sorts of activities make you feel better?"

"Sure. I'm fine once I get there, I even feel good afterwards, but I still don't want to go."

"Is it fair to say that you overwork yourself and then are too exhausted to do things you enjoy?"

She looks away from her, off toward the top of the wall as is her habit. Erin catches her and leans forward to make sure she maintains eye contact. She wonders if this is why she has so few decorations in her office, to

prevent her patients from being distracted or allowing themselves to become distracted. Yet today she is wearing the red peep-toe flats again. Brandi always thinks of Dorothy Gale when she sees Erin in the shoes. There's something sexy, un-Kansaslike about them. She can tell they make her feel beautiful.

"Yeah. I just wish I had more time. This isn't how I pictured school being. I thought I would have time to write, to work on what I'm here to work on."

"Maybe you are focusing too much on what isn't essential to you finishing the program. For instance, maybe you should just read enough so you are familiar with the books but not overdo it trying to read everything," Erin tucks a loose strand of brown hair behind her ear.

"I know I do. I just want to be a good student. This has come up before, last semester. It seems like I have to learn that lesson a second time," she sighs.

Erin stares at her intently for several seconds. "How is the eating? Are you noticing an increase that correlates with your stress level?"

"Yes. Some days I am ok. Other days, I just can't stop eating. Even when I am eating, I'm thinking about the next thing I get to eat."

"What do you think that's about?"

"I don't know. I think it started as a way to protect myself from abuse. My mom once said that if I was fat no one would ever love me. Gaining weight was a way to keep people away, not that I thought of it that way at the time. Now it's just habit. I mean, I hate it but don't think I can stop it. Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I shake my belly really hard. I wish I could just cut it off. Don't worry, I'm not going to do it, it's just something I think about," she laughs. "It would be painful and not work the way I imagine. It's like, when I imagine it, my belly would just come right off. It wouldn't be that way. The rest of the time, I feel disconnected from my body, kind of like I'm a floating head."

"The disconnection with your body is common to survivors of abuse." Erin thinks for a moment before continuing, "I want to give you an assignment. Well, two assignments."

"Ok," she starts rubbing the arms of the chair more vigorously.

"First, I want you to try and connect with your body. That starts with awareness. So next time you are in the shower, I want you to focus on feeling your body. That could be something as simple as washing your hair. The key is to pay attention to the sensations. Do you think you can

do that?"

She chuckles, "Yeah, that should be easy. It's like Thich Nhat Hanh in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*: when I'm washing a dish, I'm washing a dish."

"Exactly," Erin nods. "Second, I want you to do something that's just for you and doesn't involve food."

"Such as?"

"It doesn't matter. You could write something or paint. You said you were a painter right?"

"Yeah," she says.

"So maybe try that. The important thing is to get you out of these obsessive thought patterns and back into your body. It will also help your stress level."

"Ok, I'll think of something."

On her way home, she racks her brain for ideas. It has been months since she last painted, actually since before she moved to Columbia for graduate school. It is one of those things she dreads doing even though it makes her feel better. There are few things that brought her pleasure anymore. When she has downtime, she often watches television, but even that makes her feel guilty. It is time she could be using to read for her classes or to study for the comprehensive exam, not to mention the foreign language requirement. Her stomach tightens thinking about everything

she has to do, and now she has to add leisure activities into it. She understands how it would be beneficial; she just doesn't know if she can get out of her thoughts long enough to actually make it worth it.

CHAPTER 12

She headed down the chocolate colored carpeted stairs toward the front door. John followed behind her. As she reached for the doorknob, he extended his hand past her and firmly pressed the door closed. She turned and his other hand pushed her shoulder so that she was now facing him. His face moved toward her, its wrinkles and liver spots filling her field of vision. His teeth were decayed and his breath smelled like rotting leaves. Her eyes moved from side to side, looking for a way out. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. The back of her head hit the door as his mouth connected with hers. She grimaced but otherwise didn't move, had already started to leave her body as she did with all the others. He grabbed, lifted, and pinched her right breast with his hand, as though he was measuring her. Even through a t-shirt and black training bra with lace straps, she felt exposed. Then everything turned black.

Numbly, she got into his car, not sure what exactly happened, only that she didn't want it to happen.

As he drove her home to her parents' house, he made approving comments about her body. Says he'd like to see what's under the bulldog printed on the right breast of her shirt. She looked down at her t-shirt, thinking how she only got it a few weeks ago at the swap meet just a mile from where they currently were. When she returned home, she stripped it off, wanting to claw through the fabric, to tear it to shreds. Instead, she threw it in the trash.

CHAPTER 13

It's Thanksgiving and the weather is unseasonably warm. The sky is blue and bright instead of the blank white she's used to in Colorado. She and Nick are invited to her friend Kelly's home in Blythewood for the holiday. Kelly and her husband are ex-military and have invited over friends that don't have any family in town. For Brandi, it reminds her of holidays when she was growing up, of how her parents would have soldiers out for dinner. Things are much different in Columbia; somehow it is less festive without the winter weather. Even her birthday, just one week ago, was different. Back home, they'd have a turkey dinner and her cake would actually be a pumpkin pie. Here, she made the pie herself and didn't leave the apartment that day.

Nick is apprehensive about meeting strangers, she can tell from the way he picks at his fingers as she drives up I-77. Her radio is broken and the silence is difficult for her to handle. There is so much silence in their lives

now. She can confide in him about her depression, about how she recently thought about suicide, but she can't share her daily life because her success makes him feel bad about himself. Without talking about her work, she doesn't have as much to say besides to show him interesting things she finds online. He hasn't worked since the temporary job finished and has little to report about his day.

Life had been strained anyhow. Last week he told her that he doesn't love her anymore. In a way, she was surprised but also relieved. She doesn't know if she loves him anymore. Well, she knows she loved him but isn't in love with him. They talked about separating but hadn't discussed it again since. She wanted to, but didn't know where to begin, plus it was almost the end of the semester and she was busy with school and work. Kelly knew about the exchange, knew how trapped Brandi felt. She told her, when they met for coffee on campus one morning, not to live her life in a relationship she doesn't want. Brandi doesn't know why she is holding on. Perhaps she thinks no one will ever really love her, so what is the point of separating. They were together for several years, so long that she has trouble remembering what her daily life was like before him. Besides, if they split, what has she been working for all these years?

"You sure the wine is good?" he says, referring to the bottle of red wine they purchased the day before.

"It's fine. I mean, she's pregnant and not drinking but somebody else might enjoy it. Besides, I didn't want to show up empty-handed even though she told me not to bring anything."

"Ok. As long as you think it will be alright. Maybe we should've spent more money."

"It's a decent brand and we need to be careful; Christmas is coming up."

"Don't remind me," he sighs.

Ever since she left her job at the call center, they haven't had a Christmas where they don't have to worry about money. It helps to be further from her family as she doesn't need to be there for a gift exchange. Even though they wouldn't expect gifts in return, she still feels a sense of obligation and feels bad when she has nothing to give. She never thought they'd be struggling financially into their thirties, living paycheck to paycheck but, then again, she also never thought her education would go past a bachelor's degree.

When they arrive, Kelly is in the kitchen cooking and Frank is making margaritas.

"Hi guys," says Kelly. "You want a drink?"

They both nod and, as Frank presses a plastic Solo cup into her hand, she thinks of the first time Nick proposed to her. It was a December evening and the air was frosty. Her sister and her husband invited Brandi and Nick to a party at one of their friend's house. It was still early in the relationship and, though she disliked parties with people she didn't know, she was feeling adventurous. Nick was in the kitchen with the other men most of the evening. She didn't know how much he had to drink until he stepped out onto the front porch with her and her sister.

"Set a date," he said. His voice was loud, booming.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You know what I mean," his head tilted and he squinted at her in the moonlight.

"Uh, I think he just proposed," said Elise.

He smiled, his mouth contorted into a grimace. He didn't usually smile like that - then again, it was the first time he had been drunk around her. The rest of the evening, he spent vomiting in the bathroom. Brandi was embarrassed by his behavior, yet also pleased that he wanted to be with her.

Two months later, he actually proposed to her. They were in her bedroom, lying in bed in the afternoon.

She was working the overnight shift and painted the windows black so she could sleep. Because of the lack of light and the cool, it was her favorite room in the house when she needed to shut out the world. Nick had already moved in - partly because she needed help with the mortgage and partly because he loved her and wanted to be with her. She knew the proposal was coming, had found the receipt for the ring in a stack of papers he left in her headboard, just not when.

"Hey honey?" he asked as he hid something in his hand.

"Yeah baby?"

"Can I keep you?" he was using one of her favorite phrases.

"Yes," she smiled in the dim light that came in from the doorway.

He shimmied up next to her and held out the open ring box, "Do you promise?"

It doesn't feel real to her now, like it happened to someone else. This isn't the life she imagined and she is tired of being her. The evening passes pleasantly, that is, until Nick gets drunk and starts stammering, stumbling, and insisting on looking at everyone's cell phones. She is embarrassed by his behavior and a little worried. Things

didn't often go well when he was drinking. By the time they got home, after getting lost on the winding routes of the outskirts of the city, she is exhausted and ready for bed.

How the conversation began, she can't recall - only that it quickly got worse.

"We already talked about separating," she says.

"We did?" he turns to her in bed. The lights are still on and they are both dressed.

"Yeah, you said last week that you didn't love me anymore. It was after that," she sighs. "Did you mean that? I mean, I've thought for a long time that you don't love me. I just didn't expect you to say it."

"I meant it."

"How long have you felt that way?"

"I don't know, a long time," he avoids her eyes, looking just past her.

"Oh. Is that why we don't have sex anymore?"

"I don't know. I'm depressed."

"You've been using that as an excuse for years. Sometimes I think it is me that's the problem."

"Well..."

"Well what?" she asks.

"I'm not sure if I find you attractive anymore."

"What the hell do you mean?" she feels the heat

rise on her throat.

"Your body disgusts me," his words fall and knock the wind out of her.

She is silent for several moments, thinking of the last time this happened. He made negative comments about her body, but he didn't use that word: *disgust*. It stuck in her throat like sickly sweet jam.

"I don't understand. I was fat when we met, fat when we got married. If you didn't want a fat girl, then why did you stay with me?" her eyes start to fill with tears and she turns away, not wanting him to see her.

"I thought I could learn to live with it. I can't."

"Over four years of marriage and you can't live with it? Then why do you sabotage every diet I go on? Why don't you support me, go for walks with me? I've been supporting you all this time and you've felt that way about me." He didn't respond. "I feel used. I feel really used." He shrugs and it infuriates her even more. "I want you to sleep on the couch tonight. Tomorrow, you should check into a hotel. I can't do this anymore. I won't keep supporting someone who is disgusted by me and doesn't love me."

The next day, he sleeps past noon, doesn't wake even though she loudly puts the dishes away. She wants him

to wake up and get out. Looking at him laying there, she wants to hit him, wants to wound him as much as he wounded her. But, even when he wakes, he doesn't look for hotels, doesn't mention what happened.

"You need to look for a place to stay now, it is getting late. Maybe you can call your mom too and see if she will let you move back in."

"I don't have a way to get my things there," his jaw set angrily.

"You can use my car and just take the bike later. It isn't really my problem anyhow. You did this."

He doesn't respond and doesn't take back what he said, which is normally what he did. She keeps to herself, staying in the bedroom all day and trying to find ways to distract herself. Inside she is seething. Each minute that passes without him taking action fuels her anger. By early evening, she can't take it anymore and marches out to the living room to confront him.

"Are you leaving or not? You've spent all day screwing around and you're still here. I don't get this. You're acting like nothing happened," her hands are bawled up in fists at her hips.

"You really want me to leave?"

"Yes."

"Oh," he looks down. "I didn't think you were serious."

"After what you said to me last night?"

"What?"

"That you didn't love me and my body disgusts you," her fingernails begin to dig into her palm.

"I said that?" he looks confused.

"Yes, why else would you think I want you to leave today?"

"I don't know."

"That doesn't make any sense," she throws her hands up and paces across the carpet.

"Well, I was drunk. Why were you asking me that anyhow?"

"I didn't start it. You started talking about separating again. That's how it came up."

"I don't understand how that led to talking about your weight. You must've asked."

"No I didn't. I didn't push you or goad you into saying it. You did that by yourself." She hates when he blames her for things he does. "Besides, you didn't deny that's how you feel."

"I don't feel that way," he sits up straight.

"This isn't the first time you've said it and

denied it."

"You'll believe what you want to believe," he shrugs and stares at the floor.

"And when you told me last week that you didn't love me anymore, what about that?"

"I don't know, I don't know how I feel."

Her chin begins to quiver, "Do you have any idea how much you've hurt me? Why don't you just go?"

"I don't want to leave."

"Why?"

"I don't know where I'd go or what I'd do without you.""

"So you don't love me, you just don't want to leave the security of marriage?"

"I think there's more to it than that." He looks into her eyes, "I don't want to leave."

She pauses for a long time before speaking, "I'm not sure what to do. I don't know that I love you anymore either. I'm not happy."

"I'm not happy either, but maybe we can work on this."

"I think you need to work on yourself first. You're an alcoholic and your depression is out of control. I mean, I'm depressed too, but I'm not going

around destroying other people.”

“What if I go to therapy and stop drinking”

“I don’t know, I’ve been begging you to get help for years.”

“Yeah, but I’ll really do it this time. I don’t want to leave.”

He doesn’t move toward her, doesn’t move from his computer desk. It bothers her that he won’t hold her or reassure her. His affect is flat and, though he doesn’t smile, he doesn’t seem terribly upset by the situation. She wishes he would show some sort of emotion after wounding her so deeply. She lowers her hands and leans back.

“I guess, but you’re calling for an appointment tomorrow.”

The evening passes without them speaking, without her sensing that she has given him all of the power in the situation, that she still doesn’t know what she wants or why she stays - besides a sense of obligation and fear. Her feelings for him ebbed and flowed like the tides, which made it more difficult for her to discern what she felt, because it was constantly shifting and changing. At times, she couldn’t stand the sight of him, mainly when they fought, at others, she couldn’t wait to get home to see him. Emotionally, she was a wreck - unstable and never

fully settled despite outward appearances.

CHAPTER 14

She was awakened by a hand around her throat; it was Jerry's. Her head slowly rotated to the right to look at him on the twin bed beside her. His skin looked pale in the light filtering in through the blinds. Though she couldn't see the details, his brown eyes, his short sandy blonde hair complete with cradle cap - for he always had severe dandruff - her mind filled in the gaps. He appeared to be asleep, laid on his back with one arm coiled around her neck. As he breathed, his fingers pulsed, squeezed, and she was too afraid to move. After a few minutes, his hand slithered away, now tucked up underneath him.

She eventually fell asleep but was caught somewhere between dream and reality. Her body was on a beach, eyes staring at the stars. The salty air washed over her, the crashing surf drowning out all other sounds. As the water approached, she noticed him lying next to her, his face buried in the sand. He breathed deeply, unaffected by the sand so she left him alone, had a bad feeling about what would happen should she disturb him.

She was still, even when jellyfish bump into her skin, even when the crabs begin to climb over her. She thought she could hear their claws clacking but was unsure. One large one, a blue crab with a ridged shell side-steps onto her hips. It crawls up her long torso, finally settling around her neck like a choker, long legs fully wrapped about her throat. And she was silent, listened to the surf.

CHAPTER 15

In May, after the end of her second, frantic semester, she starts working out at Kirkland Correctional Institution. It is a men's facility tucked away in the city just past Highway 26. She actually didn't know it existed before her boss, Graham, at the Writing Center asked her if she wanted to tutor there over the summer. The opportunity is welcome as she doesn't get paid over summer and is worried about how she'd keep supporting herself and Nick. Even with tax returns, their savings had dwindled and she worried about losing the apartment. Her summer hours would be split between Kirkland and the Writing Center. The students are in a two-year, theologically grounded associate's degree. Somehow, she gets it into her mind that the men are non-violent offenders and, though apprehensive, isn't worried much about her safety.

On her first day, she doesn't want to go. Where previously she felt excitement, now she feels dread. She wishes she could have a break from school and work but,

instead, she is driving to a prison in ninety degree heat. Thankfully, the air conditioning in her car works, but the walk to and from the car is miserable. As recommended by the program director, she has worn modest clothing, no jewelry, and no makeup. In the car, she slips her flats off and drives bare-footed, a habit of hers. Getting onto the highway is easy enough, but once she gets onto Broad River Road, she gets lost. She's always been terrible with directions so she relies heavily on her GPS. The automated female voice tells her that her destination is in a parking lot next to the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED).

She does not panic yet as she still has fifteen minutes to get there. Following the numbers on the buildings, she realizes that it should be further up the road. She pulls into the next parking lot up and finds an unmarked building. There are too many windows for this to be the right place. It also does not fit because her contact, Mark, says that the prison is down a winding road, past two duck ponds. With her phone, she checks the email he sent her. Even in the air-conditioning, she is sweating. *It must be nerves*, she thinks. The number of this building is too high so she drives back over to the SLED building. According to the numbers, it should be somewhere in

between, but she sees nothing.

She glances at the clock in her stereo. In a few minutes, she will be late. She hates being late. It feels like she is disappointing people. She starts to panic, which makes her sweat more, rereads the email from Mark, and searches her phone contacts for Graham's number. He does not answer. Her stomach clenches as the heat rises in her face. This means she will be flushed on her neck and throat for at least an hour. She is already afraid to come because of an irrational fear that they would lock her away even though she had not done anything to warrant it. Her thoughts are often strange, nonsensical, in that way. It is ridiculous, she knows, but she can't stop thinking about it. It doesn't help that being late also triggers her guilt. She is supposed to be as perfect as she can be, she knows. Always on time, or extremely early, she makes up for her failings by being the reliable one, by being the overachiever, the person who is always available, always volunteers, never breaks down. This is part of why Graham chose her for this assignment. He calls her unflappable and she has to look it up in the dictionary. It means assured and in control, self-control.

His description of her fits, as she has always strived to be in control, to not show emotions in front of

others, to always be aware of how she is being perceived. She manages crises well, always able to anticipate needs and rationalize events and reactions. The definition does not make her feel good though. It makes her feel hard, reminds her that she hides within that space in herself, that she keeps herself from truly feeling. Her body is a shell around her and she often uses a smile or laughter to heighten the effect. Still, she is afraid to go inside the prison and afraid of being late. What if the people she is meeting have already gone in? How will she find them? What will her boss think? She drives in circles, unsure why there is a missing street number. There are other unmarked buildings surrounded by chain link and razor wire, set far back in the parking lot. The temperature continues to climb. There is an older man walking across the parking lot. When she unrolls the window to ask if he knows where Kirkland is, she is met by a blast of hot air that feels like opening an oven. The man looks as though he has never heard of it. He tells her try going back down Broad River Road. She does, even though it seems wrong, and ends up in front of a mom-and-pop gas station. Again, she checks the email from Mark. The numbers do not make sense, they should make sense. Part of her just wants to turn around and go back home as she has already failed.

She decides to go back over to the SLED office and ask inside. The front of the building has mirrored windows. Inside, the white tile floor leads straight to a receptionist's desk. The woman sitting behind the polished wood desk is blonde, has black framed glasses, and a Christmas red sweater with puffed sleeves. She looks at Brandi as soon as the door swings open.

"Can I help you," the receptionist asks.

She eyes the doors on each side of the desk, "Yes, I'm looking for Kirkland Correctional. I've been driving up and down the street but can't find it. I'm supposed to be volunteering there, and I'm already late."

"Ah," she chuckles, "that's a common occurrence. Go out of the parking lot and turn right; Kirkland is just past the next light. There's a sign. You'll turn right. It's just a couple of blocks up."

"Oh, I wasn't going far enough. The street numbers were too high so I kept turning around.

"Yes, been that way for years. I don't know why that is."

Sure enough, just over a block from where she was circling is a small sign for the South Carolina Department of Corrections. She is relieved to have found it but is worried as she is now twenty minutes late. *Ridiculously*

late, she thinks. Slowly, she drives past the guard shack and down a winding road with close-trimmed grass. There are the duck ponds Mark told her about, but she sees no ducks. She follows the road to the right and arrives to find her fellow tutor, Lauren, and the director of the Writing Center, Christi, standing outside in the heat waiting.

She finds out that they are waiting for Mark and were late too. Sweating under the hot sun baking on the concrete, they wait for thirty minutes, their only view the small, cinder block building with the x-ray machine and metal detectors, a vending machine with cash cards for employees and visitors to purchase, and two heavy iron gates. They decide to go in but have to wait as only three people are allowed inside the lobby at a time. It is a lot like the airport: she takes off her ballet flats and places them in a plastic tub, she also puts in her pens and a legal pad. Other than her driver's license, she brought nothing else with her. As instructed, she left her purse, cell-phone, wallet, and water bottle in the trunk of her car. She keeps running her hand down the flat pocket of her slacks, feels naked without her phone. She did not even wear an underwire bra for fear of setting off the metal detector.

A female guard signals her through the metal

detector, and then does a quick pat down, shuffling gloved hands across her arms and back. There is a small sign that states that those who fail the metal detector twice must submit to a strip search in order to gain access to the prison. She is surprised by the pat down; it is truly less invasive than the TSA. Then she signs in, providing her license number and car information. She hopes the plate number is correct and she is suddenly a bit queasy. After that, the three of them are buzzed into a hall where they exchange their driver's licenses for numbered visitor's badges. At this point, she is worried. What if something happens to her? She no longer has proof of her identity. The heavy door slams behind them and they make our way through the concrete passageway, more akin to a tunnel with long thin windows at the top to let in light, leading into the prison itself. She wonders if she will be able to get back out again. Logically, she knows this is silly, but the fear comes from deep inside, from the terror place. There, she is afraid of being held against my will, of not being able to escape.

To get to the library, they have to walk through a general population courtyard. It is an open concrete square with white lines painted on the ground where the inmates are allowed to walk, much like the helicopter

hangars her father worked in during his time in the Army. This is not a place for lingering but for moving the men between locations. There are a couple of stumpy palms and spiky plants surrounded by bark mulch in two tiny areas. The rest is open to sky and, somehow, it is even hotter out here. The sweat trickles down the back of her neck and her head aches. If she stays out here much longer, the sweat will start to pool at her lower back.

There is only one line of men in the courtyard today. She does not look at them or the single officer with them too closely, instead keeps her vision slightly blurred. All she sees is a wave of short hair and ill-fitting gray jumpsuits. Though she can only see the one guard, she is sure there are others, can imagine rifles pointed at the group in case one or more of the inmates breaks ranks and comes toward them. The women cross the yard without incident and enter the library.

She thought she would be afraid of the students, but she is not. They are welcoming, eager to show poems and talk with them about their first memoir assignment. She sees smiles from many. As the weeks go by, Brandi and Lauren will develop regulars. When Mark asks them to introduce themselves that first day, he says that they could share what they want but probably should not get any

more personal than their hobbies. Christy talks about her teaching background and her job. Lauren talks about the writing awards she recently won, about her hometown, and about horses. When it is Brandi's turn, she talks about being from Colorado and working on a memoir to address gaps in my memory due to child abuse. She also mentions that she is working with a therapist.

When she gets home, she berates herself for it, feels like she messed up the assignment, shared too much. Why did she go too far? Why does she always go too far? Yet, in the next session, she realizes this was the right thing to do. The first student that comes to see her is having trouble starting his writing assignment - write about your first memory - because of the same problem with gaps. Others bring it up when they sit down with her; they feel like they can trust her with their own traumas, their own stories. She realizes that she feels more comfortable with them than the students that come into the Writing Center on campus. She doesn't know why, only that she sees them as people with pain too. She tells Erin that she thinks trauma recognizes trauma, something in her is connecting with something in them.

SECTION II: SETTLEMENT OF SALVAGE - SETTLEMENT OF OWNERSHIP

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she -

from "Diving into the Wreck" by Adrienne Rich

CHAPTER 16

She's in Erin's office again for her weekly therapy appointment. Today is the day they are going to start talking about the sexual abuse. Brandi is nervous, more nervous than usual. Just preparing to talk to Erin about it makes her nervous. She knows the conversation will make her feel bad and she doesn't want to cry. Still, to have some form of closure is something she desperately desires. How does one get closure though? The abuse is something she knows will always impact her, maybe to lesser extremes, but it will always be there. She will always be the woman who was abused as a child. Nothing can be done to erase her victimhood. Her foot taps as she sits out in the waiting room. She tries to read the book she brought with her but is too nervous. She wonders what good can possibly come of this. It isn't as if dealing with it will suddenly free her from depression; she learned that long ago in her fledgling attempts to write about her past.

"You seem distracted," says Erin as she watches

Brandi plays with the cap of her water bottle. "Is it because we are going to begin talking about the abuse today?"

"Yeah, I just, I don't know. It's like I want answers, but I don't really want to remember. I mean, I remember some things from when I was a child, but there are huge gaps."

"How old were you when you were abused?"

"Um, six or seven, twelve, and fifteen," she ticks them off on her fingers to make sure she remembers them all.

"Was it by the same person?" Erin looks surprised.

"No. It was four different people."

"Ok. Where do you feel comfortable starting?"

"Well, I guess with my first memory of it. I mean, it's only a fragment. Maybe not even worth talking about. I don't even know who it was."

"Tell me about it, in as much detail as you can remember. Don't leave anything out."

She closes her eyes and the memory becomes clear. It is like pressing play on a recording. She was in a swimming pool, but she doesn't know where. It was a summer day because the bright light shone through the

water, casting glowing reflections on the bottom of the pool. Somehow, she is looking at herself - a trick of mental cinematography, looking at her stick thin legs gently kicking. She can only see below the water, nothing above, but she knows it is her. A pair of male legs, thick with black hair, step into the frame. His swim-trunks were navy blue and black. His feet turned, stepped toward her, and he reached out his hand and slipped it inside her bathing suit. The touch lasted for a few minutes and she can see his hand moving under the fabric, sliding lower and lower. The screen goes black and Brandi opens her eyes, momentarily blinded by the light of Erin's office.

Erin waits several moments before speaking, "How did it feel to share that with me?"

"Ok I guess. I've talked about it before and I wrote about it. It's just kind of this floating thing that has no context."

"And you have no idea who it was?"

"No. I'm not even sure exactly when it happened. I didn't even remember it for a long time. It sort of came back to me one day when I was writing for a class."

Erin scans her page of notes. "Do you realize that sometimes you refer to your childhood self as 'she' instead of 'I'?"

"Yeah," she chuckles and then stops herself.

"It's kind of hard to see myself in that little girl. A lot of my memories feel that way. I think it's a way of distancing myself from what happened. Still though, I want to know who did it and why. It's like my mind is holding my memories hostage. I have no way of controlling what I remember and don't remember."

"Is there a reason you might be afraid to remember?"

"Well," she stares off to Erin's left, to a spot on the wall her eyes gravitate to when she's uncomfortable.

"I know it wasn't my dad, but what if it was another family member or one of the GIs he used to bring home?"

"What would it mean if it were one of them?"

"That I wasn't protected."

"And what would that mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe that's part of why I can't remember. It doesn't feel like I can do anything with the information. No one has and no one will be punished."

"Why do you want to remember then?"

"I'd like to fill in the gaps. You know, I keep reaching back to the time we lived in Virginia Beach, as if doing so will explain why I ended up the way I am, the person I am."

"And what way are you?"

"I'm a bundle of affects. I started reading that book you suggested."

"The Courage to Heal?"

She nods. "Anyway, there was this list about the ways sexual abuse affects a person. A lot of symptoms fit me. It's like all these things that I thought were personality traits, that were mine, are actually a result of the abuse. I don't know who I would be without it and I can never know. That sucks."

Erin looks pained, "That is difficult. What were the symptoms?"

"I don't remember them all. Uh, feeling like there's something wrong inside and if people really knew me they'd just leave. Self hate, not protecting myself, not taking care of myself, not trusting myself, being afraid of success, feeling numb inside, not taking pleasure in things. Almost all of what was in the chapter fit me. It made me sad. If I could remember, maybe I could undo some of the damage. Or at least understand myself better."

"And what if you never remember?" Erin asks.

"I don't know. I keep getting stuck on this point in time, when we lived in Virginia Beach, even though other things happened to me. Other events shaped me."

"Like what?"

She looks away from her, off toward the top of the wall again. She touches her mouth, something she only does when she feels like she might cry. "There was the neighbor when I was thirteen, the twenty-something year old who climbed into bed with me when I was fifteen, the old man who pushed me up against the wall. The neglect she felt growing up, that all shaped me but I'm not focusing on that. Even my marriage, that was abusive. . . but not sexually." She hears the hollowness of these last three words as they leave her.

Erin watches but doesn't interrupt her rambling. Brandi plays with a fold in her jeans, pinching it between thumb and forefinger, moving it from side to side. She notes how loose her jeans have gotten and thinks, *I'm actually losing weight this time.*

"Well, actually, there were a couple of times he pressured me into sex. I said no, didn't want to do it. He didn't listen; he just kept pushing until I gave in. It was places I didn't want to have sex or things I didn't want to do," her voice sounds like flat-soda, as though she has already told the story a hundred times. She stops herself and watches Erin. "I don't know what that was. It wasn't right though."

Erin presses her lips tight, furrows her brow, and looks at Brandi in a way that tells her that she's stumbled onto something vital. "We are almost out of time, but I want us to talk about this. Do you think you can write about it, as homework?"

She feels the air escaping her body as though she is struck, "I can do that."

On the way home, instead of taking the shuttle, she walks a block over to Sandy's Famous Hot Dogs on Main Street. She orders an eight pound Black Angus dog with chili, mustard, and sauerkraut. With it, she has a soda and potato salad, to be followed shortly by a double scoop of praline pecan icecream. The fullness silences her inner voice, which is consumed by the sensory delight of food - particularly unhealthy food. It is a way of pushing down what has surfaced during therapy, keeping the darkness she fears from escaping, of filling the empty hold.

CHAPTER 17

It takes a week before she seriously starts writing about her previous marriage. Part of the delay is that she is busy trying to get work done for school. The other part of it is that she doesn't want to. It's ideal homework for her as she needs to write for her program, and it is a recovery tool. The writing is helping her remember, not yet revealing anything new, but reminding her of things she had forgotten, like Jerry's biological mother's name. In workshop, one of her classmates calls such forgotten details "things you let go of." Tonight she decides to write about Jerry, about what he did to her, about how she now has to deal with realizing that what happened to her was wrong. Her mind reels yet, in a way, she is numb. She doesn't belong with the women in her sexual assault/abuse survivors group. The true pain of the experience is delayed and somewhat stunted by her lack of recognition, and what happened before was in childhood.

At almost midnight, she grabs her brown leather

padfolio - home to a half-used, yellow legal pad - and heads into the bedroom. Her room is her sanctuary, despite its presently messy state, and it is where she goes to write about difficult things. She has the pen her sister bought her in New Orleans, a heavy, roller ball with the phrase "Write No Evil" above four monkeys. She draws back her blankets, gets into bed, and pulls the sheets of paper back until a blank page is showing. In her mind, for the last week, she's mulled over where to start, how to start putting words to what happened. And for a week she has procrastinated, thought of nothing, sat staring at the page or, sometimes, her typewriter. How does one take three years of pain and convert it into a couple of pages of handwritten prose? But she knows the answer. First, she must simply show up to the page, just begin writing without thinking about writing. Second, she must pick a moment to begin - a single, emblematic scene. As she writes the first few lines, she is struck by the memory of their first Fourth of July together.

Jerry's stepmother and her boyfriend picked them up for the races. Brandi and Jerry still didn't have a car, so they welcomed the chance to go somewhere outside of Blende, Colorado. It was a farming town on the outskirts of Pueblo, and there wasn't much to it other than Casper's

Donuts, the bakery where she worked, the Mission Tortilla Factory - a job Jerry had recently quit claiming that he was being screwed because of illegal labor - and wide swaths of farmland planted with green leafy vegetation that she couldn't identify. The air was dry and hot, even hotter and more stifled in the squat camper in the back of the truck, as they headed to Beacon Hill Speedway for the races and fireworks. She had never been before and was looking forward to it.

It was a wonderful night. Jerry's anger - for once - didn't boil over and he hadn't yelled at her all evening. Instead, he watched the cars circle the track at breakneck speeds, his brown eyes scanning for his uncle's car. She was glad the evening was going well and that her face had healed. Just a few nights ago, she and Jerry were play fighting in his Uncle Chuck's car, which they had borrowed to go to Mesa Drive In. His cousin, Zach, was in the backseat laughing and taking sides - which he constantly switched. Her smile was wide and carefree; she laughed openly. Then Jerry's face changed, a momentary flash of something she didn't recognize, and he pulled back his fist and hit her in the face. Her head was knocked back and her spine collided with the car door. Tears immediately erupted from her eyes and Jerry chuckled and said "Oh baby,

I'm sorry." Her face was hot and her lip began to swell grotesquely. He had busted it. Looking down at the bench in front of her, she touched her lip for a moment. There was still some slight swelling but nothing noticeable.

At the end of the evening, they went with Robin and Shaun to their house. It was late by the time the fireworks ended and Robin had to be at work at the bank early the next morning. Brandi fell asleep in the camper on the way to the split-level home in Colorado Springs. When she woke up, she was cold and wished she brought a coat. Jerry was asleep next to her and she had to wake him when they arrived. Because of the hour, everyone went straight to bed. Brandi and Jerry were allowed to sleep on the couch. His bed in the downstairs bedroom was removed not long after he moved out.

The couch was a bluish-gray and took up the length of the living room window. On one end was a corner table and then the metal staircase railing. On the other was an entertainment center filled with CDs and video tapes. Resting above were framed pictures of the family, though none of Jerry, and the stereo that they played Garth Brooks on while dancing in the living room a few days after they met. There was a small hallway leading to his stepmother's bedroom, her daughter's bedroom, and the

bathroom. The house was dark save for the patio light that crept in from between the blinds and the only noise was the hum of the old beige refrigerator in the adjacent kitchen.

There was only room for them both on the couch if they lay on their sides. She adjusted the waist of her jeans, wishing that she'd known about the overnight plans so she could've brought pajamas. She hated wearing structured pants to begin with, changing into something more comfortable as soon as she got home from work at the bakery, so sleeping in her clothes was even worse. He slept along the back of the couch with his arm around her abdomen to keep her from falling off. It didn't take long for her eyelids to become heavy and she drifted off to sleep.

At some point in the night, Jerry put his face next to her ear, "Are you asleep," he asked. His hand was low on her belly and his fingers spread as he pulled her tighter to him. She didn't answer. "We could do something," he whispered in her ear, grinding himself into her backside.

"There isn't any room," she said.

"There is if we try something else," his grip on her tightened.

She knew what he wanted, what he had been asking her to do. She didn't want to, didn't want to have sex like

that.

"Please," he said.

Her stomach turned. "I don't want to," she said.

He continued to plead with her. For some reason he liked to have sex in situations that made her uncomfortable. She thought it excited him, but it left her feeling ashamed. She would rather have died than get caught by Shawn and Robin, to have her body seen like that. His hand moved up to her ribcage as he continued to question her, at first simply persistent, which then turned to "Don't you love me?" Deep down she knew he would not let her go until she said yes or fought him. There was something in his body, in the tension of his arms that told her he was prepared to fight. He'd already raised a hand to her once, as though to strike her, and she was afraid of him when he was angry. It set something off in her and suddenly she became a frightened child, capable of only cowering in a corner.

"Fine," she finally relented though inside she was screaming no. He knew she didn't want to do this and didn't understand why he insisted on making her. Her intestines felt slippery and she was suddenly nauseated.

Roughly, he pushed down her jeans and underwear. They were under a thin, blue blanket so if anyone walked

past, she looked like she was still dressed. He hadn't bothered with foreplay. This was all about his need, his want. He unzipped his pants and started to press into her. He didn't use his hands, just kept shoving until her body gave way. Her insides resisted, tried to push him out. It hurt and felt unnatural. Once inside, he started to thrust. His arm was still over her but he used his hand on her hip to get her body to move with his. The smell made her want to vomit and she wished he would hurry up and finish. She wanted to cry, wanted him out of her body. She closed her eyes and disconnected, lost in the repeated prayer, "please finish. please finish." She was no longer there but in the place she went to when bad things happened.

After he was done, he didn't speak to her, just got up and went to the bathroom. She looked toward the hall to make sure no one was there before pulling up her panties and jeans. He didn't use a condom and she knew his mess would soak into her only clothing as she waited for the bathroom. The feeling of it sliding out of her was disgusting. His hand brushed her as she passed him in the hall. When she returned, he lifted up the blanket so she could lay with him. Neither of them spoke. She stared at the wall until she finally drifted off to sleep.

Slowly she comes out of the almost meditative

state that comes from writing about her past. Her cheeks are wet with tears and it takes her a few moments to take in her surroundings. It is the same bedroom, same massive pile of dirty laundry, same boxes that still weren't unpacked. Nick is in the other room on the computer; she can hear the keys clicking under his fingers. Her dog Bunny is breathing heavily as he lies by her side on the bed. She can't reread what she wrote and instead closes the padded cover in slow motion, as though she has just woken up from a dream. Or a nightmare.

"Honey?" she calls to Nick.

"Ya?"

"Can you come here for a second?" she pulls the blankets up over her crossed legs.

Nick comes in and plops down at the foot of the bed. He's dressed in baggy jeans and a t-shirt she gave him for his birthday. His hair is still wet from the shower and has ridges from where it passed through the teeth of the black, plastic comb he always keeps in his back pocket. She breathes deeply.

"I want you to read this," she says and holds out her brown, leather padfolio. "I finally wrote about what happened with Jerry."

It is important to her that he read it. She needs

him to read it because up until now, she hasn't been able to fully explain what happened, to put it into words when she is talking with him. It's as if she can't find any purchase, a point to begin talking from. Writing freed something in her, allowed her to write in full detail, to create a narrative that was easier to share than a conversation.

He grips it with the tips of his fingers. "You sure?" His gaze finds her and holds it.

"Yeah. I need you to read it. It might help you understand," she pauses. "It's only a few pages anyway."

He takes it and she lies down on their disheveled bed, which they never bother to make. She expects him to sigh or complain but this time he doesn't. Instead, he sits on the bed, back against the window and legs splayed out. He has his tennis shoes on but she doesn't say anything, afraid he will stop reading. At the same time, she can't bear to watch him read, doesn't want to scrutinize every expression - or the lack thereof. Still, she needs this.

He reads silently and when he finishes, he closes the padfolio and sets it next to her on the bed. She knows this silence. After four years of marriage, she's come to recognize it as discomfort with her work. He wears the same expression that he does when she reads her writing in

public - well, at least any time there is the mention of abuse. Here he disconnects from her, seems embarrassed in the way he hangs his head, doesn't recognize how writing helps her - often is the only thing that keeps her from suicide. It hurts her that he doesn't get it.

"So?" she asks.

"That was really personal," he says. "I'm not sure if you plan on publishing that or not," he looks down at the carpet.

She sighs, "I didn't want you to read it for a critique: sentence structure and crap. I don't know how I feel about it still. I don't know what to call what happened. I needed to be vulnerable with you. I feel like no one knows the real me, like no one has ever known the real me."

"Well...I'm sorry that happened," he replies in a low voice.

She realizes that he can't give her what she needs. The affirmation won't come from him. And all she really wants is for him to know and understand, to maybe hug her and lie by saying it will be alright. He also can't give her what she is searching for: a label or a category of some sort. It was wrong but was it sexual assault? Rape? A poor decision? When Nick leaves, she brings her laptop

into the bedroom and looks up the definition of rape. She feels stupid for not knowing for sure, yet this isn't like the crime shows she watches. Isn't like *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* where the victim, if she survives, sits on the edge of an exam table. It is implied that the doctor has just finished the exam and rape kit but never shown. Now Detectives Benson and Stabler can question her. The women are almost always in hospital gowns. Fabric with small blue dots, not the shitty paper gowns she is given when she goes in for her annual Well Woman exam. Some of the women have cuts and bruises; others lay rather than sit, but those are the ones who were brought in unconscious.

The depictions always make her think that she is glad she'd never been raped. It isn't something she thinks she could live with. She doesn't want to call it rape because then that would mean she was victimized. That she buried it for almost a decade. That she was so desperate for love that she let him break her with emotional and mental abuse to the point where she didn't recognize what was happening. But then she was afraid he was going to hurt her, but still, she said yes. She has trouble making sense out of it.

She is staring at the wall when Nick returns. He

again sits on the foot of the bed, but this time he reaches out a hand to touch her leg.

"I'm sorry about earlier. I just have trouble understanding your writing," he runs his hand through his hair.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like the person that you are, the person I know, doesn't match up with the person you are writing about. I don't know her and, well, it's hard to read about that stuff anyhow. I don't like to think of that happening to you."

"That makes sense, though it's not like I enjoy writing about it either. It's painful and I just need some support. It makes me think you're ashamed of my work."

"It isn't that. I just can't connect to it."

His words still feel like a rejection to her and she doesn't know if she is just hardened toward him or if it is something else. She wishes he would talk to her about what happened, help her process it. Then again, he just found out about the entire situation. What must that be like for him? That night, as he turns away from her in bed, she sobs into a pillow.

CHAPTER 18

Another writing workshop and she's racking her brain, trying to figure out what she wants to write. Again, instead of just writing, she tries to think of a subject, tries to pluck a singular moment out of her life in which to begin writing what would become her thesis. She's at least decided on a subject - the abuse she suffered as a child and the adult trying to cope. She wants what happened with Jerry to be a part of it, but not right away. There are so many questions that keep her hand from moving on the page - how much should her family be involved and would anyone be hurt by it? How does one write a book-length work when there are so many blank spaces in childhood memory? How do the fragments fit together? The self-doubt is paralyzing, lasts for over a week, but she has a deadline she must meet. When she shows up to therapy, blocked and unable to function, Erin suggests she start with her earliest memory.

Something clicks, akin to tumblers on a door lock

when the correct key is inserted. She knows what she wants to write and heads next door to Cool Beans, a campus coffee shop, orders a black Chai Tea and a chocolate croissant, and sets to work. She doesn't have her favorite writing pen or one of her legal pads, but it doesn't matter. The story is bubbling up and she simply has to hold out her hand to catch it. Her breath slows as she transports herself, once again, to the days when her family lived in Virginia Beach. Her memories of the ocean are a swirling mass, connected and flowing into one another, but one stands out above the others. Everything before this moment is blank, as if she had not yet come into being.

The sand, a damp grey filled with chips of tumbled shells, burns the bottom of her tiny feet. To get down to the water, her family must first cross the dunes, which were formed partly by vehicles the military had abandoned there and covered up. The dunes were taller than she was and she felt small as she crossed the worn wooden walkway. Her mother found a calcified blowfish, body bloated and yellow like an exoskeleton, and considered taking it back to the car but, instead, left it.

Brandi's feet slid in the sand as she came down the other side of the dunes. The day was warm, but the sky was slightly overcast. Down by the water, the sand was

pockmarked by crab-holes, looking like the lunar surface. Though she never saw one, she was afraid that a crab would reach a claw out of one of those holes and pinch her feet. The thought made her curl her small toes in, similar to what she did when walking on grass. She picked her way carefully but quickly, hopping from open spot to open spot. The rest of her family - her mom, dad, and siblings - moved quickly too.

The water washed over the sand in frothy foam. She didn't approach; though she liked the water, she was afraid of what might lurk beneath the surface. Though she was afraid of fish, she was more afraid of jellyfish with their stinging tentacles. In her mind, she saw them wrapping around her and dragging her down into the depths. What she pictured was more akin to a cartoonified representation rather than the semi-translucence of their actuality. While her parents set up beach towels and placed the cooler, she drew hearts in the sand with her finger and wrote her. The water came up, crashed over her artwork, her name, and took it away. Though she was sad to see it go, it also gave her a sense of exhilaration.

She was glad that her father was with them. He was in the Army, stationed at Fort Story, and it seemed to her that he left before the sun came up and didn't come

home until it was ready to come back down. Her father, with his dark brown eyes and hair that didn't look like hers, held her hand and led her down to the surf. Her mother took her other hand and walked along with her as her brother and sister ran up and down the beach. The water was a pale grey and was relatively warm, except for some shocking cold spots that made her gasp when she reached them. Her mother's brown hair puffed out around her face and blew in the light wind. She was smiling at Brandi's father.

Brandi didn't watch them but instead focused on the rolling waves in the distance. The waves began as far back as she could see and moved forward in rows. As each wave hit them, her parents raised her up, their hands in hers, and she felt the water drag her lower body while her upper body glided over the top. The feeling of suspension was magical and she wished it would last longer. Each time she laughed and felt warm, loved. Her siblings ceased to exist in that moment and it was just the three of them.

Then, a larger wave formed on the horizon and crept closer. She followed it with her eyes knowing that the bigger ones were more fun to ride. She went over the next few waves but kept her eyes riveted. Her parents were talking and laughing, engrossed in their conversation. Their hands did not tighten in preparation. Eyes wide, she

realized too late that those hands she had trusted were not going to lift her. The water crashed into her tiny body forcing its way into her mouth, nose, ears, and eyes. She was overcome by the gray wall trying to drag her further under. Held tight by her parents, she could not rise to the surface or try to breathe until the wave passed. She choked and coughed. Her throat hurt and her eyes stung. They laughed.

This moment connected into the next as she wrote about her childhood, the abuse, and going through therapy and trying to remember. When she arrives home, she begins to type up her writing, adding in what she wrote about Jerry. It is all connected, though she isn't sure how yet. A mosaic is forming though she can't see the larger image. It feels good to just be writing, to not be struggling to figure out where to start. Still, though, the writing is difficult, painful even. Erin told her this was part of the grieving process in order to recover, and she wants to recover. Once she is done typing, she wants nothing more than to sleep. Nick says nothing, knows she often gets like this after writing. Looking back, she isn't sure why she decided to become a nonfiction writer. Yes, she felt driven to write truth but, at the same time, it was a form of torture.

Hours passed and, when she wakes, it is late evening. Still, she doesn't want to get out of bed, doesn't want to turn on the light, can't handle being out in the world. This is one of the warning signs of an oncoming major depressive episode. She stares, thinking about how tired she is of being herself, how she would like nothing more than to just disappear, to drop out of her life. Nick is in the next room, not aware that anything is happening. He is engrossed in trying out a new programming language and hasn't spoken much to her since she arrived home. The silence is welcome when she is working, but now she hopes he would seek her out - come and talk to her, hold her. Despite her desire, she doesn't ask for these things, feels the affection should be automatically given. Erin wants her to work on asking for what she needs and she's been trying, but today it is just too much. Instead of asking for Nick to come in, she calls her sister on the telephone. It's too late to call the counseling center and she needs to talk to someone.

"Bueno," Elise says. It is her signature telephone greeting.

"Hey," she says.

"Are you ok? You don't sound good. What's going on?"

"I can't get out of bed. I was writing and, I still need to finish, it's due for workshop and I just can't." She places her free hand on her forehead.

"Aw, sweetie I'm sorry. Why can't you get out of bed?"

"I don't know. I'm just...tired of being me."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No. I just needed to talk to someone." She pauses and breathes deeply trying to decide how much to share of what she has kept hidden from her family for so long, "I'm having bad thoughts."

"Like what kind of bad thoughts? Like hurting yourself bad thoughts?"

"Yes," her eyes water.

"Ok. Can you tell me more about it?"

"I don't know what there is to tell. I just feel so trapped. So stuck in my life, in school, in my body. I'm not happy. Nick and I aren't really talking. We haven't slept together in seven months."

"Seven months?"

"Yeah. It's normally a long time in between, but this is the longest it's been. He resents me. It just...it makes me feel unwanted, like I don't know why he won't either love me or let me go. It's like torture."

"That's hard. I know." Elise breathes heavily, "You haven't hurt yourself have you? I mean, I don't know exactly what 'bad thoughts' means."

"No, I haven't. I don't think I'm going to actually do anything. I just wish I was dead. Sometimes I see things, but that hasn't happened in a while."

"What do you mean you see things?"

"Well, I don't hallucinate or anything. It isn't outside, like in the air, I see things in my head. Recurring images like blood, slit wrists - this last one was a belt around a neck, my neck I guess. I also see a foot with someone pulling a strand of what looks like beans out of it. I've seen that since I was little."

"Have you told your therapist about this?"

"No. I don't want her to think I'm crazy."

"I'm sure it's not that, but you should talk about it."

"I'll try. Writing was so hard today and now I've got to give my work to other people to read. I'm nervous. I feel like such a loser, like I don't belong here."

"That's shit. You're awesome."

"Well," she chuckles, "thank you. I don't know that I believe it."

"Look at everything you've done. You're a James

Dickey fellow and you've published tons of stuff. What did Dr. Ortega say about you?"

"That I was the most published undergrad she knew."

"See..."

"I know I've done a lot, but it's never enough. I don't know if I'll ever be enough. It's like I do things and I don't have time to enjoy them, don't know how to enjoy them. I just move from task to task. Erin calls it survival mode. It just...sucks."

"Do you want me to look at your work? I can give you some feedback."

"Sure. I'll email it to you."

Elise's feedback helped, but Brandi still feels nervous walking into nonfiction workshop. Her classmates, having a week to look over her twenty pages of writing, have annotated drafts of her work. They sit in the Humanities Building around several grey tables arranged into a square. She prefers the tables of this classroom to the small desks in some of the other rooms. The class is small, though not quite as small as she expected for only having five people on the nonfiction track. They were all in the class, as well as a linguistics major and an undergraduate student. She couldn't help but wonder how

this was going to go - what sort of feedback she'd receive. What made her the most nervous was the rape scene. After talking with Erin, this was how she came to understand what happened, that it was coercion, and she had fear of bodily harm. At the time, it felt like she had some semblance of control, but she no longer felt that way, realizes it was an illusion necessary to her survival.

The class starts with her piece, which means that the instructor leads a lengthy discussion during which, Brandi isn't allowed to speak. On the table in front of her, next to her slice of strawberry cheesecake, is a copy of her manuscript. It is strange to look at it with its printed title page, her name just below the title. Something about it, and the weight of the stack of paper, made it feel real. Still, she is nervous about it. She'd written about the abuse before, even published work on it and read it in public; however, she is now opening herself up to sustained critique, which could easily devolve into criticism. She'd seen it happen before and it scares her more this time, because she is writing about herself. A criticism of the work feels like a criticism of her. She flips back the front page and picks up her pen.

Halfway through the critique, Emilie raises her hand to comment. "I also wanted to say how well she covered

the assault scene. She focuses on giving the audience her sensations both physically and emotionally, but I don't think she pushes it too far. None of it feels gratuitous."

The young undergrad speaks up, "I agree. This is really tough material. The rape scene was heartbreaking but effective."

Jonathan, the linguistics student with a strong - at times too strong - voice in his work raises his hand. "Wait, why are we calling it rape. I don't see how it was rape?" The women in the class stare in disbelief, while the men sit quietly, either fidgeting nervously or with crossed arms. Jonathan looks surprised by the reaction. He continues, "I mean, it was just a guy trying to get some. I don't see that as rape."

The women defend her, going over the details of the text - the history of violence, the way his arm wrapped around her with increasing pressure. Brandi is glad for their defiance, for she is not allowed to speak and even if she was, she wasn't sure what she'd say. Her mind reels as voices are raised; she tries to separate herself from the conversation, tries to get away. Maybe she isn't a writer after all; if she couldn't get across what really happened, then what business did she have continuing.

Downstairs, in the lobby of the Humanities

Building, Emilie is waiting for her. She isn't wearing her coral lipstick, which means she didn't have to teach today. It was her way of preparing herself to face anything. "Hey friend," Emilie says. "How you hanging in there?"

"Shitty," she replies. "That went worse than I thought."

"Well," Emilie buttons up her bright green cardigan, "you got a lot of positive feedback too. I put this in my written response too, but I saw a lot of progress in your writing. The narrator is much more immediate and effective. You're onto something."

"Thanks," Brandi looks down at the tile floor. "It just doesn't feel like anything, I mean, you heard Jonathan. He didn't get that it was rape. I just feel stupid for opening myself up like that. I don't know."

"Just because he didn't get it, doesn't mean anything. The women got it. You can't reach everyone. You're doing important work and you should keep doing it."

"So I shouldn't move back to Colorado?" She laughs and adjusts the strap on her book bag.

"No. I need you anyway. God, I can't imagine facing workshop alone. Besides, next week is my turn."

"Oh goody. I hope you are ready."

"As ready as I'll ever be friend. My insides

already feel icky about it.”

“It’ll be ok, but you can send it to me ahead of time if you like.”

“Thanks,” says Emilie. “I think I will.”

They say goodnight and Brandi heads down the dark pathway that leads to Greene Street. Nick is waiting on the corner to pick her up. He gripes about picking her up, especially when he has to wait for her, but she doesn’t like waiting for the evening shuttle, which can take her up to 35 minutes to get home, plus she has to wait in the dark on the nearly deserted campus. A branch snaps, probably a squirrel she figures, and she quickens her pace to the car.

CHAPTER 19

A seed takes hold inside of her, rind and melon expanding into flesh. Flesh of her flesh. Tendrils forming into fingers and delicate pink toes. Legs bent from the weight of her pregnant belly, she bow-steps through sliding glass doors, making her way into the emergency room. The air conditioner blows the fabric of her jersey knit dress, leeching the Carolina heat from her skin, stopping the sweat trails that run down her spine. She knew she should've let Nick take her to the hospital sooner, but she wanted to be sure the baby was coming. She clenches her thighs feeling like the baby could drop out of her at any moment. If she were to reach down, she thinks, she might feel the soft downy hair on the top of his head. The pressure in her lower back is intense and she is thankful when a nurse spots her and brings a wheelchair for her to sit in.

The baby she is having is not her husband's but a classmate's - a man she's had exactly two conversations with. Somehow, her husband has accepted it and stands

beside her, holding her hand through the contractions that come in waves. As she lies back, she sees nothing over her firm belly, the belly that has kept her from wearing jeans or tying her shoes for weeks. Soaked with sweat, she wants to swat away the swarm of nurses and doctors that circle her open knees.

"One last push," the doctor says and she holds her breath, presses outward from the depths of herself, finds a strength she didn't know she possessed.

A nurse brings them the swaddled baby, places him in her hands. She looks at his face, looking for some sort of recognition in his features. He is heavy and she is exhausted, barely able to keep her eyes open after the long labor. She wants to hold him up, facing her, but doesn't have the strength in her arms.

"What should we name him?" Nick asks. He is smiling in a way she has never seen before. Even with his nephew, he seemed uncomfortable as if unsure how to act around a baby.

"Silas," she says.

"Silas what?" he raises an eyebrow.

"Silas House," she answers. Somehow the first name that comes to mind is that of the Kentucky author, a man who gave a keynote at the North Carolina Writing

Network's conference, but she has never met.

When she wakes, the fruit-bearing belly is gone as is the child. Her husband lies next to her cocooned in blankets. She feels the cool air from the purifier, the one they bought because of her asthma, rush over exposed flesh. She pulls a sliver of blanket out from under him and covers herself.

"You ok?" he mumbles.

"Yeah, I just had a really weird dream."

"What about?" he rolls over to face her. She can't make out his features in the dark of the bedroom.

"I had a baby, like I gave birth. It was so vivid. I mean, I've had pregnancy dreams before but never birth dreams. You were there but the baby wasn't yours."

"Whose was it?"

"One of my classmates. A guy I hardly ever talk to. It didn't make any sense. We also named him after Silas House."

"So it wasn't mine?"

"No," she says.

"That kind of pisses me off," he grumbles.

"It was just a dream honey. I can't control what I dream. Besides, it probably just came up with all the talk about pregnancy and grad school that's been going on."

She pauses, listening to his breath. "You know we need to make a decision."

"I know," he says.

"It's just, I mean we either do it when I'm working on my thesis or we wait until I get tenure but who knows how long that will take and if I can even have kids at that point."

"Yeah, it's something to think about," he says and turns over.

Brandi's cell phone vibrates on the nightstand. Eyes closed, she reaches for it, knocking her glasses and a book down in the process. Normally she turns her ringer off at night, and she silently curses herself for forgetting. Though it is already ten, it feels like she has just fallen asleep - a feeling that comes on whenever she had strange dreams or trouble sleeping. She turns the screen toward her: it's her sister, Elise. She slides the answer key, unplugs the phone from the charger, and leaves the bedroom so she doesn't wake Nick.

"Hey, what's up?" she says.

"Oh my god, you won't believe what happened. I'm freaking out right now," Elise sounds frantic, worried.

"What? What's going on?" her mind rushes through several possible scenarios.

"Rebecca tried to kill herself."

"Your roommate?" Brandi plods out into the living room so she doesn't wake Nick.

"Yes, she took twenty Xanax."

"Oh shit, what happened?"

"She didn't get up this morning so I went in her room to check on her. She was passed out on the fucking bed, all groggy and shit. I propped her up but she fell face first, not making a sound when she landed on her arm, the one that's broken. I called Kendra and Kendra told me to call 911."

"Is she ok?"

"I don't know. She's at the hospital now. You know what's even worse, how I found out she tried to kill herself?"

"What?"

"She put a suicide note to me in the skillet in the cabinet. I can't believe she did that. I went in her room after the paramedics took her out and found a note addressed to her father and sister."

"Wow, that's fucked up. Are you at the hospital now?"

"No." Elise hesitates, "But I'm going to call for an update. Can you imagine if I didn't find her? How are

you going to come up in someone else's house and do something like that?" She takes a few deep breaths, "Is it wrong that I'm angry about that? Am I being too harsh?"

"No, I'd be angry about that too. It doesn't mean you're hard at all. I mean, what if it happened on a day Kai had to work? Can you imagine the paramedics rushing in while he was on the phone with a client?"

"I know, right. If anything had been overheard, they may not have let him work from home anymore. It was just disrespectful. We let her into our house to help her out and this is how she repays us. Kai didn't want a roommate anyhow."

"Yeah, it's hard for married couples to live with anybody," she says.

"I just don't know what to do."

"Wait a little while and check on her, maybe take a bag to the hospital with some clothing and toiletries."

"That sounds good. I can take the book she's reading and her scriptures too."

"Ok, call me later if you need me. I have to go, I'm at Kirkland today, and I need to get ready and go."

When she arrives at the prison, sweating and breathing heavy, her mind is somewhere else. Somehow her dream becomes mixed up with talking to her sister and all

she can think about is that phone call two years earlier. Elise was unable to have children, even after two very painful attempts at in-vitro fertilization. Ever since she was a child, Elise wanted to be a mother, had mothered Brandi and her siblings. Brandi jokingly called her the mother hen. That day, Elise had a follow-up appointment with her fertility specialist. She was still reeling from the loss of not being able to have a biological child, yet still held out a tiny shred of hope.

Brandi and Nick were living in a two-bedroom apartment off of Austin Bluffs, just a few miles from the University of Colorado. It was early in her marriage and she and Nick were fighting a lot. In those days, she wasn't afraid to use her voice in argument, to fill his silence with her rage. They were finally recovering from the time she left him, finally working out their differences and the arguments were few and far between. They were in such a good place, they were planning a child. She came off of birth control and tracked her temperature daily. Each time they made love, she marked an X in a small calendar next to the bed without telling him. She desperately wanted a child and she cried each month when her cycle came. Looking through the calendar, at the small Xs that were weeks apart, it was no wonder they hadn't conceived. Still, she

continued to track, glad Nick had finally said yes to having a baby. She'd tried with Jerry and couldn't get pregnant, a fact she was happy about now because it meant she wasn't tied to him, but it devastated her at the time. Secretly, she worried that she was infertile like her sister, a fear she didn't share with anyone.

It was late afternoon when Elise called. Brandi was sitting on the thin pleather couches she purchased with their stimulus check. The chill of winter left frost on the window. It was so cold the cat didn't even sit in his usual place on the sill. Despite the draft that came from the window, Brandi sat on the couch below it, staring off into the distance. The view was dismal: nothing more than a row of garages and bare trees beyond that. The sky was a marbled grey and white, and it wouldn't be long before snow fall. She wished they would cancel tomorrow's classes.

The phone rang, breaking her out of her almost-trance. It was her sister and she had just talked to the doctor. Not long before, the in-vitro failed for the second time. The eggs, once fertilized, deteriorated and broke apart, didn't survive long enough to be implanted. Her heart broke for her sister, but she felt powerless to help. The most she could do was be there and comfort her, not say the unfeeling things other people did - it will happen in

god's time or it will happen when you stop trying. They meant well, but made her feel so much worse.

Elise's voice was steady and even, as though she were trying not to break. "We will have to use donor eggs and donor sperm. The doctor said it would be best if we could get a family member to donate eggs. I don't want you to answer now, just think about it," Elise said.

Brandi knew she would say yes before she hung up the phone. Elise was her sister, how could she not do it? Yes meant a series of injections, examinations, and tests. A high protein diet that would make her vomit like it had Elise and, of course, the pain of the retrieval. Elise's ovary had swollen to the size of a grapefruit and she was warned that if she slipped on ice or bent to tie her shoe, it could flop over and cause immense pain. She couldn't bring herself to tell Elise that she and Nick were planning a family. The following week Elise asked to meet her, but Brandi wasn't sure why.

"I don't know that I want you to do it," Elise stared at the traffic ahead while she spoke. The traffic was backed up, as it always was at the Southgate Shopping Center. "I don't want you to risk your life. It's dangerous. What if something happened to you because you did this for me? I couldn't forgive myself."

She exhaled slowly. "I worry about doing this and not being able to have children of my own later," she told her. "I don't know how I would feel watching you raise a child that is partly mine."

Brandi shakes her head to clear it, to try and be in the present moment. She's calm, probably because she doesn't know Rebecca that well, has never met her, only talked to her on the phone when her sister was not home. She thinks of her parents, how they would react to the news. Unlike them, she would never ask why or say that she can't believe it. Brandi's been suicidal before; she can believe it. She knows how depression can take hold and there are only two options, however illogical they are: life and death. Sometimes the choice isn't even between living or not living but in how to die. Her detachment makes her feel impenetrable in a way. Graham's word strikes her then: unflappable. Is this merely survival or is she a hard person? Elise called her because she knew she would be the calm spot in the shit storm, would not blame her, would not try to make her feel guilty in her anger and hurt. When Brandi was in her early twenties, this kind of a situation would have eaten at her. Her stomach would have boiled so bad she wouldn't be able to sleep and would once again have to go on medication for irritation of the stomach lining.

That seems to be the place that she feels everything. Now, she is a sea of calm. She can tell her sister what Rebecca needs most from her because these are the things she would need if it were her.

CHAPTER 20

She didn't really have a chance to notice, because she was on a second phone call with her sister, but she is glad to have her car back from the dealership with the air conditioning working. For the past two weeks Lauren went out of her way to pick Brandi up at her apartment. Though she finds the work at Kirkland emotionally exhausting and walking across the yard nerve-wracking, she loves it. As the student's she tutors work their way through the nonfiction writing course, she gets to witness the unfolding of the gift of writing as they begin to have faith in themselves and their abilities. Most of them had trouble just beginning. She recognizes her own struggles with writing in them, in just showing up at the page and not intellectualizing it. When they write from their heads, it is stilted and summarized; when they write from their hearts, it is smooth and stunning. Each student has unique and beautiful gifts. For some, it is raw emotion and for others, it is stunning descriptions and metaphors.

Perhaps it means that she is becoming too attached, but she cares about them. *Then again, she thinks, one must either care deeply or be hardened to succeed in corrections.* By this she means who there are some that have to be hard, some jobs within that require it. In general population, kindness could be construed as weakness.

As she again crosses the yard, she notices a crowd of male inmates under the overhang next to the library entrance. Normally the men she encounters, save for those that are allowed to walk around by them themselves - typically those doing grounds maintenance, are in regimented rows. These men are in a cluster. She takes in their khaki uniforms, closer to hospital scrubs, with the thick black stripe along each pant leg. They talk and joke, their voices echoing off of the brick walls and concrete floor. To get to the library door, she must walk between them. Her heart beats faster and she scolds herself for wearing heels and makeup. As she walks through, they give her room, but only enough to pass. She hears their intakes of breath and guttural sounds. Her stomach turns and she's afraid.

She passes without incident but remains nervous as she climbs the flights of stairs up to the library. There are no cameras there, as one inmate informed her. She

looks down at her hand, at the black-light responsive stamp on the back. When she asks Mark about it, he says that it is just in case there is a riot and the officers need to find and drag out those that don't belong inside the walls.

The library, with its few shelves filled with mostly fiction paperback, is accessible by the general population. The men sitting at tables and in the rows of padded chairs may not be part of the college program; she's been counseled to remember that. The two classrooms, which sit about twenty students each, and the adjoining private library, are solely for students and this is where she tutors.

About halfway through her first session, a young man opens the classroom door and takes a step in. She does not know him and neither does Lauren. He is clearly agitated and keeps his splayed fingers close to his head.

"I need a dictionary, this is where I need a dictionary," he says as his eyes scan the room. "They said to get a dictionary."

She freezes, pen in hand hovering just above the paper. The student she is tutoring, Antovis, stands. His broad shoulders and back form a barrier between her and the young man.

"This is not where you need to be," said Lauren's

student. "You need to go back out to the desk."

"I need to get a dictionary. They said I get a dictionary in here," he moves forward another half step.

"No son," says Antovis, "you need to go to the desk." He takes a step forward and the young man backs out of the room. He shuts the door and sits back down next to her.

She hasn't processed what just happened, just knows that her body is tense and hair is standing on end. Antovis comes back and sits next to her, noticing the way she sits rigid and doesn't speak. He sees her concern and smiles at her. His face is broad, his smile reaching wide across his face, and his black hair is shaved close to his head.

"He's part of a special needs group and is on medication. They use the library. Don't worry, we wouldn't have left him hurt you. These guys here would protect you both no matter what went down, even if we had to hide you," he smiles at her and she is conflicted. On the one hand, she was protected for the first time in her life. On the other hand, she has put herself in a situation where she might need protecting.

Today, Antovis' writing is about the abuse he suffered as a child. His language is powerful and raw. He

has a gift for short lines that knock the air out of your lungs, that draw the very breath from your lips. Not in a gasp but in holding, in a silent prayer for the child he writes about. She wants to gather that child to her, to show him the protection and love he never received but deserved so badly. This is the power of memoir. This is the power of trauma. It makes us wish fiercely that time travel was possible, that we could go back and right the wrongs of the past. Perhaps this also means that she has grown too close to him.

In Antovis, she sees pain but also tremendous possibility. In reading his work, she is better able to understand the strength in hers. When she reads her work in public, she is always approached by people who tell her how brave she is, but she doesn't feel brave. She is simply compelled to write about what happened, about her own abuse. There's a disconnect between her and their praise, as though accepting it would make her a braggart, claiming something she had not earned. Yet, in experiencing Antovis' courage, bravery, and resilience, she is able to see these things in herself. He talks about the work pouring through him like water and he, like her, experiences those moments where the writing carries him away. When he goes back and reads it, he doesn't remember writing it. Doesn't recognize

the work, and, without thinking, she tells him that this is his gift. That God uses our pain. We are wounded healers, those blessed to be able to communicate what so many others cannot, to help others find solace. When the writing is flowing swiftly, it is divine inspiration she tell him, it is God using us and she thinks of the Bible and how the spirit flowed through those men ages ago and this is righteous work. She doesn't know why these words tumble out of her mouth - she isn't religious.

Antovis feels sick when she reads his work out loud and she tells him to write about that, to write about being in his body as this is where trauma manifests. That ball rising in his stomach is the bodily manifestation of so much more - of guilt, shame, rage, disappointment, sadness, grief, all of those things. He feels trapped by these memories.

"You are doubly incarcerated," she tells him and he nods, understands, knows the emotional truth of such a statement.

He says this feels like cheating because she's done this research, read obsessively on trauma, and now she passes it on to him. She doesn't understand how her time with him opens her. That she feels safe enough to let her walls down with him in the same way that she can only truly

share herself with other survivors.

In his work, she also sees the resilience of the child, can see how he is giving a voice to the voiceless child, can identify with his repetition of "there was no one to tell." He questions her and she tells him how she uses her achievements and work to cover the sadness, how she's a people pleaser and can't say no. This comes from living out of survival, which allows us to function but not to truly live. The writing is a way of surrendering, of finding those coping mechanisms that worked for the child but not the adult. Not every child survives.

"The gift of writing does not make the past worth it but takes the sting out of what happened," she says.

"How do you know all this?" he asks.

"Well, part of it is reading, my hunger to understand, which led me to read lots of theory. The other part is lived experience," she shrugs and checks her watch. Their time is almost up. "Please keep writing after the class ends. The reason why you can't find the end to his story yet is because there is so much more."

He says he will and she truly hopes he embraces the gift. "I feel real hopeful," he says.

As she shakes his hand goodbye, she wraps her other hand around his, holds slightly longer. He senses the

trauma in others, has found that by opening, they too are comforted.

Later that day, as she sits by herself during a gap in tutoring sessions, Antovis comes back into the room. He approaches the desk, leans down, and places both hands on the surface.

"I hope I get to see you next week," he says.

"Well, just make sure you sign up early. Did you like the section of *Writing as a Way of Healing* that I brought for you?"

"There's something in there about that too," he says and looks down at the desk.

She doesn't know what he means until he walks away and there, where his right hand was, is a folded sheet of notebook paper. She slips the note in her legal pad, unsure what the exact rules are for accepting something from an inmate. In her volunteer training, she was told not to, but she has been told by program staff that she can take drafts of the students' work home. She isn't sure what to do, but it makes her nervous to be placed in such a situation. In the stairwell, she puts the note in the pocket of her slacks. The edges of the paper poke her skin through the lining of my pocket. She doesn't unfold it, doesn't dare read it until she reaches the car.

In the letter, he thanks her for her sacrifice and servant hood, for listening to his story, for being the first person he could share his story with, and for not judging him. About caring for him and the "medication of her counsel." He credits her with the smile that she's seen in the last few weeks. He tells her that she was sent by God, he knows this. His faith staggers her, makes her want to cry. It is hard for her to believe that she could be an instrument of God, that by helping an inmate write about his trauma, navigating his childhood and the pain that helped lead him to his present, she is doing God's work. She is doing what He has put her for.

That evening, Elise is piecing together what happened. Rebecca survived the suicide attempt and was able to have visitors. Elise took a bag along with Rebecca's book, her scriptures, and a teddy bear.

"You know what I can't figure out?" Elise says.

"What's that?"

"Why she didn't take the whole bottle of Xanax. There were like ten left.

Brandi turns the potato soup she's cooking down on low and sit on the couch in the living room. "She was probably spacing them out so she wouldn't vomit and had to stop before the dose was lethal, that's what I would have

done," she says.

Her voice is cold, unemotional. Yet there's something behind her response, the ease with which she understands and answers. She thinks back to when she wanted to kill herself after her next door neighbor molested her. For years, she played it off as teenage angst, as a child acting out and dismissed it. It wasn't that serious. Now she's not so sure.

Her first kiss, or at least the first one she remembers, happened when she was twelve years old. Instead of another boy, it was with a twenty-six year old married man named Greg. He lived two doors down from her parents' house. She can't remember how she first started hanging around Greg. It was the summer and she was bored, so he offered to show her how to build model cars. For hours, she would sit at a small table and work on her model. Each day, she carried the box back and forth. On the nights that she had to stay home, she worked on her model until her eyes got fatigued. She was so proud of her it, a purple Camaro. He airbrushed the body for her and she carefully detailed the undercarriage using a toothpick dipped in silver paint. When she ran out of paint thinner, he refilled the tiny bottle with Everclear, a strong grain alcohol she had never heard of.

It was with Greg that she first started smoking, a nasty habit that she wouldn't drop for another twelve years. With a Swisher Sweet cigar in her hand, she felt like an adult. He'd let her sip from his drinks, plastic fast food restaurant cups full of soda and Everclear. He often complained about his wife, Kathy, how they fought all the time and that he didn't love her anymore. He loved Brandi, or at least he said so. She couldn't remember the first time he kissed her but, after that, she couldn't wait for his wife to leave. Kathy was always taking their black truck and going out for fast food, usually Taco Bell, and while she was gone Greg and Brandi would kiss. He'd whisper things to her - dirty things that he wanted to do to her. She'd blush, not understanding half of what he said. Her best friend, Kim, who was fourteen, started visiting him with her at some point. She became uncomfortable when Greg kissed Kim and told her the same things.

At some point during what Brandi called a relationship, she moved into the washroom in her parents' house. It was a tiny room on the other side of the house, opposite from everyone else's bedrooms. She felt a sense of freedom despite the fact that she could only fit a twin-sized bed, a shelf, and her desk in the cinder-block room. Her sleeping area was separated from the washer and dryer

by a king-sized sheet converted into a curtain. With the divider, her parents could come in and do laundry without disturbing her.

"I want to make love to you tonight," Greg said during an afternoon visit.

"You do?" she smiled and flicked her ashes in a yellow glass ashtray.

"Yes, finally. I have an idea," he looked at her with his green eyes and she knew she'd do anything for him.

"What's that?" she crossed her legs and leaned back on his couch.

"Leave the garage door unlocked. Your bedroom is right there and I can come in without anyone seeing me."

"I'd like that," she smiled.

"Good. I really want you," he ran his hand up her thigh. "It'll be late though. I have to wait until everyone is asleep."

"I understand," she felt flushed, excited.

"Don't wait up, I'd love to wake you up. I'm not sure I'll be able to get out at all. You can't be disappointed if it doesn't happen."

When she went to bed that night, she put on a knee-length red satin nightgown with sheer panels along the neckline. The smoothness of the fabric and the deep red

color made her feel sexy. She brushed her hair and pulled it into a high, tight ponytail that sat on top of her head, the way he liked it. She unlocked the side door, turned off her bedroom light, and lay on the bed, waiting. Though she was nervous, her entire body tingling, she managed to fall asleep. He never showed, and when she woke in the morning, she cried.

When they later slept with Kim - Greg and Kathy together - Brandi was destroyed. She'd lost the love of her life and her best friend in the same evening. She closed in on herself, spending hours alone in her bedroom listening to the same song over and over again. In childhood, she had fantasized about suicide, now she began to actively try. A couple of times, she used the old skinning knife she found in a pile of leaves, making scratches up her wrist. These were always light, superficial, because she couldn't stand the pain, the way the metal bit into her skin instead of gliding. Her skin wasn't as easy to split as she thought, as she saw in her mind when she imagined the blood pouring from her body. Then came the model glue huffing and drinking rubbing alcohol. These she didn't think would kill her, but they dulled the pain she felt in her heart. From there, she switched to Aspirin, taking handfuls of pills and increasing the number each night until she lost count.

Nothing worked.

When she thinks about it now, she knows it was abuse, but it took years to make that distinction. Until twenty-seven, she thought it was a relationship gone wrong - nothing more than heartbreak. Now that he is a perpetrator instead of a lover, her anger is placed on him instead of directed at herself. She realizes that she wasn't responsible for what happened, that she was just a little girl. Still, she doesn't feel like that little girl was her. When her therapist at the University of Colorado asked her about her inner child, Brandi responded that she didn't have one. Erin relates it to her compartmentalization of herself, the way she has many selves all neatly cordoned off. When she moves forward, the old self is placed in a box on the shelf. This helps her not be overwhelmed by the trauma, by the memories and the guilt and shame that always trail behind them.

She can tell the stories of her past with little emotion because it doesn't feel like it happened to her. The memories are there but they aren't connected to any emotion. "It's just something that happened," or "it is what it is" are two phrases she has used a lot in the past. But it does matter, otherwise she wouldn't feel the waves of depression slide over her in those still moments,

wouldn't be afraid of being swept away if she just sat with the emotions for a while. Sometimes she cries, though she doesn't know why. Now that she is fighting the compulsion to eat to cover them, she has no choice but to sit with it. If she writes, she can figure out some of what she is feeling, her brain tells her hands to write as though she is tapping into some subconscious spring. It isn't until she goes back to read it that she understands, that she gains some insight. Sometimes the words come so quickly and fluidly she doesn't even recognize herself as the author.

Brandi finishes her dinner and decides to get on the computer. As she sits, Antovis' note again presses into her skin. She unfolds it and rereads it. The person he describes doesn't match the person she thinks she is; she simply does what she needs to in order to survive, a way of thinking that minimizes all of her accomplishments. Then she has an idea, she decides to look Antovis up on the computer, just to see what comes up. He hasn't spoken about his crime yet, the reason he is behind bars. This is something she doesn't ask her students, instead allowing them to tell her if they want to. Usually it comes out in their writing and she remains professional, doesn't comment on the content of the writing but the quality. Those that have told her are guilty of murder. She has trouble

reconciling the men that sit across from her with their crimes. The only result she finds online is the South Carolina Department of Corrections. There, underneath his photo, are the words "Criminal Sexual Conduct with a Minor - Second Degree."

CHAPTER 21

In her quest to get better, Brandi starts seeing a nutritionist. Each meal is measured and weighed, every calorie counted. It is tedious, but she is losing weight. Nick hates it, wishes they didn't have to go through all this hassle just to eat. She doesn't understand how he can want her to lose weight but, at the same time, want her to be able to eat with abandon. It makes her resentful that she has to control her food so severely when others, like Nick, can eat whatever they want and not exercise yet not gain weight. He does help her keep track, even when he is cooking, but he complains about it. She doesn't think she'll ever be good enough for him as he doesn't love her as she is and resents her for trying to become what he desires. Sometimes he even brings her home candy or fast food, something he does whenever she attempts to diet. She wonders if he sabotages her because he's afraid she'll find someone better if she was more attractive.

Tonight she cooks dinner because Nick didn't feel up to cooking. He is finishing up online classes through the community college back home in Colorado, where Brandi received her associates, and is working on a paper that's due in a few hours. She makes spaghetti with Brussel sprouts on the side. When Nick prepares his plate, the serving dwarves her single cup of pasta and half a cup of sauce. It makes her feel deprived. If it keeps up, she knows she will simply quit again and again back the weight she has already lost. It's a depressing thought as she has just bought some new clothes that fit well.

After they eat, Nick goes into the kitchen to get a cold soda. As he reaches in, he knocks a banana off the shelf and it falls dully on the floor. He is bent over, eyes level with the top shelf, when he screams loudly. Brandi, out in the living room grading papers, jumps.

"What, what happened?" she says.

"I dropped a fucking banana on the floor. God damnit. Fuck. I hate when that shit happens," he says.

"You're screaming over a banana?" her anger flares. She is used to him flying off the handle at little things, but it irritates her no less.

"Yes. The fucking thing fell on the floor. It's ruined. Fuck, fuck, fuck," he yells.

"I can't take this, I can't take it when you get like this," she says as she packs up her papers and heads into the bedroom.

Erin told her that her reactions to yelling and loud noises are a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. All Brandi knows is that her brain scrambles, she can't think, only reacts. She lashes out in fear and then turns in on herself, becoming frightened like a small child overhearing her parents arguing. That's when the negative self-talk turns on, almost like a radio station in her head telling her that she's unsafe, that she is a terrible person, that no one wants her. The feeling persists and it is almost nine at night and she still doesn't feel safe. The air conditioner is on high and she is in bed underneath the covers, far removed from the drone of the cicadas which unnerves her. She hates the one-hundred degree heat they've been having and wishes she was somewhere else. Instead, she is in bed, wide-eyed and staring. Her heart pounds and there is no conscious thought, just sensations. It is a bodily knowledge of fear, as though at any moment she will be attacked or her home threatened. Nick comes into the room to check on her.

"You coming back out tonight baby," he says.

"I don't think I can," she says and scoots over

so he can sit down. Bunny snuffles at the disruption and lays his head back down.

"What's wrong?" he sits near her feet and places a hand on her calf.

"I don't feel safe," she says in a small voice, hating herself for acting and sounding like a child.

"What, you think we live in the ghetto or something?" he laughs.

"No, I just get scared when you yell at me. You know that."

"I wasn't yelling at you," he shakes his head.

"You were yelling over a banana falling on the floor. You screamed into the refrigerator. I don't understand why you act like this over little things. I've told you what it does to me and no matter how many times I've asked you to stop, you still do it," she turns her head more toward her pillow.

"I can't help it," he says, "that shit stresses me out."

"Well it stresses me out when you get like this. Have you talked to your therapist about this?"

"No. I mostly talk to her about the depression," he sighs.

"I'd like you to next time you see her. I just

can't take this anymore. I just want to live in peace. Erin said to ask for what I need and I've tried that before, it doesn't work. It's like you don't know how."

"How what?"

"How to give me what I need. You don't intuit it and even asking you doesn't work. It's like you don't care."

"Of course I care," his voice becomes defensive.

"But you told me you don't love me anymore," she says.

"That was months ago," he sits up straight.

"Yeah, and you never took it back or told me otherwise."

"Being in love and caring aren't the same thing," he leaves the room.

She begins to cry, as silently as possible, not wanting him to see her weakness. Eventually, she calls Elise who encourages her to write about it. If she can't get out of bed, Elise reasons, she can at least move her hand on the page. Brandi takes out her paper to get to work, wondering again what she could possibly write about. She decides to write about Jerry again, because she still isn't done with it, because she needs to remind herself that Nick is at least better than Jerry. Perhaps, she

reasons, it will make her feel better about her current situation.

Back in the house in Blende, she often found herself alone in the unfinished living room with its partially textured ceiling and fireplace. The room was bare except for a sofa, a television, and a small table. It was strange to live in a place where there was nothing hanging on the walls, not even curtains over the windows - a far cry from the cross-stitch covered walls of her parents' home. During these times, Jerry, his Uncle Chuck, and Chuck's partner Damian, were back in the bedroom. Whenever she asked Jerry, he wouldn't tell her what they were doing. Instead, she read and waited. They didn't have a phone, cable, or internet so there wasn't much else to do. She was curious, especially when, every so often, she heard muffled voices. When she felt brave, she would tiptoe into the hall and try and listen, but she could never make out what they were saying. He was in there for hours and she got bored, angry. She didn't think they were having sex. If their familial status didn't prevent it, Chuck and Damian's full-blown AIDS would. They were very up front about that, very careful too. They taught them to wash the dishes with bleach water, just in case.

Seeing how it upset her, Jerry finally relented

and told her.

"We're smoking crack in there."

"As in cocaine?" she raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, crack cocaine," he held her wrist firmly as though he was afraid she would run.

"You're joking right? I mean, who smokes crack?"

"We do. I think you'd like. I think you'd really like it if you tried it," he said.

She pulled her arm but he held tight, "Um, I don't know about that. Sounds a lot worse than weed."

"You love me right?"

"Of course," she smiled at him weakly, knew what was coming next.

"I want to share this with you. I love you and if you loved me, you'd at least try it." He released her wrist and took both of her hands in his, staring into her blue eyes. "We don't even have to be with them when you try it. I can make us a pipe out of a tire gauge and we can go in our room, just the two of us."

He knew that she was embarrassed to do things in front of other people. She looked down, uncomfortable with the sustained eye contact, and said "Ok, but just once. If I don't like it, I don't want you pressuring me to do it again."

He smiled and went back into Chuck and Damian's bedroom. Jerry got a small rock from Chuck and she tried to ignore Chuck's smile when he finds out she was going to try it and he put it in the cellophane, a square of cellophane from the bottom of a pack of cigarettes - this was how the dealer gives it to them he explained - and it's just a small bit, like a bright, white pebble sitting there. Jerry and Brandi went to the bedroom where he gutted a tire gauge and stuffed Brillo into one end, just enough that it provided a metal nest for the hit to lie in. They were sitting on the floor, in front of their bunk bed that didn't have a top, and he cut a small sliver off the rock with his black handled pocket knife, the same knife she cut herself with after they fought.

He laid the hit on the steel wool and melted the crack for a few seconds so it doesn't fall out of the pipe. He took the first hit so he can show her how to hold it upright, to suck the flame down into the pipe, to twist the tube so it doesn't get too hot, hot enough to scald her fingertips. He kept it vertical as he handed it to her along with the butane lighter. She couldn't believe she was here, in this tiny room, in this place she essentially ran away to in order to be with Jerry, holding a pipe. Sure, she smoked marijuana, but never imagined doing anything

like this. Their room didn't seem like a crack den, it was just full of piles of clean laundry and her things that she had no place for. It, like the living room, was also empty, in that moment she felt empty - outside of herself as she reached out to take it.

"Hold it up," he said.

She did as he asked, inhaled as she twisted and held the lighter, trying not to screw up, wanting to be an adult at eighteen, to not look stupid or disappoint him. She wasn't thinking about the effects of the drugs or really what she was doing besides the fact that she wanted to please him. She let out a lungful of chalky white smoke and she could smell it, would recognize the smell anywhere. This is his true love, but she didn't know it, only knew that Chuck and Damian were wrong when they told her you could have the most incredible sex on crack. Jerry took one hit and went limp. He tried to have sex with her but cannot get hard. Instead, they sat on the floor and talked to each other. They were up all night just talking. She was not thinking about her body or finding a job.

They had the most intense conversation ever, one she wouldn't recall in the morning, and she was a buoy and the tide of language was carrying her, it pulled her past the wreckage of childhood, and her teenage years, out into

open waters where there was nothing but the sound of wind, the taste of sun, quietness in spite of their speech. *This is home*, she thought. She could live there, would live there even after they had to move into the shed out back where there were mice. Live there even after they spent all their money on rent and drugs. Damian did not give his mother their portion of the rent, lies, says Jerry and Brandi are freeloaders so he could buy more drugs and they traded her one-hundred disc CD player for a seventy dollar rock. And they live there even when their dealer showed up, wanting to cook in the kitchen, used baby food jars and stirred in baking soda with the handle of a crescent wrench as he explained the difference between tight white and honeycomb and her family didn't know, couldn't see that she'd slipped below the surface. And he told her that he loved her and that she did real well.

She realizes that she has drifted off into the poetic again, something Erin says she does when writing difficult material. It's a way of avoidance, but she doesn't want to avoid this. She has dragged the baggage of her past into her present relationship, can see it in the way she cowers when she hears yelling, how she has again lost herself in her partner and no longer knows who she is. That life also led to her new life as a writer. The first

piece she published, in a community college journal, was a thinly fictionalized version of waiting for Jerry while he purchased drugs in a motel room. At the time, she didn't know what nonfiction was, didn't know there was a place for that kind of work or that she could even write about what happened. In a way, she was still living in fear. She turns the page and begins again, thinking back to her wedding night and how she should've know then that it wouldn't work.

They married in August, after only dating for three months. Jerry was going into the Navy despite coming up hot on a urinalysis. He claimed the recruiter fixed it for him but, then again, Jerry was a compulsive liar. He once told her that he only had one lung - a lie she caught him in when he passed his physical to enlist. They only had one week to plan the wedding as he was set to ship out. Their families came down from Colorado Springs for the day. His family wore pastels and her family, without previous discussion, wore all black. Her parents' brought her only good dress, a black velvet, floor length, sack dress with a black glitter rose on the chest. Her shoes were also black, leather with a suede top. Jerry wore a white dress shirt, black suede vest, and black jeans and cowboy boots. Their rings were hand-me-downs from her parents. When he

proposed, just two nights after they met, he didn't have a ring, didn't work enough to ever be able to afford one, and she was ok with that, just wanted to be with him, with someone that loved her.

Damian fixed her hair with baby's breath and miniature pink rose buds from the garden and, as she stood holding hands with Jerry as the justice of the peace spoke, she felt beautiful. Even the slow drone of the justice, almost comical, wasn't enough to ruin her mood. She loved that everyone pitched in to make the wedding happen. Jerry's grandmother, Sharon, paid for the justice and Brandi's mother baked the cake - a sheet cake with a smaller heart layer on top, covered in pink icing with sprinkles. They had a bonfire in the backyard afterwards. Even though it started to rain and Brandi was cold, she glowed. In the photograph of them together, a photograph she would years later leave out in the rain with the rest of the wedding photos, he had his arms wrapped around her and she was off-balance, laughing in the mist that fell as the fire blazed in the background.

It was late evening when Jerry announced, "I'm going to make a run."

"What? With what money?" she asked.

"The sixty dollars," he said and started to put

on his coat. Chuck was behind him and they were ready to walk out the front door.

"You mean our wedding money? We just got that. Your whole family pitched in."

She had already thought about how they could use that money. They were poor, so poor that when she worked her shifts at McDonald's, she had to pick up change in the drive-through to afford the tax on her employee meal. Granted, they'd have more money if it weren't for the drugs, but neither of them could stop. She wasn't sure if she was addicted, more that he was persuasive, in the same way that women found him attractive despite his constant, offensive body odor. She wanted anything to continue to be the object of his love, to have him tell her that he wanted and needed her.

"I'm going to go. I'll be back soon and then we can have some fun," he turned and walked out the front door.

She watched the lights of Chuck's Ford Probe as they pulled away from the house. Hopeful, she thought he would return quickly. She went in the bedroom and put on a black slip with lace along the cups. Lying on their bed, she posed seductively, expecting each set of car lights that passed the house would be him. She only moved to smoke

the occasional cigarette, USAs because it was the only brand she could afford and they came in singles, which helped when times were really rough. It was difficult to pace herself when she was nervous, but she only had a half a pack left. She didn't want Jerry to get angry with her for smoking them all. She didn't like it when he was angry. If she fought him, he would get in her face, call her a cunt, and raise his fist. It was easier if she went along with whatever he wanted, no matter how much it hurt her.

When the car finally pulled back into the gravel driveway, she was asleep. The sound woke her and she turned to look at the alarm clock. It was after midnight - no longer their wedding night. She felt something in her sink, but she tried to hide it when he came into the bedroom.

"Sorry that took a while hun," he said, smiling. "Ron was out of cocaine and had to go buy some to cook. We ended up driving him and ran out of gas. Luckily, some guys in a truck passed by and drove us to the gas station." He took off his coat and placed it on the suitcase that contained his clothes at the foot of the bed.

"I really hoped you'd be here sooner," she said as she watched him pull a plastic covered rock out of his pants pocket.

"It couldn't be helped," he smiled. "Look though,

he gave us extra because of the car issue." He held the rock out to her with his left hand, it sat next to his wedding band, what used to be her father's wedding ring.

She didn't respond, so he sat on the floor and pulled out the tire gauge pipe. "You're not going to smoke that now are you?" she asked.

"Yeah. Come on, you can have the first hit," he patted the carpet next to him.

She remained where she was on the bed. "But...it's our wedding night."

"That's why we're celebrating," he said.

She sighed knowing that now that he had drugs in his hand, he wouldn't be interested in her, in consummating their marriage. As she settled down onto the floor across from him, she was glad that he was enlisting. *Maybe that will keep him clean*, she thought, *maybe that will keep us both clean*. Luckily, she'd be moving back with her family in Colorado Springs in two weeks. Once Jerry finished basic training, she'd move with him and they would start a new life, away from all of this. That's what she held on to that night as she fell asleep, turned away from and untouched by her new husband.

If anything, writing about it makes her feel worse - breaks the wall between her and her past. These are

the things she doesn't like to talk about, keeps hidden. When she does talk about it, her tone is flat, unaffected. Yesterday, when it came up in the writing center she simply said, "My ex got me addicted to crack and we lived in a shed." She shrugged as though it was no big deal. Writing about it means integrating the person she was, the person she hated - sometimes still hates. *At least the second marriage is better*, she thinks. Though even this doesn't feel like a real marriage sometimes.

Nick and Brandi got engaged in February, three months after they started dating. The marriage was delayed until they felt they could afford it. Tired of waiting after a couple of years, she suggested they marry at the El Paso County Courthouse on Cinco de Mayo. It was last minute, but it was a way to make the day special. Her mother and sister were visiting family in Lawton, Oklahoma. Her father offered to come to the courthouse, but she was embarrassed by the thought. Her sister-in-law wore a wedding gown to the courthouse and her in-laws oohed and ahhed at the photographs. Brandi didn't understand the reason for their pride and would have rather died than have her family see her there. Besides, she reasoned with her father, Brandi and Nick couldn't even get the night off of work. They were just going to get married, have lunch, and

go to work. There'd be no ceremony.

She wore a long, flowing pastel green embroidered dress. He wore slacks and a dress shirt. Parking in downtown Colorado Springs was a nightmare, so they used the garage on the corner of Colorado and Nevada Avenues. The weather was warm, so warm they didn't need jackets as they walked toward the mountains, to the west, toward the courthouse. What she didn't know was that in Colorado, an officiant was not needed. They took a number, sat in a grey cubicle like the ones they worked in, handed over the cash, and signed the marriage certificate. No one said any words and they didn't put on their rings, hand-cast Navajo silver and gold bands with wolves on them, until they left. She placed the clear plastic ring boxes in her purse and they made their way the nine blocks up to Jose Muldoon's, a local Mexican restaurant, for lunch.

Her supervisor, Amy, was kind and brought them a cake. In front of their whole team, Brandi and Nick cut the cake together with a plastic knife. They worked the midnight shift and when they got home, he didn't touch her. All she could think about was her last wedding night and how she was essentially going to bed alone. Her marriage didn't feel real, doesn't feel real. In her mind it was more akin to buying a car than promising to spend their

lives together. It was a piece of paper. Neither of them promised anything, a fact that came up when they fought shortly after getting married.

For reasons she can't explain, she's suddenly driven to get up and get on the computer. It's late and she should be getting in bed or, at very least, studying. Nick is downstairs walking the dogs and she's glad. With him always home, she doesn't feel like she has any privacy. Her heart is pounding and her neck flushes. She searches the internet for Jerry and finds a photograph of him with twin infants and his new wife. The breath is stolen from her lungs. She snatches up her phone from the desk and heads into the bedroom to call Elise, her hand shakes as she tries to operate the phone.

"That son-of-a-bitch has kids. Twins!" says Brandi. She hears Nick come in the front door, the deadbolt sliding home, and the jingle of the Bunny's collar.

"Whoa, wait. What? Who?" says Elise.

"Jerry. I looked him up online and found pictures of his wife and kids," she was pacing, something she never did. "We tried for so long to get pregnant. It broke my heart when we couldn't."

"But aren't you glad you didn't get pregnant? He would've leached off of you forever and you wouldn't be

able to get rid of him. Think of how he fucked around on you and used you.”

“I know that. I do.” Tears slip down her face. “It just pisses me off that a piece of shit like that has been blessed with children and you can’t have kids. I don’t even know if I have kids. How is that fair? It’s shit like that that makes it hard for me to believe in God.”

“I get that, and I appreciate that you feel that way. I think the same thing all the time”

“Then how do you deal with it?” Brandi asks.

“I don’t know, I struggle with it. I still don’t have an answer,” says Elise.

After the phone call, Brandi heads into the kitchen to heat up a mini-pizza and drink a glass of milk. She knows she shouldn’t be eating, tells herself that she’s being bad, but she has to fill herself, has to try and fill the void inside of her. She imagines slicing open her abdomen, her stomach, placing something hard inside, perhaps a stone that will keep her full. Somehow her stomach becomes a stand-in for her soul, for an ache she has felt since childhood. Nick doesn’t say anything, but is happy that she is eating junk food because he has an excuse to heat up a pizza of his own afterward. He doesn’t notice her mood, how she eats standing up instead of leaving the

kitchen. She doesn't want to tell him. It's all a jumble in her mind, how she couldn't have children with Jerry, how Nick said they could try but then wouldn't sleep with her - eventually taking it back. This isn't the life she wanted to live. She wants to be happy, or at least content. It isn't that she wants to be a mother anymore, she moved past that into focusing on school and her career, but she has never truly let it go.

CHAPTER 22

It takes her a while to set up the bedroom so she can paint. She's finally taking Erin's advice to do something for herself that doesn't relate to food. She doesn't remember where she got the idea, perhaps from a long ago internet article, but she plans to paint with her body - more specifically, her breasts. It is a way to reclaim a part of her that has been misused by others, to claim her body as her own, and to begin to feel connected again. *Erin would like this, she thinks, remembering how she wanted her to work on being in her body anyway.*

She needs a low, flat surface to work on, so she chooses the bed. The dining table might have worked, but she needs to be alone to do this, can't take Nick seeing her body; she doesn't trust him. When he first moved in, before she lost her house in the housing market collapse, she asked him to stay in the room she made into an office for him while she worked out. He lasted only a few minutes and was out in the hall, watching her. Since then, she only

exercises when he isn't home, which isn't often. She doesn't feel safe exercising in public. Since she's moved to South Carolina, she has been harassed three times by young, frat boys barking at her from their cars. Her flesh, flesh that she thought would protect her from abuse, has betrayed her.

She locks the bedroom door and lays a plastic-backed drop cloth on over her blanket, the blanket Nick gave when they separated, back when they were going to church and wanted to get married by a pastor. He required them to stop sleeping together, to stop living together, and they complied for a time. The pain of separation was too much for both of them. It was strange to see the brilliant white of the cloth on the bed, a white she knew would soon be sullied with paint. The thought bothered her, much like it did when she was a child.

She always liked things to be clean. When her family lived in Virginia Beach, she loved making mud pies. The concrete slabs in their backyard were the perfect place for such messy work. There was a pie pan she used, one given to her by her mother. Using the hose, she turned rich Virginia soil into dark mud. She used her hands, despite the fact that she hated the feel of dirt on her palms. She heaped the mud into the pan and smoothed the top into a

rounded hump. There were red berries growing on bushes near the house. She picked a handful of them to decorate the top. They had to be placed symmetrically though. Not one could be out of place. If one fell and marred the top of the pie, she had to smooth it out again, so she took her time. Her fingers hovered as she found the perfect spot.

The pie was beautiful and wished it was real so she could eat it. When she was finished and the pie failed to magically metamorphose, she dumped the soil back into the yard. Then, with a rag and water, she scrubbed the concrete. This was a part of the process she also enjoyed. She wanted the concrete to be a uniform gray with no stains. When the water dried, the blemishes became visible again. There was no way for her to keep it perpetually wet, though she would have liked to.

She shakes off the thought and places a large canvas on the bed. Her colors are ready, set off to the side. Though her mood is dark, one of extreme sadness, she picks bright colors. Erin always tells her that when she is feeling bad, she should do the opposite of what she would normally do, like wearing bright clothing instead of black and going to class even though she would rather stay home and lay in bed. Most of the colors she has chosen are translucent - Ultramarine Blue, Quinacridone Magenta, and

Hansa Yellow. To these bases, as she doesn't plan on mixing paint on the palette though she learned how in art school before she dropped out, she selects Titanium White, Lamp Black, and all shades of pinks, purples, and sky blues. She avoids green.

She puts on her favorite music, Tori Amos, and tapes the edges of the canvas so she doesn't have to clean up the sides later, then covers the surface with matte fluid medium. With a palette knife, she creates a smooth, even layer. Then she adds texture in small streaks: glass beads suspended in a thick gel. She strips off her clothes and is naked except for her underwear. Normally, she would look down at her large belly, maybe lift it and watch it fall, but she is focused. The air conditioner is up and the coolness bristles against her skin as she makes her first color selections.

The process is one of feeling, of letting the colors guide her and she selects carmine red to begin. She uncaps the plastic tube and whips the thin line of paint about on the canvas, making lines and circles on top of the fluid medium. She does this with each color, working from dark to light - deciding against using black - and simply places the colors where there are gaps. Taking a few steps back, she surveys her work and is satisfied. She approaches

the canvas, flattens her back, and presses her breasts into the paint. It is cold and thick against her skin and the sensation is unnerving at first. As she works, she becomes more comfortable - sometimes dragging and swirling through the pain and sometimes lifting her breasts and pressing down in a stamping motion. She realizes that she must clean the paint off every few minutes in order to keep from muddying the colors.

Once she finishes, she is covered in paint - it is on her chest, her abdomen, and even on her underwear. She laughs at herself and moves toward the doorway. Before she can go to the bathroom to shower, she makes sure, by peeking through the slightly opened door, that Nick cannot see her. She must scrub to get all of the paint off and chides herself for not doing more research on potential issues of paint on the skin. The water, flecked with bits of dry paint and a mixture of colored veins, runs between her toes and she watches it for a long time. Her skin must be exfoliated, again and again, but carefully as it is delicate. As she towels off, she realizes that this is the most she has ever touched her breasts and belly.

"I don't know," she tells Erin the next day in her office, "it was kind of weird."

"Unfamiliar," Erin corrects her.

"Yes, unfamiliar. Still though, the process was interesting and I really like the finished piece."

"I'm so proud of you. How did you even think to do that, to paint that way?"

"I don't know. I'd seen it somewhere before I think. Just something I felt like doing."

It is nearing the end of their session, which is fine as Brandi wants to be outside. The weather is hot but the humidity isn't as bad as normal, meaning she doesn't feel like she is drowning just by breathing. When she crosses the brick walkways of the Horseshoe, she notices the small rose garden is in bloom and she wants to go back and walk through it.

"Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something," Erin makes a point of catching her eye and holding it.

"What?" Brandi furrows her brow.

"Well, I know I mentioned this before, but my internship is ending. I've accepted a job out of state and will be moving next month. I can still see you, for a few more weeks, but you have to decide if you want to keep coming - to transition to someone else. You don't have to answer now, but I have someone in mind and she's here if you'd like to meet her. Whatever you feel comfortable

with.”

Brandi rubs her lower lip, “I’ll meet her. I don’t think it would be smart for me to give up now.”

Erin steps out into the hall and motions for Barbara, a tall, thin woman with straight hair, to come in. Barbara sits in the third chair in the office and Brandi is instantly uncomfortable, not with the woman herself, just by the disruption of the space. It’s just been her and Erin since April. The introduction is quick and Brandi feels comfortable enough working with her, a fact Erin checks just after she shuts the door behind Barbara. She’d, of course, prefer to keep working with Erin, but that’s not a possibility.

Erin sits back down in her chair, adjusting her white, button-up dress shirt. “I just wanted to tell you what a pleasure it’s been working with you. You are willing to do everything I ask, even if it is unfamiliar, and have made some really great progress.”

“Thank you,” she looks down at the grey carpet squares, “it’s been a lot of work.”

“I know, and you’ve come a long way. I don’t normally tell patients this, but when you read what you wrote about Jerry, it really stuck with me. I see a therapist too, as part of my program, and when I told him,

I cried. I just wanted so much to make it better." She sets her clipboard down on the table next to her. "You have a gift and I know you'll do well. Just keep at it."

She sees Erin a couple more times before the transition. It is a sad time for her because she likes Erin and feels like she's done a lot of work. She likes Erin's approach and even Erin as a person. They have similar interests and, had it not been for the therapist-patient relationship, they probably could have been friends.

Perhaps this is a sign that I'm attached, she thinks. But then is it all that bad? Part of the benefit of therapy, as Erin told her many times, is that you have your own personal cheerleader, someone who is on your side, that supports you. There is bound to be some closeness as a result, though, at the same time, there is also a wall of separation.

CHAPTER 23

Barbara is different, older than Erin, a mother figure where Erin was a peer. Her office is filled with books, paintings on the walls, and a canvas bin full of toys. The office is comfortable where Erin's was sparse. It is the difference between an intern and a full-time employee. Barbara smiles widely as Brandi sits down across from her. She chooses the chair closest to the window instead of the bench seat or the other chair alongside the desk. None of her therapists ever said it, but she suspects that they judge her based on what seat she chooses. Brandi eyes the toys as she settles her backpack next to her chair but decides not to pick one up, even though having something to do with her hands would make her less nervous.

"So," Barbara presses her hands together and leans forward, "Erin tells me that you've been dealing with childhood abuse. Do you call what happened to you abuse or is there another word?"

"Um." Brandi's momentarily caught off guard. She hadn't expected to talk about this just yet. "I call it abuse. Some of it, I still have trouble thinking of that way, though I'm much better. I was assaulted when I was older, by my ex-husband."

"Do you see a difference between those two terms - assault and abuse?"

"I don't know," she crosses her leg over her opposite knee and instantly regrets it. She's even more uncomfortable now. "It just seems like abuse is what happens to children. I wasn't a child."

"How old were you?"

"Eighteen."

"Well, I am willing to keep working with you on dealing with some of this, but I have to know that it is where you want to go. You get to dictate how we spend our time."

"I, I still want to work on it. If that's ok. There are so many things that happened and still so much I don't remember. I mean, I guess I'm ok if I don't remember, but I want to deal with what I do."

"That sounds fair. I understand you've been using writing as a tool with Erin."

"I was, yes. I don't know that it always helps. I

mean, when I have my head down and I'm working on it, it hurts and I feel worse. When I look up and can see the bigger picture, I feel better. I lose perspective sometimes though and can't seem to get out of what is immediately in front of me. I'm getting better though," she stares out the window. This is one benefit of Barbara's office; it has large windows that let in the sunlight. Erin's office was inside and felt dark.

"We can work on that together. I'd like to get a sort of idea of the timelines of what happened though. Do you think you can tell me?"

Barbara seems careful with her, even though Brandi can list off the abuses as though reciting a grocery list. When Barbara asks for details, it becomes more difficult. Brandi still has trouble saying "I" and not "her" when she shares the earliest abuse memory, the one in the swimming pool, the fragment that she has already talked through with Erin. She can't seem to reconcile the abused child with the assaulted young woman with the depressed twenty-nine-year-old adult. How is the teenager who didn't think she would ever become anything, who gave up her dreams in an abusive marriage, how is she her, the woman who is getting a Masters degree in creative writing. How is she the same person who gave up everything to move across

the country to pursue her art? It is unfathomable that she can be both. Even her age doesn't betray the path she had to walk to get here as the average MFA student is twenty-seven.

She sometimes feels like an old lady among her cohort though. She is one of the few who is both over twenty-five and married. They like to gather at bars after an 8 p.m. class, but she would rather go home and get into her pajamas. She's a night owl by nature, but she thinks 8 p.m. is too late to be going out. Besides, she is not much of a drinker, usually calling it quits after two beers. Now, with the Cymbalta and the Clonazepam, she doesn't drink at all. Last time she was on medication for depression, she still drank. She isn't sure what the difference is this time, she just seems to care a bit more. Or, at very least, she is not as keen on destroying or sabotaging herself.

Even after months of working with Erin, she still buries herself under obligations, promises, and projects. Everybody wants a piece of her and she will usually give it, though she may resent the imposition on her time later. Still, she likes having things to do, more to do than she can usually get done. There's a folder next to her desk filled with false writing starts, notes, and outlines. In a

tub is the novel, *Caramel Coffee and the Man with No Hands*, that she put away after her boyfriend, Jimmy, essentially tried to rewrite it when she asked him to look over it. She sent him the file electronically. When he sent it back, he had written comments in red text. After every few lines was a paragraph of bloody ink, telling her how he would have written it. She stopped writing. It took her until the end of their relationship, and some months afterward, for her to start writing again. Not until she started living with Nick, after she lost the house.

"What have you been writing about lately?"

Barbara asks.

"Oh, I don't have it with me. I was writing about John, he was, well..." she pauses, unable to find a scaffold in language from which to begin.

"Ok," says Barbara, "I want you to take a couple of deep breaths." Brandi straightens, feet flat on the floor, feels the breath enter her and expand in her chest.

"There, now, can you tell me how old you were?"

"Fifteen."

"Ok, and who was John?"

"Well, I was part of a group called Earth Spirit Pagans. I needed a ride to their meetings and they put me in touch with John. He offered to drive me out there," she

says.

"Tell me about him?"

She closes her eyes, "He was in his fifties, had grey hair and liver spots. He was married."

"And his wife?"

"She came with us to a meeting once. I didn't see her after that."

"When he abused you, was it a one time occurrence or did it happen multiple times?"

"Just once."

"What happened? Where were you?" Barbara asks.

"He took me shopping in Old Colorado City. He taught me how to find power stones and bought me an obelisk of amethyst. We went back to his house because he wanted my help setting up a youth study group," she stares over Barbara's left shoulder.

"And then what happened?"

"Well, I was getting ready to leave and when we got to the bottom of the stairs. I grabbed the doorknob and he reached around and pushed the door shut. I think I started to turn. I got turned around...somehow. I don't know, but he was facing me," her tone is even.

"You were trapped?"

"Yes, I couldn't move and I just froze," she

says.

"And then?"

"It's like all I could see was his face, it was huge and he leaned in and his breath smelled like rotting leaves and he kissed me."

"Did he do anything else?"

"Um, he touched my breast. I didn't remember that part until I was writing about it, but I know it happened." She looks down at her chewed up fingernails. "And then I don't remember anything else, like there's a gap and I'm back in the car with him and he's driving me home."

"You don't remember at all?"

"No, I was still dressed so... He made a comment in the car that he wanted to see what was underneath my t-shirt. I just kind of stared out the window until I got home."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Yeah. I mean, he kept calling the house and I wouldn't answer so my parents asked me what happened and I told them. My dad answered the next time he called. I don't know what he said to him, but John didn't call again."

"You don't remember what he said?"

"No, I was in my bedroom, hiding. I didn't want to hear the conversation. It made me uncomfortable."

Barbara waits a few moments before speaking. "How do you feel after telling me that?"

She shrugs, "I don't know, it is what it is. I can't change it."

"Do you think this helps?"

"I guess. I mean, I don't think I'll ever get over everything that's happened. I keep telling myself that it was just a little thing, but it really wasn't. It made me afraid of older men for a long time. I had nightmares."

"That's a common reaction," Barbara says as she leans back. Writing and talking does help though. But, as I said, it's going to get worse before it gets better and I want to make sure you are taking care of yourself. This is difficult work and most people don't even make it into therapy. The fact that you're here means you are ready to start dealing with it."

"I'm trying," she chuckles and then catches herself. She'd been called out previously for inappropriate laughter in therapy. It is a defense mechanism, one she uses whenever she is uncomfortable. "I just hate that I can't remember. What if something really bad happened?"

"Wasn't what happened bad?"

She shrugs her right shoulder, "I suppose. It's just when I'm in the survivors group, the other girls went

through things that were much more...violent."

"You can't compare your experience to others. It is equally as valid."

"I just think that it always could've been worse. Like I don't have a reason to complain. That I should be over all this already."

"That doesn't seem very fair to yourself. It sounds like you are invalidating your experience. I want us to start working on these core beliefs. Usually they start in childhood, as a way of coping. The problem is when children that have experienced trauma enter adulthood, they aren't able to just give them up, no matter how unfounded the beliefs are." Barbara leans forward, hands steeped in her lap, "How do you feel about working on it?"

"I guess it'd be a good thing," she replies, though she feels little hope that she can change. These beliefs - of worthlessness, of not deserving happiness because of her weight, of being fundamentally flawed - were rooted, spread like coral, they had a life of their own, overcame her waking mind.

CHAPTER 24

Her heart is pounding, a pressure like she is being pulled underwater, the moment she opens her eyes. Her chest is tight and she feels the heat rising on her neck. She never knows what to do when this happens - stay in bed and feel the rocking of her pulse in her ribcage or get up and take a shower. Her preference is to stay in bed, but today she must get up, rush to get ready and head to Kirkland Correctional to tutor. The alarm goes off a second time and she moans.

"Baby," says Nick, "don't you need to get up?"

"I don't want to," she rolls over, kicking off the blankets and trying to avoid the light that filters in the bedroom from the large windows in the living room.

"It's hot. I'm hot and I don't feel like going."

"Well, can you call off sick?" he turns toward her but doesn't reach out to her. Even in the dim light, she can tell he needs a haircut.

"No. I don't even know who I'd call."

"Why don't you want to go?" he asks.

"My heart's pounding again. And, I don't know, I just don't feel like it anymore."

"Why not? You love what you do."

"It's a long drive and I'd rather just stay in bed all day. I'm exhausted. I've been working so much." And she has. Between tutoring, classes, and homework, she feels like she no longer has time for herself. Things that she used to love, like reading, become work. "Going in there, even just crossing the yard is emotionally exhausting. Reading their stories takes a lot out of me. It's like I go work for three hours and when I get home, I can't do anything else. It takes me the whole day to recover."

"At least it's Friday," he says. "You don't have to be anywhere this weekend."

"That doesn't mean I don't have a ton of shit to do."

"Come on," he sits up. "I'll make you breakfast."

"There better be bacon," she laughs and sits up, "and coffee."

Despite drinking two cups of coffee, she is still tired when she heads out to the prison. Her heart stops pounding and for that she is glad. Still, she can't seem to shake the feeling that a fog of sorts has descended. It is

difficult for her to think straight and she catches herself frowning when she checks her rearview mirror.

As she walks into the library, she's greeted by several students. They are always happy to see her, even if it is just to see what she is wearing. They call people from the outside "free people" and marvel at different kinds of clothing, especially jeans. Many of them haven't worn street clothes in years. Despite this desire, she is surprised that none of them write descriptions of clothing in their memoirs. Instead, most of them focus more on dialogue, on summary. She sees in them the seeds of beginning, of starting out. When she first began writing, she too compacted too much into a single story, didn't focus on details and setting. Still, their stories are raw and gripping and she wonders if this is what her mentors saw in her early work.

The library is emptier today than normal, with half of the students in class and a good number busily typing away in the computer lab. They are trying to finish their stories for finals. Though she is glad for the quiet, it makes her time drag on. One of the senior aides brings her coffee, sweetened and with cream the way she likes, but drinking it makes her hot and her mouth sticky. Lauren was smart and brought a book. Brandi browses the titles on the

shelf and, finding nothing that strikes her fancy, goes over to the window. The seagulls are active today, diving, swooping, and circling. She wonders what the men think about the birds. If it were her, she imagines it would make her sad to see such freedom.

Toward the end of her shift, Antovis approaches. She takes a seat at one of the long tables under the windows. He has no papers with him but smiles broadly.

"I already turned in my piece," he says as he sits across from her.

"Great. How did it turn out?"

"Good, I think. I want to keep working on it. I have more to say," he smiles at her.

"Well, keep writing. You have a gift for it," she says as she straightens the legal pad on the table in front of her. "You've been smiling a lot lately."

"I feel good. I feel real good. You know," he looks down at his hands, "it's because of you. Talking to you has really helped me. I can't stop smiling."

"I don't know about that. You're the one doing the work, that's the hard part. I'm glad that you're feeling better. Not too long ago, you weren't in a very good place."

"I need to tell you something," he rubs his hands

together. "Something you probably guessed a while ago, with your female intuition."

She cocks an eyebrow, "What?"

"I'm in love with you. I had to tell you. I wanted to tell you last week, but we didn't get a chance to meet. You're just so beautiful and smart. You've really helped me. I was in a bad place, so low, hating life. But then you came along and changed that. I can't stop smiling and singing. I'm sure you knew."

"I had no idea. I don't really know what to say," she pauses. "You know I'm married."

"I know, but I can't help it."

"Antovis, I don't want this to ruin your progress or anything, but I can't be that for you. I'm flattered, but I can't."

His face falls, "You didn't even guess?"

"No, I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say," she says as she shifts in her seat. She just wants the conversation to be over with, to be back in the car with the air conditioner on high.

"It's ok. Can we still work together?"

"Sure. I'll be back after the break. Just sign up."

As she watches him walk away, slouch shouldered,

she feels a whirlwind of emotions. *All that time*, she thinks. How much of it was related to him wanting to be with her. She isn't even sure she believes in love anymore, but she is even more uncomfortable with the thought of Antovis loving her. He is her friend, or so she thought. It is a betrayal of her friendship, though she wonders if she is being fair. She discounts his feelings because she is one of his few options. Like, if he'd been out in the world, he wouldn't have chosen her. Suspicion rose in her and she isn't sure if it has to do with the present situation or more with her past experiences. Either way, she is unsettled and knows that things wouldn't be the same.

As she drives down I-22 towards her home downtown, she replays the conversation in her mind, tries to remember previous conversations looking for signs but struggles. When she thinks of working at the prison, the days blend together and it is difficult for her to make distinctions between one week and the next. She wonders if this is how her students felt too with their regimented lives - always the same routine with few changes. Perhaps this is what drew him to her, that she is different and represents a world he will not see again until his sentence is up in 2017.

Her radio doesn't work, hasn't worked since the day she left Colorado, and she detests the silence today more than ever. She just wants to get home, to eat and maybe take a nap. *God, she thinks, what I wouldn't do for a cigarette.* And she's surprised by this thought as she hasn't smoked in ten years. Not since Jimmy.

She met Jimmy at work, when she was at one of her lowest points in her relationship with Jerry. Jerry had destroyed the house, destroyed what she had been working for. The toilet overflowed and, instead of getting a shop vac to clean up the water, he tore out the carpet in the guest bathroom, hallway, bedroom, and part of the living room. The floor was bare plywood, covered with sharp staples he hadn't bothered to remove. The wet carpet was thrown out on the lawn. The other bedroom, one he decided he was going to move into because they were having problems after she caught him using the webcam for internet sex with strangers, he had torn the closet out of, wrecked the drywall, and scraped all the popcorn texture off the ceiling without replacing it. He was good at tearing things down but never at building them back up again.

When she met Jimmy, she'd simply offered to teach him how to drive. He was over thirty and she knew what it was like to have to wait a long time to get a license.

She'd just received hers when she turned twenty-one and bought the house. It wasn't until they were driving in the mountains, when they came across a deer in the darkness on a winding road, that she realized she wanted to date him. She'd never been shown the kindness he showed her, had never been treated like she was important, let alone special. When she got home, she decided it was time to break it off with Jerry once and for all, to tell him that she wanted to date someone else.

Brandi and Jimmy were together for three years, though she could only recall certain moments from their time together. It was comfortable and, much like her unhappy times, her happy times blended together making it hard for her to distinguish time.

"You know what I thought when I first saw you?" said Jimmy as he sat next to her on the sofa. His red hair, which reached the base of his neck, was pulled up in a ponytail. He needed a shave, with considerable growth on his neck.

"What?" She hated those kinds of lead-ins, was convinced that whatever followed was likely bullshit.

"That you were very beautiful," he caught her eye and smiled.

"Ya?" she smiled but, at the same time, felt her

stomach clench. She knew what was coming.

"Yep," he paused to take a drag off of his cigarette. "What'd you think when you first saw me?"

She looked up for a moment then replied, "I thought you had a really long face."

In a way, she regretted her answer, wished she was kind enough to lie to him, but she prided herself on being genuine. Her mother always says of her "If you don't want an honest answer, don't ask Brandi." Jimmy didn't seem too hurt, puzzled maybe, and he did laugh.

"Well," he said, "that was honest."

What she couldn't really say to him but wanted to say was that he gave her the strength she needed to leave Jerry. That night, when she sat out on the back porch in the snow, when she told him that she told Jerry it was over, he was there for her. He'd put himself in the middle of a situation for her. A situation that could've easily become dangerous. Jerry left the next morning, decided to hitchhike to his father's house in Denver. As he prepared to leave, to take those last few steps out the door that she so desperately wanted him to take, he stepped toward her. His face was red. It wasn't sadness, but anger, an anger she knew all too well.

"You're nothing but a fucking cunt," he screamed

into her face. He pushed open the glass door with such force that she braced herself for the impact, was sure the door would hit the side of the house and the glass would shatter.

And Jimmy was there, there to pick up the pieces of her broken life, to help her begin to find herself again - a self who was lost in trying to please Jerry for so many years, for failing because nothing was ever good enough for him. Jimmy helped her realize that the problem hadn't been her and she appreciated his gentleness, how he never seemed to stress out, didn't get in her face, and didn't raise his hand to threaten her or sleep with her friends. Instead, they wrote short stories together through work email. He introduced her to the works of Kurt Vonnegut, Jonathan Lethem, and Philip K. Dick. He shared his love of Japanese literature and she fell in love with Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto, while she fell in love with him. He even taught her a few Japanese words from the dictionary he was studying.

She hadn't thought about Jimmy in years. What she remembered most was taking care of him when he had pilonidal cysts. She helped drain the line of holes that ran down his tailbone while he waited to see a doctor. As it worsened, she convinced him to go in and he had to have

surgery.

"Are you ready for me to change the bandages?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said and followed her into the bedroom.

He was standing and, though she used the saline to dampen the gauze, he almost passed out when she tried to pull it out. She caught him before he could fall and sent him to lie on the bed. Carefully, she poured saline solution into the open wound, it was deep and had to heal from the inside out.

"Ok," she said, "I'm going to try this again. Take a deep breath."

She was calm and didn't react as the gauze came loose and she could smell the raw flesh. He winced, but didn't react the same way this time. She packed the opening with fresh gauze and told him to lie on the bed for a while. He said he loved her, appreciated her, and she felt it in that moment. Given everything they had gone through, and the fact that they had talked about marriage, she was surprised when he broke up with her.

"I want to start smoking again," he said as he stood near the doorway.

She was lying on the couch, under a blanket. Her

chest ached from the chronic bronchitis. After two weeks of using nicotine patches, she had finally quit smoking. Her lungs felt worse as they cleaned themselves after years of cigarettes. She didn't have health insurance and only agreed to go to the hospital when she couldn't take more than three steps without coughing, doubling over. Still, she went to her painting class and then went to the emergency room.

"I don't know if I can live with a smoker," she said. "My health can't take it. I need to stay quit this time."

"Well then," he said as he grasped the latch on the glass door, "I guess we can't be together."

And that was it. He didn't want to talk about it, moved into the other room, and agreed to help her with the mortgage. To her, it was another instance of losing someone without the respect of an explanation, a valid reason.

She is relieved to be home and is glad that the elevator is working again. All she needed was to have to walk up three flights of stairs. As she enters the apartment, she hears the blender roaring. Knowing she would be hungry when she got home, Nick makes her a peanut butter and honey sandwich and a smoothie. She stands watching him for a moment as he finishes and pours the thick liquid into

a glass.

"Well, how'd it go?" Nick asks her as he hands her the plate.

"Boring. And something happened today," she sits on the couch heavily.

"What?" He brings her smoothie and sets it down on the coffee table in front of her.

She sighs, "One of my students told me he loves me today."

"Really?" he asks.

"Really."

"Was it Antovis?"

"How'd you know?" she raises an eyebrow.

"He's the only one you talk about by name," he shrugs. "So what'd you do?"

"Told him I was married and I couldn't be that for him. It was really uncomfortable."

"Good. Well, good that you told him that. I'm sorry that happened," he says.

"I just feel stupid for thinking that I could go in there as a person and not a woman. Stupid." She rests her glass on her forehead for a few moments, enjoying the cool.

"I wouldn't call it stupid," he sits next to her.

"It's just something you should probably keep in mind from now on." He looks at her outfit, taking in the sweater with black camisole underneath, skirt, and heels. "Is that what you wore?"

"Yeah. I've been dressing like this for a while."

"Maybe you should go back to jeans. I'm just saying, don't encourage them."

She is hurt by his comments. Recently, she started losing weight and is trying to take better care of herself. She fixes her makeup, stops biting her nails, gets a haircut, and tries to be more aware of what she is wearing. He is also saying it is all her fault, at least that's how she takes it. She was becoming someone better, only to be criticized for it. Perhaps she is being sensitive - knows she is sensitive to comments about her appearance.

"Ok honey. I'll go back to wearing jeans and long-sleeve shirts," she says as she turns the television on.

After her lunch, she lays down in the bed. She cries quietly, trying not to draw attention to herself. Antovis' confession bothers her. She had just come to terms with his crime, a crime he admitted to her - though thankfully not in detail - the week prior. She wonders if

there is something in her that draws the wrong kind of attention. What did he expect to come from the situation anyhow? The bedroom door opens and she is broken from her thoughts, the repeating thoughts that may not have stopped otherwise.

"Honey," Nick pokes his head around the corner.

"Are you ok?"

"No," she says. She is facing the door and he has full view of her.

He draws back the covers and lies with her in bed, his hand on her side. "Is this about what happened today?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry that happened to you. I don't like that it happened. It pisses me off," he says.

"Why?"

"Because you're married and it's inappropriate."

"I know. I guess I was too trusting. I made a mistake," she says. Her throat aches and she tries not to cough.

"No, that was on him." He turns over onto his back and lets her cuddle with him. "At least you're leaving for New Mexico next week. Hopefully things will be better when you get back."

"Hopefully. I just knew I didn't want to go in today. I wish I hadn't," she says.

"How much longer do you have to tutor for?"

"Um, all of next school year, but he graduates in December."

"Well," he says as he strokes her long hair, "hang in there. Be firm about it."

"I will," she replies, decides to peel off the changes, to go back to the familiar. In a way, it was a vindication of a core belief, a belief that led her as a child to eat as a way to protect herself from the abuse. She'd been taught that if she was fat, no one would love her and she didn't want the love she was receiving at the hands of men. As an adult, she still overate out of habit and anxiety, but also because part of her didn't want the attention of men. She decides to stop dieting, to stop fixing her hair and nails altogether. There was no safe space and no acceptance from her husband.

CHAPTER 25

Brandi wants to stretch her legs but doesn't dare get up on the long flight to Colorado Springs. Elise is moving to New Mexico for graduate school and Brandi is coming out to help. She booked a window seat and is now turned sideways, with her arms folded in front of her, trying to take up as little space as possible. She feels bad for the people who have to sit next to her, can feel the press of the seatbelt in her low belly and wishes she had asked for an extender. Though those around her have gotten up to use the restroom, she is too embarrassed to squeeze out of her seat and walk sideways down the aisles. In her mind, she hears what her mentor, Becky Thompson, said to her about it. "Why is it automatic to criticize the people who use public spaces and not to criticize the spaces themselves? I guarantee you aren't the only one with that problem." This doesn't change the space or her negative feelings toward herself.

Other than feeling trapped in her seat for hours, the flight to Colorado is uneventful. Her parents arrive

in their red SUV to pick her up and take her back to their house. She is thankful it is summer and the evening is still warm. She was spoiled by the weather in South Carolina and could no longer tolerate the cold as well as she had previously. Then again, she never really tolerated the cold very well. Her hands and feet were like ice and her hips and backside would be chill to the touch. In order to get warm, she had to take long, hot baths or showers and, even then, she often went to bed freezing. Tonight is pleasant though, with a gentle breeze that tousles her hair playfully.

Her parents aren't happy with the length of her stay in Colorado, just three days to help Elise and her husband, Kai, pack before driving down to Albuquerque. She is desperate to return to the Southwest, a place that inspires her to paint and write. In her carryon, she has a plastic, turquoise typewriter that arrived damaged from eBay. There is a typewriter repair business - John Lewis Mechanical Antique Repair and Restoration - one of the few she could find in the States, in Albuquerque, and she has a special trip planned there to get it fixed. Beyond that, Brandi just wants to be surrounded by the colors and the art of New Mexico, to see the Yucca plants and cacti dotting the road, and the sandy soil reaching out into the

distance. Last time she was in Santa Fe, she went to the Georgia O'Keeffe museum where she discovered that O'Keeffe painted abstracts as well as oversized flowers and animal skulls. It was a magical experience for her, one that solidified her desire to be a painter. She remembered when she first started painting, purchasing a fifteen dollar kit from Wal-Mart and how one of her friends called her "a budding Georgia O'Keeffe." To her, the Southwest represents possibility in a way the West and the South doesn't.

First though, she has to get through the Colorado portion of the trip. She missed the way the Colorado Springs nestled against the base of Pikes Peak, the way you could always find your way if you could see the mountains in the west, the way the pine trees smelled, and even the sense of danger. Out here, nature didn't meander like it did in the South. There was very real danger of encountering bears and mountain lions. Her friend, Shantelle, carried a large can of bear mace - more closely resembling a bicycle pump - with her whenever she hiked. Brandi remembered days where school alerts came out from the University of Colorado because a mountain lion had been spotted on the walking paths behind the campus, which was on top of a bluff. Here, nature is humbling.

She is also nervous about returning to her

parents' house, just two doors down from where Greg lived. Though he had long ago moved away, just the thought of seeing the home, which matched her parents' in layout and style, makes her stomach hurt. The women in her sexual abuse/assault group talk a lot about triggers, things that brought back unpleasant, and often debilitating, emotions. She wonders if this will be a trigger for her or if she is just being dramatic, just wanting to feel something, to have the same outpouring of emotion. It isn't that she doesn't feel at all, just that the emotions are blunted.

When she arrives at the house, she is focused more on having dinner that her father has prepared and catching up with the family before bed. They sit around watching the Lord of the Rings films, something her parents did regularly. They came in from the north side of the street so she didn't see Greg's house anyway. She isn't sure if her lack of reaction represents her moving on, processing what happened, or that she still hasn't dealt with it, still hasn't assimilated the experience.

In the morning, she comes into the computer room where her parents are playing Farmville and eating breakfast. She hasn't slept well, even with her sleeping meds. Every hour or so, she rolled over, which caused the full size bed to creak dreadfully, and checked the time on

her phone. She wanted to sleep, especially after flying, but just couldn't seem to.

"So what have you been working on?" her mother asks.

"I'm writing my thesis. It's about the abuse and going through therapy," she takes a sip from the coffee her father brought her.

Her mother frowns, her skin creasing around her mouth. "The abuse?"

"The sexual abuse."

"You know, I still see Greg's grandparents at Wal-Mart. I don't say anything about it though. They've been having problems with him for years. I can't remember where they said he was last."

She doesn't like the fact that her mother has spoken to them and, even worse, didn't tell them about the abuse. It is hard for her that no one had been held accountable for what happened to her. "You should tell them he molested me when I was twelve."

Her father bristles in his chair. The word makes him uncomfortable, a combination of hurt and anger. She guesses it is also a sense of powerlessness, just as she is powerless to change the past.

"I wish you would've told us. If we had known

what was going on..." her mother says.

"I didn't know there was anything to tell. He had me convinced it was a relationship. Besides, I was abused by several people."

"You said several people, do you remember who?" her mother asks after a long pause.

"I don't know, I remember bits and pieces. There was John, Jason, Heath, Greg, those were later. The earlier stuff I don't know. There are blank spots when I try to remember. The only early memory I have is a fragment, but something was going on. I knew what sex was early on and wanted to kill myself when I was five," she says as she finishes her coffee. She didn't mean to drink it so quickly, but when she is nervous, she sips rapidly. "I've been working with my therapist on it. Trying to deal with it. It's hard."

"And what if you think you remember something that didn't happen. What if she convinces you it was your father?" she looks Brandi in the eye.

"It's not like that. She isn't hypnotizing me or something, and you're thinking of false memory syndrome. I know it wasn't dad," she says.

"We just worry about that," her father says.

"That was a problem in the nineties. My therapist

isn't planting ideas, we just talk about things and when I talk about them, sometimes I remember more. Except for that one time."

"What one time?" her mother asks.

"In the swimming pool. Somebody touched me in a swimming pool. It was a man. That's all I know. I couldn't see his face."

"A swimming pool. Hmm...where were we at when you would've gone to a swimming pool?"

Her parents discuss it for a few moments, not coming to a resolution. The conversation makes Brandi uncomfortable, but she doesn't say anything. She feels sadness wash over her in waves. She will never know everything that happened, yet feels it is her right to remember.

"I don't remember a lot of things from childhood," she says. "Even things like you singing to me, which I'm sure you did. It makes me sad. I think it's part of why I pulled away so much."

"Well," says her mother, "you were always good at hiding things. We had no idea."

Her father says, "I don't like that you don't remember those things. I feel like we failed you as parents."

Back in her room, she tries to forget the conversation and the loss she feels over her childhood. In blocking out pain, she knows, she also blocks out joy. Surely there were happy moments. Her mother teaching her to bake her first cake - chocolate with chocolate frosting and dinosaur shaped sprinkles in soft, sweet pastels - playing on the neighbor's slip and slide, the dresses mom used to sew for her - she loved them, Elise hated them. There are photos of her smiling, of being held by her parents, of playing with her siblings. Where do all these memories reside? She thinks if she could just remember the good, the emotional truth of her childhood may shift, might be more balanced, instead of being overwhelmed by the bad. If she could only raise the good.

Inside the house in Virginia Beach, she remembers bits and pieces: how the family watched Polly Anna every Thanksgiving and she stuffed herself sick on turkey. How she used to put ice cubes in a rag and chew on it, grinding them under her teeth. Drinking chocolate soda for the first time and vomiting in the middle of the kitchen floor because she couldn't find the mop bucket (it was under the step-stool). Glo-worms, Popples, Cabbage Patch Dolls, and those ugly stuffed toys that were supposed to be windows (Pillow People). Playing Peter Pan but she had to be Wendy,

Elise got to be Captain Hook and Howard got to be Peter and Brandi had to be the one rescued. How Howard slid down the blanket they tied from the top bunk to her day bed and how the blanket dropped out from under him and how he split his head open on the floor. How the greatest gift she received was a refrigerator box and markers. She made a candy shop and lived/worked inside of it. Watching Creep Show in her parents' room and walking downstairs in the dark, thinking giant Venus fly traps would spring from the floor to eat her. How the power went out once and mom used a ceramic cookie magnet as a candleholder and how Howard got hot wax dripped on our head. The neighbors fire and how the boys from next door were at the kitchen table eating their cereal the morning it happened and she walked down the stairs in a dress like she was some kind of princess and wanted to make sure they thought she was beautiful. The neighbor children that taught her to dumpster dive and all of the treasures they reclaimed from the trash. Her mother giving away their Alvin and the Chipmunks toys because the voice-boxes no longer worked. How she thought toys came to life if she just shut her eyes and learning to ride a bicycle and getting a porcelain doll from her grandmother all the way from Oklahoma. And how she and her siblings used Frisbees to slide across the wet kitchen floor. It's

like a tidal wave, like a flood that she can only wade through, can't disentangle the lines. When did these things happen? They all drift together, providing little insight.

In bed that night, she again can't sleep, instead searches her memory for more pieces but finds nothing.

CHAPTER 26

After three days of packing, she awakes with a terrible migraine and back pain. Today they are leaving for Albuquerque. The three of them, Elise, Kai, and Brandi, each driving a vehicle the five hours down Interstate 25. Before they set off, Kai gives Brandi a muscle relaxer and something for her head. The city flies by and she is soon passing long stretches of dry soil, thanks to the several years long drought they have had. It's hot but nowhere near as humid as South Carolina. Just before she reaches Pueblo, after an hour of following behind Elise's car, her head starts to feel foggy and she is suddenly very drowsy. The traffic is bad and she has trouble remaining focused. Then she passes the exit to Chuck and Damian's house, the new house they lived in after Brandi and Jerry left, the house where she last relapsed.

Jerry went into the Navy, but his service was short lived. When he arrived at Great Lakes Naval Station, just inland of Lake Michigan, the weather was already

bitterly cold. Before he enlisted, he was told he would be able to spend Christmas with his new wife - a deciding factor for him. Three weeks passed, and the sister unit that was supposed to begin with his had not yet arrived. He called her with the news one evening, before lights out.

"Our sister unit just arrived. That means we finally get to start training," he said.

"So you've just been sitting around waiting?" She was in the bedroom at her parents' house, where she was staying until he got stationed somewhere and she could join him. She held the chunky, white cordless phone close to her ear.

"Yeah. They said I won't be home for Christmas. Fucking bullshit. They fucking promised me. I don't know what to do. I just want to walk out." His voice was raised and she worried, knowing what he was capable of when he was angry.

"It's ok baby. We'll get through this. You can do it. There will be other Christmases." She was trying to be strong for him though it hurt her that he wouldn't be there.

"No. It's not ok. They promised. I hate it here. They make us stand in the cold for hours and stay up all night. This sucks," he said.

"I'm sorry honey," she said. "Just remember, you are doing this for us, so we can have a good life together."

He made it through the first few weeks of training and decided he'd had enough. One evening, he decided to just walk off the base and head to the Metro Rail station a mile and a half away. As he waited at the station, he breathed heavily, anxious at being found. Two officers passed him by and he was thankful that they didn't notice that he was out after hours.

"I did it, I left," he said. He was at a payphone, waiting for the train.

"What do you mean you left?" she said.

"I had to spend Christmas with you. I walked out," his voice was cheery.

"I don't understand. How could you just leave? What's going to happen?"

"I went AWOL and they'll probably just put me out after I turn myself in."

"When will that be?"

"I'm not going back until after Christmas. I have other good news too."

"What?" She was sitting on the bed in her nightgown, too startled to move.

"I found out my brother's here in Chicago. I'm going to take the train to his place and stay there for a while."

"I'm glad you found him, but I thought you were coming home." Her eyes stung and she played with the hem on her flannel nightgown.

"Yeah. I just need to see him for a while. I haven't seen him in years."

"How long is a while?" she asked.

"I don't know, a few days."

He had to go; the train had arrived and he was off to see his brother. Brandi took several minutes to move, several minutes to absorb what he said, and that he wasn't even coming home to her. She dreaded telling her father, who was retired Army. Shame and embarrassment washed over her. She thought things would be different now that he went in the military, now that they were no longer on drugs. Part of her also didn't trust him. He told her how female soldiers were hitting on him and telling him "what happens in basic training, stays in basic training." It made him happy and he told her that she was lucky he wasn't like that. Coupled with the fact that he had left and wasn't coming right home, she wasn't sure what she could believe or expect. The life that he promised her was

snatched away in an instant.

He called infrequently after that, staying on with his brother for weeks. She had no way to reach him, knew he was back on drugs, could tell from the way he spoke to her. He actually went AWOL twice, both times facing a Captain's Mast, until they put him out of the Navy for good. He returned to her parent's home where they stayed for a while but eventually left because he would get angry and scream obscenities in her mother's face. Brandi had no choice but to go with him, or so she felt. They moved to a run-down apartment near the McDonald's on Platte and Murray, where she worked. Jerry was often between jobs, quitting after not getting promoted to management in a ridiculously short period of time or for some other illogical reason. With so little income, and Jerry often stealing what little she had to buy toys at the nearby Pawn Shop, they didn't travel much. She started but then dropped out of community college because the bus system was unreliable and she was already exhausted from working.

When Chuck and Damian called offering to pick them up for the day, they jumped at the chance to get out of the city. Though she had left on good terms, Jerry had not and she hoped this would be a time where he could reconcile, if he could only keep his anger in check. They

rode down with Chuck in his white Ford Probe, the same car they'd taken on numerous drug runs just a year earlier.

The worst one was when she went with Jerry to a drug dealer's hotel room. The rooms were all in a row in a long, low to the ground building that reminded her of the Bates Motel. She didn't know the dealer's name, only that he wasn't one of their regulars. The room was non-descript, mostly shades of brown and dark red with an old glass lampshade over a dining table. To their left was a bed on which a young blonde lay. Brandi couldn't see her face and paid her little attention; she simply wanted to get what they came for and get out. The dealer, a man known to them only as J, was wearing a leather jacket and standing by the entryway.

"I've gotta go get some supplies," he said. "You wait here, I'll be back."

So Brandi and Jerry sat at the table and waiting. Minutes passed and they were bored. The woman never moved, but it never crossed either of their minds to check on her. On the table was the dealer's pipe, a slender glass tube - broken at one end and filled with dark resin. Jerry picked up the pipe.

"What are you doing," Brandi whispered and looked about the room.

"We're waiting, we might as well smoke," he said.

She watched as he scraped the resin out of the pipe, loaded it back in and took a hit. He held it out to her and she took a hit too.

Then they were back in Chuck and Damian's house, a year after they'd gotten clean. The four of them walked through a neighboring park, not returning until dusk, when the mosquitoes had become unbearable and Brandi's skin stung with large red welts. She noted an odd tension as they reached the house but didn't understand until Jerry held her hand, keeping her from entering the house with the others.

He smiled at her, "They want to smoke, and they want to share.

She shifted her weight, the wood boards of the porch creaking beneath her feet, "I don't know."

"C'mon. It'll be fun. It's just this once, promise. We'll leave after." He ran his thumb over her fingers.

She turned her head, looked through the window and saw Chuck and Damian watching her through the dimly colored stained glass. When she looked back at Jerry, he had that same pleading look he had whenever he asked her to do something she was uncomfortable with. She was willing to

do anything for him though, and he knew it. As soon as she nodded in agreement, Jerry gave them a thumbs up. He dropped her hand and walked inside.

The four of them sat around the dining table. Brandi scanned the new house, taking in the white cabinets and canary yellow plates displayed just above. It was much bigger than the old house but still had a feeling of emptiness. She wasn't sure if it was the lack of wall hangings or something else.

"Have you ever shot gunned" Damian asked as he held a cut down straw aloft.

She shook her head and simply watched as they loaded a pipe and began to portion out hits, so they'd know how much they had. It was oddly sensual, the straws locking their lips together as the smoke moved from one person's lungs to the other; the four of them locked together in their addiction. The energy was electric and it made her body tingle. It was late that night when they headed back to the Springs, full of hope for the renewed relationship.

As she crosses the state line, after what seems like hours of staring at the back of her sister's car, Brandi becomes drowsier and starts to swerve in the vehicle. She turns on the air-conditioning and turns up the volume on the radio. Soon, they'll be stopping, just before

entering the Raton Pass and she is ready for it, ready to move and feel like she is back in her body again.

CHAPTER 27

As she leaves Albuquerque, she realizes how easy it would have been to stay with Kai and Elise, how strange it feels to be going home, how in just one short week she has adapted to this place, their lives. It would be easy because Elise is mothering, making sure Brandi is taken care of. Brandi brought the first one-hundred pages of her manuscript, pages that seem disconnected in a way that she can't yet understand, can't figure out how to put together. Elise reads the draft, drawing a heart with lines through it - an exploding heart - to indicate the most moving moments and Brandi loves her for it. Elise notes the details she remembers, short comments in the margins. No conjecture, just her emotional truths sliding past Brandi's. She questions, never doubting Brandi's truth but suggesting ways she is hiding, has hidden. Together, they look at pictures of them smiling together as children and Brandi wonders if she was truly happy or if she learned to wear the mask early, to perform in public but to hate herself in private.

Coming home to Nick, she sees the extent of his depression more clearly. He is angry and sad, lethargic despite the fact that he doesn't work or have school right now. It is his summer break and he spends it bitching. The morning after she arrives, he swears at her when they get out of bed.

"Guess I'll go make breakfast. I don't want to make fucking smoothies," he says.

"I don't know how I'm going to deal with this," she tells him.

"With what?" He is sitting next to her on the couch eating breakfast.

"This attitude," she says, "the way nothing makes you happy. I've been asking you to get help for a while, for years."

She feels her anger rise, notices it in her sharp movements as she brushes her hair, gets ready to go to therapy. The swearing and yelling make her nervous and she is constantly biting her nails or picking at her face. It was the same way when her parents would fight when she was young. Brandi either shuts down or senses that she needs to defend herself, so she won't be walked all over again like with Jerry. When she comes out of the bathroom, Nick is

still sitting on the couch but is now sliding his wedding ring on and off, twirling it on his fingertip.

"You taking your ring off for a reason," she asks.

"No," he says and settles the silver and gold band back on his finger.

She wonders if this is what she looked like when she was severely depressed, sometimes still looks like. His mood would be easier to handle if it wasn't all the time. *Maybe I'm being selfish and pulling away from him,* she thinks. She worries that she will soon have to choose between her marriage and her recovery.

With him, she sleeps late. She is anxious. His swearing, muttering, and worrying put her on edge. A lot of the issues he has relate to general responsibilities like cooking, paying bills, and cleaning, which, given that she cannot get rid of them for him, cause constant tension. She doesn't understand how he can't be even the slightest bit content. But then, was she? When things were at their worst, not long after they married, she was unhappy regardless of the circumstances - never satisfied. Still, she was able to recognize the good things in her life, the reasons she should be happy, to recognize disordered

thinking and the lack of logic. Maybe he does too, and she just hasn't asked.

Things have settled down and Nick talks to her about the new path he has chosen for himself; he has decided to become a writer. It isn't that he hasn't considered it before but that he has just now allowed himself to see it as a possibility. This is the hardest part to becoming a writer: once one decides to become a writer, to allow it, that is when the real work begins.

They are sitting on the couch; he is reading Hunter S. Thompson and she is reading *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, which they bought earlier in the day on a trip to Ed's Editions, a local used book store across the bridge on Meeting Street. Nick also picked up a copy of Alcoholics Anonymous' *The Big Book*. At first, he didn't want her to see it, and she tried not to look, told him that she didn't have to know when she saw him grab something off the shelf in the self-help section and tuck it quickly into the crook of his arm. When he finally showed her the book, after they arrived home, he told her that he is trying to quit drinking.

"Are you planning on going to meetings or are you just going to read the books?" She tried to sound gentle as

she didn't want to guilt him into anything, doesn't want to destroy this fragile moment of progress."

He thought for a moment, and then spoke slowly. "I think meetings would be uncomfortable. I'm just going to read for now."

She turned toward him, but he didn't look at her. "Would it help if I went with you or would that make it worse?"

"Probably worse."

"Ok," she said as she picked up the copy of *The Dance of Anger* she purchased. "Oh, this is the book that Erin recommended. I finally got it." He didn't respond. "So what made you decided to quit drinking? I mean, I think it's great. You said you would a while ago."

"I don't know. It will help me focus and help us save money. I hate not having an income and that I had to withdraw money from my inheritance to help us get through the summer. The car repairs at up all of our savings, and I can't replace it without taking out more," he said.

She realizes how much he is dealing with not being the breadwinner, with his depression, with quitting drinking, with not having a degree yet or even a clear, defined path. She worries that he will drown, flounder in the face of too much too fast. She's been there before,

sees it in the way he writes, later that evening, writing a line and then scratching it out, over and over until the page is black.

"What's wrong?" she puts her arms around his shoulders and holds him.

"I just don't have any ideas," he says.

He sees her as a successful figure, forgetting the agony of sitting at her desk all day, not having written one word. Never knowing how to start, what to write about. She has pages of false starts. Even with her current project, the beginnings of her thesis, she can feel its fragility, her need for encouragement, to hear that yes, it is worthwhile and yes, keep going.

"Don't you remember any of that?" she asks. He shakes his head. "If you want to write, you have to read, read widely: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, books on writing and creativity, self-help. It is all related to writing. Write down sentences that you like. Write down words that strike you. Those words will turn into sentences, into paragraphs, into pages."

She can tell that he doesn't believe her, thinks that struggle means he is on the wrong path again. That it shouldn't be this hard, but it is. Lately, she writes two pages in the morning and maybe a poem and then she has to

lie down. She has to lie on the couch to rest, think, and also read. It is part of her process, it is part of respecting how draining this sort of work is, of how much it takes from her. She wishes she could do something for him, but he has to struggle and overcome himself, has to deal with the whispers of an internal editor telling him that he isn't good enough, that he is crazy to think that he could be a writer, that he is creative, that he has something to say. She fights this voice constantly, even after years of writing. Her thesis, a memoir, isn't something that just pours out of her, she has to push past self-doubt. She has had to read and write in pieces, because that's all she can manage.

She wishes she knew how else to support him, but this isn't about her, this is about him. It pains her to watch. She wonders if she was this insecure before, this needy, this breakable. She gets up from the couch, touches his shoulder as she passes, and makes him a cup of hot tea with honey.

The next day, he is still feeling defeated and she tells him that she understands the way that he is feeling.

"Yeah, but you are doing what you love," he says.

"That should make me happy," she says, "but it doesn't. I hate school. I mean, I love it too, but I hate it. No matter what I do, it's never enough."

They're driving in her car down Trenholm Road, heading back after a trip to her teacher's house, where she is cat sitting, and then over to a restaurant for dinner. The sun is just setting and she realizes she needs to turn on her headlights. It is easier to talk about her difficulties when she splits her focus. It flows easier, she doesn't over think.

"Even the slightest thing can throw me off," she continues. "A rejection letter, a colleague publishing. I'm just never enough. I can never be enough for herself."

He has forgotten her struggles to get into an MFA program, the struggle of her first year, of feeling like she didn't belong on the academic side, not smart enough, and that she wasn't doing enough on the creative side. His focus is limited, much like hers is. She forgets her past selves, forgets what it was like before she allowed herself to become a creator.

The day is a difficult one for both of them. It is hard enough having one depressed person in a relationship. Two often feels impossible, especially when they are both on break and have no idea what to do with

themselves. It's like being a rubber band. During the semester, she is stretched by homework, events, projects. She ends up so busy that during the breaks, when she has nothing she is required to do, she snaps back - only she snaps back into depression. Even small tasks become huge challenges. People see her as a super-achiever and they have no idea how much she struggles, how much she hates being her and how she knows it doesn't make logical sense. She still has a core belief that she is unlovable and unworthy. How does she change that? Is writing about her past the same as handling it? She is no longer stuffing down her emotions or silencing them with food. How do "normal" people handle things? Do they quickly forget the good but latch onto the bad like she does? Do they replay interactions with other people, dissecting their own actions and words until they are physically ill like her?

All she knows is that she is tired of feeling this way. Tired of being so depressed by silence that she can't do anything, can't be happy with anything. As the semester progresses, she gets worse - overcommitted, she cancels plans and appointments at the last minute. She has migraines and severe stomach aches. Last week, she even cancelled therapy with Barbara. It took her days to call and reschedule, she believes she messed up and doesn't want

to show her face again. It's illogical, she knows, but she can't help it. She also no longer wants to go to the sexual assault group. The meetings are full of emotion and Brandi's rage is stirred by the lack of accountability on the part of the perpetrators, on the injustice, but there is nothing she can do about it. It makes her feel powerless and she again questions the existence of God.

She meets Barbara the following week, but this time it is in an office across the hall from Erin's old one. It too is lacking personal effects, just contains a desk and a bookshelf of highly polished, cherry wood. Brandi sits in a computer chair with rounded, fake leather armrests.

Barbara sits down across from her and says, "I'm sorry for the move. They're working on the building and right now there's a man on an access platform outside my window. I didn't think that would be conducive. The work is quite loud too." Brandi nods. "So, tell me what's been going on."

"I can't sleep again. My head hurts all the time, and I've been having nightmares," she says.

"Nightmares? Is that normal for you?"

"No," she shakes her head. "I had them after the car accident but not really since then."

"What are they about?"

"Um, I think the worst one involved my brother. I was in a bathtub, one of those old ones with the claw-feet, and the lights were off. Then the door opens just a crack and my little brother James is there. He walked in the bathroom, didn't say anything. He had a hammer in his hand and he started striking me with the claw end. I tried to use my arms to protect my head, but he still managed to hit me a few times. It felt so real, I can even remember the water sloshing around in the tub as I fought him." She chuckles, "So yeah, kinda disturbing."

"Yes, I would say it is very disturbing and probably pretty scary.

She shrugs, "I guess so."

"So you aren't sleeping and are having vivid nightmares. Is there anything else going on? How's the depression?"

"Bad. Real bad. Actually, there's something I wanted to talk to you about today but I'm a bit worried about it."

Barbara leans forward, "What's that?"

"Well, it's just that I've been having bad thoughts..."

"Thoughts about self-harm?"

Brandi nods. "Like just last night, when I was taking my pills, I thought about taking all of them at once. I couldn't think of any reason not to."

"And did you?"

"No," she says, "I don't know what stopped me to be honest."

"How often are you having these kinds of thoughts?"

"Every day. It's like sometimes there's a voice in my head and it says these terrible things, things I should do to myself, and it makes me cry. I can't stop it. It's like a continuous loop. I mean," she straightens, "I know it's me. It's not an outside voice. More like self-talk that I can't control." Barbara nods. "And I've been seeing things."

"What sort of things do you see?"

"I don't know how to explain it. It isn't like a hallucination, as if it is out in the open air. I see things when I close my eyes, like blood and slit wrists. It's sort of a close up view. Really zoomed in."

"How long has this been going on?"

"For years, since I was a kid. I don't know what it means. I was worried about telling you."

"What were you worried about?" asks Barbara.

"That you'd say I was crazy and have me hospitalized," she starts to pick at her fingernails.

"And you don't think that's a good option?"

"No," she says. "I think it would make things worse. Do you know how behind I would get? How would the bills get paid? No, I don't think I need that kind of help."

"Well, I'd say the self-harm thoughts are the most concerning. The things you see more closely relate to daydreams than anything else. You aren't crazy. Hospitalization is only the last resort, when other options don't work. There is an out-patient program you could go to where they let you go home at night. Do you think that would be beneficial?"

"No, I don't want that either."

"Ok, then we have to figure out a way to make you safe. Part of the solution is helping you put things back in perspective. I'd like you to tell me a reason you have to live. Take your time"

Brandi stares at her for a few moments and then closes her eyes. She thinks about her life, her life here in the graduate program, with Nick, and her work and what kind of legacy she would leave behind. She thinks about her body and how she will never be enough, how she isn't as

smart as other people in her classes, how she now has a second failing marriage. Out of it all, there isn't a scrap of her life she would save.

She opens her eyes and meets Barbara's. "I can't think of a reason."

"What about Nick?" Barbara asks.

"No. He'd be happier without me. He doesn't love me, he told me so. I just feel kind of stuck with him, like I'm obligated to be there. I don't even know if I'm in love with him anymore. I'm kind of numb where that's concerned."

Barbara furrows her brow, "What about your family? Surely it would devastate them. How would it affect them?"

She shrugs again and traces invisible patterns on the arm of the chair, "It'd hurt them, but they'd get over it."

"But could you stand to hurt them like that?"

"If I'm dead, then it doesn't really matter. I won't feel anything."

Barbara thinks for a moment. "What about your pets? Your dog and your cats? What about them?"

"They're animals. They'd find a new home and forget about me."

"And your work? What about that?"

She considers how she can articulate what writing means to her, remembers another time she met Dr. Ortega for coffee at Jazzman's. Dr. Ortega had been kind enough to look at yet another draft of her statement of purpose for graduate school.

"You're saying that writing saved your life," Dr. Ortega said as she handed Brandi back her draft, "but you aren't making me believe it."

Brandi knew she was right; the writing was too academic, too disconnected. She'd dropped back into that "it's just something that happened" voice that robbed the retelling of its importance, its vitalness to her survival. Yet, how could she say in two to three pages how writing kept her from suicide many times? How could she fit in all of the books she had been reading that had started to reshape her? To rebuild her in a way that made her work more accessible to others. How could she tell them that she didn't even know what a Master of Fine Arts was until last semester, that she was only applying because her professor, Becky Thompson, believed enough in her work to suggest it. Dr. Thompson taught two of Brandi's classes the semester before, introduced her to bell hooks, Martín Espada, Rafael Campo, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Leigh Thornhill. Every assignment Brandi turned in, and there were many as Dr.

Thompson required weekly writing responses in both classes, reminds her of a book she wants Brandi to read. *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison was the first, then *The Blues Eye* by Toni Morrison. The class studied Buddhist texts from Thich Nhat Hanh and Pema Chodron. Poets like E. Ethelbert Miller, Sonia Sanchez, and Joy Harjo. Dr. Thompson gave Brandi copies of her books, books that might help her, that relate to topics Brandi was struggling with in her writing: *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep* and *When the Center is on Fire*. When Dr. Thompson left after Brandi's first semester at the University of Colorado, she begged her for a reading list, knowing somehow that these new authors and works were essential to her growth, personally and as a writer.

Her philosophy teacher, Dr. Mary Jane Sullivan, taught Brandi about fearless speech and she started participating in slam poetry, asked questions about race and gender in her other classes. She discovered writing can be used to change the world, to fight injustice. She learned about community involvement in a poetry class taught by Dr. Ortega and Dr. Sullivan, discovered Suheir Hammad, Beau Sia, Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott Heron. Learned about Angel Island and the poems the Japanese detainees wrote on the walls. She discovered the work of Andrea

Gibson. Learned about Palestine. Learned to express her rage in poetic form and then perform it in public. She got invited to present work in other classes, got her poem about the homeless living along Fountain Creek after the housing market collapse published in a local activist newspaper.

Another poem was published in a Pikes Peak Poet Laureate project called *Poetry While You Wait*. She has to go to an earlier section of Advanced Rhetoric so she can go down to the local NPR station and record the poem for broadcast. At the *Poetry While You Wait* launch, she read the poem, a poem about coffee and summer thunderstorms and the desert, but she follows it with the poem about the homeless, living in the tent city, as the local media had dubbed it. She was so passionate about it, knew she had to share this work with the group of poets. This community. A man putting on an art fair gave her his card and asked her to be in touch. Poets more than twice her age came over to tell her how well she did, how brave she is, and she was flying. Their praise, along with her professors', lifted her up, yet, at the end of each night, she still went to bed feeling like she was nothing, thinking about what she needed to do next, wondering when it would ever be enough, knowing it would never be.

She graduated with highest departmental honors, but no one knew how much she struggled. Her honor society, one of two she belonged to, got some idea when she read a piece of nonfiction she wrote called "What I Know about AIDS" that was published in the national journal. In it, she talked about the drug use, about her marriage to Jerry, about thinking she was nothing and believing she had no future. About the work saving her life. It was the end of her final semester and they were inducting new members. That was her farewell and she regretted not opening up sooner. No one noticed the thirty pounds she gained in the two years here, how she couldn't sleep, how sick she felt when she had to get onstage: they just saw the achiever. Most of them didn't even know about the car accident, how she almost dropped out in March because of the pain, the medications, all of the appointments. How close she came to giving up everything.

At the University of Colorado, she learned the difference between writing as personal expression and writing as communication. Her literature classes reinforced the lessons she learned in creative writing. She rewrote her statement of purpose but was never able to do these experiences justice, to say how going back to college changed her. She didn't mention how she transferred as an

English major but was so intimidated on the first day of the survey classes that she changed her major to Women's and Ethnic Studies and switched all of her classes. The courses made her more serious about her writing. She switched back to English, realized how she was good at writing the papers that scared her so much, loved dissecting the work of others, loved author biographies and historical context, the different modes of literary criticism.

Barbara clears her throat and Brandi is brought back to the present moment, back to this empty office and to a now passionless life. "Well, I'm not exactly changing lives," she says. "I mean, people come up to me after readings but nothing major. There are other writers. I don't think I have anything particularly unique to offer."

She leaves Barbara's office with a promise to call a hospital if she thinks she will hurt herself and a promise to enlist Nick's help. In her bag is a magnet with the phone number for the Suicide Prevention Hotline. She could tell, as she left the office, that Barbara is concerned, especially since Barbara is going on vacation and Brandi would have another therapist for a few weeks before leaving on a trip of her own.

CHAPTER 28

It's her first full day in Virginia Beach. She couldn't sleep last night despite taking her Clonazepam, which is an anxiety drug she takes before bed, to stop her thoughts, the cascade that either projects her into the past, reliving some previous wrongdoing or embarrassment or into the future, making endless lists and plans to prevent future mistakes - she is desperately afraid of forgetting. She even practiced her bedtime routine as suggested by her interim therapist Karin. It was Karin who asked if she wanted to keep working on the abuse and Brandi said no, she wants to deal with the depression head on, to stop circling the site of trauma. Before, doctors, psychiatrists, and therapists have only suggested drugs to help her sleep, which typically don't work.

Her routine involves beginning the bedtime process two hours before bed, otherwise Brandi will work until it is time to go to sleep. She takes her meds, the Clonazepam and Cymbalta for the depression. She prepares her body by brushing her teeth, brushing her fine hair, and

washing her face. Then she gets into bed and, at least at home, one of her overweight cats, Turkey, joins her for his nightly brushing. Her other cat, Minkey, joins her on the bed but has little tolerance for her ministrations. The dogs, Bunny and Lucy, a Chihuahua Nick and Brandi recently adopted, come in from their nightly walk with Nick, and they cuddle with her as she reads, first from her daily devotional and then from a work of genre fiction, her guilty pleasure. It has taken a few weeks, but she no longer feels guilty about not taking a theory or comprehensive exam book with her to bed.

Last night, she had to skip a few steps of the process as she was alone in a Travelodge just across the street from the beach - the trip generously provided by a grant from the graduate school at the University of South Carolina. The drive, four hundred miles from home, exhausted her. It was the longest she had driven alone, but felt she needed to come here. Needed to return to where the gaps began. Since she started the bedtime routine, even when she can't sleep, she typically doesn't oversleep to compensate. This is how she found herself getting out of bed at 7:43 in the morning and heading for her Smith Corona Skyriter typewriter, one she bought in New Mexico at the typewriter repair shop, after preparing a cup of coffee.

Perhaps this is what her first regular therapist, George, meant about being a writer. When she told him she wasn't sure if she was destined to be a writer, he told her that if she was then she would wake up in the morning with stories pouring out of her. It took her a long time after that to start writing again.

When she first proposed the trip, she thought she would plan out every minute of every day - this is what she does in order to feel some sense of control in her life. Instead, the books she wanted to read - *Depression: A Public Feeling*, *Girl in Need of a Tourniquet*, *When Women Were Birds*, and *To the Lighthouse* - go unread and she does little planning besides marking places she wants to visit on the map. Karen told her that perhaps she was trying to protect herself, that the reading was triggering her depression, and the procrastination was a safety mechanism. She didn't read much to prepare to come here, to the place where her lifelong battle with depression began, where she was a suicidal six-year-old convinced that there must be no God because he didn't take her life when she begged him to.

Instead of planning, she watches Joyce Myer on the aged TV set in her room - basic cable only - and has breakfast which, though called continental consists of Frosted Flakes or Raisin Bran, and mini blueberry muffins

and powdered donuts. They also have burned coffee and orange juice from a machine though the Styrofoam cups were only good for two or three swallows. Still, as she sits on her hotel bed and eats, she thanks God for providing for her. She is unsure where this newfound faith comes from, but she is glad for it. It gives her something to hang on to as she is afraid of what she will discover here. Elise isn't able to come on the trip, despite talking about it previously. Whatever Brandi will face, she will face it alone.

It is still early when she crosses Pacific Avenue. The sun is bright and hot and, as she makes her way to the beach, she is struck by how much lighter everything is than she remembers. Brightly colored beach umbrellas line the shore as gulls swoop and dive in the water. She wears black, jersey shorts and a turquoise tank top as she has no plans to get in the water, just wants to feel the sand underneath her feet. Being seen in a bathing suit is another thing she doesn't allow herself to do because of her weight, partially because she fears public ridicule and partially because she doesn't think she deserves to enjoy herself, that she needs to punish herself for not fitting in, for using food as a way to deal with emptiness and violations of body and spirit.

She walks down the newly resurfaced boardwalk for about a block before taking off her pink tennis shoes and venturing out onto the sand. It isn't the dreary grey from her childhood, but a perfect tan, rich with shards of shells that look sharp but don't hurt her feet. What does hurt is the temperature as she picks her way quickly, not seeing any crab holes, just seagull tracks and footprints. As her feet touch the frothy water and the soft, sucking sand, she finds herself thinking about Mary Lou, her best friend when she lived there.

Mary Lou had a sunken face that made Brandi feel like she was staring at a skull. Her skin was ashen and some of her fingernails were missing. She said that they just never grew in. Her backyard was diagonal from the government quarters, a row of red brick homes with white pillars that she loved to shimmy up, in which Brandi and her family lived. Mary Lou was an only child and her family had the coolest toys in their shed. Sometimes they, along with Elise and Howard, would put on shows in her yard for the neighborhood children.

She only remembers Mary Lou's father, Mr. Berry, because he took the girls to the beach. Together, they raided the shed and brought along rafts and other beach toys. When they were out in the water, Mr. Berry floated on

his back, eyes closed, letting the current carry him further and further away. Brandi floated on a raft the color of red licorice. The current rocked her raft and lulled her into a sleepy bliss. When Elise decided she wanted to share the raft, she gripped the side of it with her hands and used them to propel herself up and forward. The water splashed over Brandi and she tumbled over the side. She was sinking, hands moving over her head, reaching for the surface but finding no purchase. She could not even see the sun, the water was so thick and murky. It was gritty and enveloped her as though there were no bottom, no end to its depth. There had to be though as she could see the curling fingers of spinach colored seaweed.

Time slowed as she was falling, falling. There was no panic, just a gentle sinking as though she was being welcomed. She wanted to fall forever, perhaps find the mermaids she believed lived beneath the surface. Mary Lou saw what happened, ran down the sand, and dove in after her. Mary Lou's fingernail-less hands grasped her around the chest and wrenched her from the peace she had found. Together, they rose together to the surface, emerging right next to the raft. Brandi gripped the edge of it tightly, salt water streaming down her face and she coughed, stared at the sun now covered by clouds.

She is disrupted by the sounds of children running up and down the surf, a boy and a girl running with pails and small, plastic shovels. There is a remnant of fear as she took a few more steps into the water, is covered up to her calves and then her thighs. She is not afraid of drowning but stepping on a jellyfish or having some dark thing attack her in the water. She steps in a cold spot and chills run up her spine. She walks back to the beach and sits, letting the water wash over her, feeling the sand stick to her skin like glitter. There she stays, until two jellyfish roll past her feet, laying there like crystalline discs, and she decides it is time to go back to the hotel. Tomorrow, she will come again.

After a morning of visiting museums, talking to authors, and walking the boardwalk, she is surprised by so many shipwrecks, so many disasters, yet the only evidence she sees at the waterfront are statues and relics among the various public artworks. An anchor and propeller sit outside of the Old Coast Guard Museum. That such tragedies took place here doesn't seem to register with the people or resonate with the tide, which, in its continual cycle of destruction is constantly involved in covering up the truth and choosing what and what not to reveal. She thinks about the bodies of the shipwrecked and their burial in the

dunes. Right now, she could be standing on old bones, bones pitted and the color of parchment. It's a sobering thought set against the backdrop of people frolicking in the water and the parasailers coasting by in the sky so slowly they don't even seem to be moving.

She leaves the museum and heads down the boardwalk, curious to see what is at the southern end. It's hot and the concrete holds the heat of the noonday sun. She knows she should hurry if she is going to make it out to Fort Story, to her old neighborhood, to the Old and New Cape Henry Lighthouses, but her sense of adventure prevails. Thirsty, she stops at a public drinking fountain with a basin shaped like a clamshell. The water is warm and unsatisfying. She walks with little in mind as far as destination as she's passed by rollerbladers and cyclists, though it isn't as crowded today as it was yesterday. A thought pops into her mind - *I was molested here* - and she isn't sure if her memory is suggesting here at the beach or if this is a conscious thought connecting the scrap of swimming pool memory to her current location, to the city more so than the beach.

After lunch at a Mediterranean restaurant, she decides to head out in her rental car to Fort Story. The drive is about fifteen minutes and almost a straight shot

down Pacific Avenue, which later becomes Atlantic Avenue. Her movements are slow as she prepares to leave and she realizes that this is the point of the trip she dreads the most. *If anything is to unlock, she thinks, it will be there.* When she arrives at the gate to the base, two uniformed guards have her pull forward and open the doors and trunk so they can search her car. Splayed open to the air like that, she is glad the vehicle is nearly empty. She gets a curt nod from one of them and a "Have a nice day Ma'am," signaling that she can go the last few miles to the lighthouses.

On the visitor's guidelines, it states that she may not leave Atlantic Avenue unless escorted. On her way, she had planned to take the small loop of Pacific Avenue to see her childhood home, the place where she made mud pies and learned to slip and slide. It is a place of mixed emotion, of confusion but also of growing up. From Atlantic, she can see partway down Pacific, before the road curves and blinds her view. The old bus stop, where she got in trouble with a group of other children for rushing after the bus when it didn't stop, has been torn down. The hills leading up to the wooded areas aren't as steep as she thought, really not more than ten or so steps to the top. With the window open, the faint scent of honeysuckle

reaches her and she finds her memory cast back to childhood.

Their neighborhood consisted of a square block with a single row of government houses lining each side. The backyards weren't delineated; they consisted of concrete slabs that opened up to a wide grassy area. At the very center of the block was a playground with swings, monkey bars, and wooden towers. They, Brandi and her siblings, spent a lot of time out there, on either the swings or digging in the sand, sand that was brought in from the beach. Like most children, she thought she could tunnel her way to the other side of the earth but her holes always collapsed in on themselves, the sand perpetually shifting in the wrong direction despite her frantic efforts to stop it.

Past the park was a bunch of tall trees with wide canopies that provided welcome shade. The young boys in the area climbed up and teased the girls down below. Brandi's first boyfriend, Aaron, lived nearby. They were in the second grade together. He liked to sit on one of the lower, straighter branches of the biggest tree. When she tries to remember, she sees him hanging from his knees and then flipping himself down off the branch to stand in front of her, but she doubts he was actually that coordinated at

that age. *Maybe that was something I saw in a movie once,* she thinks, *maybe it was a scene from My Girl.*

There were always a lot of lime green dead frogs with white under bellies down there and yellowed stinkbugs. The bugs left behind a casing that clung stubbornly to the bark of the trees. The custom among the neighborhood kids was to flatten your palm, draw back your hand, and then crush them. They'd walk around smelling their palms and making sour faces for the rest of the afternoon. The frogs were a different story; she never actually saw any live ones. Though she expected their corpses to be huddled, they were actually splayed out like they had drowned while swimming upside down in the rain.

One day, Aaron used a long stick to pick one up. He punctured the waxy skin, revealing congealed blood that circled the opening. He lifted it and chased Brandi around with it; she broke up with him. She had wanted to break up with him anyhow, after he got in trouble for his messy desk and their teacher made him clean it out in front of everyone. By the time he was done, a large pile of crumpled papers that came up to his knees sat on the floor. It bothered her to see that much garbage, especially when she worked hard to keep her desk organized.

As she stares down the street now, at thirty one, she wishes that he had been the first one to kiss her and not Greg, not one of her abusers. She rolls the idea around in her mind for a few minutes, trying it on to see if it fits. *It is entirely possible*, she tells herself, *after all, I don't remember anything*. It would be a happier story of a first-kiss, but she can't say if it happened or not. Has no way to discern the truth. The fiction of what might have happened is more palatable, makes it seem like her body was hers at least at one point.

Afraid of someone coming up behind her and honking, she keeps driving, leaving the block behind and moving toward the lighthouses. Now that she's done some research, the meaning of the lighthouses has changed for her. They are no longer slender structures, full of fun like in the film *Pete's Dragon*. Their purpose is much grimmer - a purpose, when failed, that results in the loss of life. And she knows she's obsessing, but she can't help but think of those that died here, of bodies washed up along the shore and those that didn't even make it that far. Her own experience pales in the face of mass death.

She doesn't stay long, doesn't even take the tour as she doesn't have cash and she doesn't really feel like it. Instead, she takes photos with her camera and heads

back to the hotel to rest. She needs to shower and sleep and maybe dream. As she nears the parking lot of the Travelodge, she is surprised at her lack of reaction. She thought, even if she didn't unlock any memories, at very least she would feel something, some kind of emotion that pierced the wall she kept around herself, that would reveal her true self. Perhaps she was hoping for too much. *It's just a place*, she thinks to herself, *it's just a place*.

The following day she spends at the beach. Instead of a tank top and shorts, she wears an electric pink, one-piece swimsuit and marches down the sand, not caring how her body looks, about the botched tattoo on her lower back that is visible now, or who looks at her. She wants to go fully out in the water and let the waves push her body, to become weightless like before, when she almost drowned, but this time she will float instead of sink. Her body tingles with exhilaration when her feet first touch the warm salt water, something she hasn't felt in years. And she walks and walks until the water is just under her bust. She is surprised by the people who talk to her, the young man who pays her a lot of attention until she moves slowly away from him. She even stays in after seeing a Coast Guard helicopter pass over, looking for sharks.

After two hours, two lovely hours full of sensory delight, she heads back up and sits in the sand again, like yesterday. There are times when she feels something bump her legs and she is sure they are jellyfish, but she is no longer afraid. When the water goes out, she envisions the bad leaving her, the pain, the depression, the anxiety. As the waves come in, she imagines white light pouring over her, healing her. In her mind, she says "Jesus, please forgive me" over and over and she is thinking about the abuse, about the rape - for that is how she has come to understand it. For once, she receives a response that seems to come from outside herself, perhaps the divine or a higher version of herself. It says, "those sins are not your own, they are on others' hands." She realizes the profound truth of it and instantly feels a sort of draining from her hands into the water. *This, she thinks, is what it feels like to be a survivor instead of a victim.*

CHAPTER 29

When she arrives home, she carries a piece of her experience in the ocean with her. Her body seems lighter, like something that no longer served her has been finally let go. Nick has cleaned the apartment, which he doesn't normally do despite her complaints, and cooked her dinner. She talks non-stop about her trip, about the shipwrecks she researched, about the Witch of Pungo, and the boardwalk and how she couldn't find any information on mermaid sightings. He listens, though he doesn't like when she goes on and on. He is unhappy that she got to travel, though she isn't sure if he would've wanted to come with her. He talks about getting away all the time, about riding off on his new motorcycle to who knows where. Despite the talk and her encouraging him to take a trip, he never does.

"You know," she says as she leans in the entryway to the kitchen, sipping a glass of water, "I realized something out there."

"Yeah," he swivels in his computer chair to face her, "what's that?"

"That I can finally accept myself the way I am. I don't need to lose weight or hate myself anymore." She pauses, "I hope you can accept me for who I am too."

She doesn't know why she said it. Since they were married, his acceptance should've been automatic, should've already been in place. She wasn't sure though, not with the nasty comments he made whenever he was drunk only to take them back later - though sometimes he didn't even do that.

He stares at her for several seconds, an intent look on his face. "I don't know if I can."

"What do you mean?" she asks. "Isn't that part of loving someone? Did you decide that you meant it when you said you didn't love me?"

"I'm not in love with you," he says.

"I'm not in love with you either," she says.

The admission marks the quick decline toward the end. They decide to try couples counseling for a few weeks but with no luck. Their therapist says that, though Brandi is willing to work on the marriage, Nick simply seems along for the ride, not wanting to make a decision or take action either way. The days are long for her as she waits for him to tell her what he wants. She gave him the power in the situation without realizing it. Hasn't considered was she truly wants because she is afraid of admitting to herself

that she would be better off alone, that she needs a peace that he cannot offer because of his rage, his disappointment with his own life, and his envy of her.

The morning before their third appointment, she says to Nick, "I think we should get divorced. Neither of us are happy. We're just in a holding pattern and I'm tired of being alone, tired of being unloved and unwanted. I need someone who loves me, who I can believe when he says it to me."

"Is that what you really want?" he asks.

"Yes, I mean, I didn't want to make a decision, but I can't go on like this. You don't want to stay together do you?"

"I don't think so, I just don't know where I would go or what I would do," he says.

"You'd move back to Colorado, be with your family because they will help you, you'll move on."

She spent the next few weeks, the last two weeks of her summer vacation, helping him pack and get everything in order for the move. She books his hotels and maps his trip. The divorce packet for El Paso County is available online and she prints copies, fills them out, and has her portions notarized. Like everything, once she decides to jettison someone, she wants him out of her space, wants the

apartment back that she has struggled to pay for over the last two and a half years, wants to wake in the morning and not face a strand of curse words over something small. She needs to begin again, to see the world freshly. Though she no longer believes in love, doesn't think anyone else could possibly want her, she does believe in her work and the silence she needs in order to work.

When the day arrives for him to leave, she helps pack the truck despite her exhaustion, despite needing to prepare for her upcoming class - a theme section on fairy tales she is teaching. More than rest, she needs her freedom and will run on empty to claim it.

The first item to go into the truck is his motorcycle. It is an undertaking just for him to find out the motorcycle kit he reserved for the truck is not actually available in Columbia. Instead, they decide to tie it down with rope and bungee cords. She pulls down the long metal ramp and he tries to push the motorcycle up. It is too heavy to go over the lip of the truck and she suggests he start it, give it just a little gas to get it up and over. He tries, using his feet to push the bike forward but doesn't make it, the bike rolls back down the ramp. He decides to ride up. This time, he guns it and when he reaches the back, the motorcycle falls.

It happens in slow motion. She is inside the truck watching him and then, suddenly, he tips to the side and disappears, the bike crashing after him. He is lucky, the handlebars catch on the platform and the bike, though balanced precariously, does not fall on top of him.

"What did you do?" she screams, and she means to himself, but he takes it to mean the motorcycle.

"You told me to ride it up the ramp!" he yells.

"I told you to rock it over, gently, not blaze up there. This is not my fault. Why do you blame me for everything?"

He doesn't answer, just surveys the bent speedometer and scratched headlight. "It's fucking ruined," he says. "I shouldn't have bought it in the first place. Fuck. Look at it!"

It's not ruined, but she agrees with the assessment that he shouldn't have bought it, thinking of many of things they could've spent the money on, how she needs new clothes, a decent couch, and to pay the interest on her student loans. A cloud hangs over the day because of the accident. He suggests that he shouldn't move yet. The thought makes her panic, ignites a fire in her and she helps him pack and get on the road, though several hours later than anticipated. He gets in the truck, drove out of

the parking lot, and was gone. She stays for several moments, watching the direction he went, wondering what she will do with her life now, though she already knows - she will work, she will write, and she will graduate. She will be happy with herself.

Standing there, she decides it is time to start becoming the person she's always wanted to be. She gets in the car and drives past the campus and into Five Points. There, in a white stucco building behind a deli on Greene Street is Immaculate Piercing. When she walks inside, she notices cases of beautiful metal and wood jewelry. The young man behind the counter, his face and ears filled with bright metal, greets her.

"How's your day going?" he asks.

"Not great, but it's about to be better," she smiles.

"Why not great?" he says.

"My husband just left. He's moving back to Colorado and we're getting divorced." She notices his expression, "It's ok, it's for the best."

"So how can I help you?" he asks.

"Well, I've been wanting to get my nose pierced for years. I'm finally going to do it. I've got to do something for myself."

"It's good to do something for yourself," he smiles warmly.

She selects a twenty-two carat, white gold, paisley shaped stud with a moonstone in it. With the piercing, it costs over a hundred dollars, more than she anticipated, more than she would've spent on herself in the past. She waits for Anna, the piercer, to pop around the corner and call her back. Brandi is nervous, trying deep breathing to stay calm. Part of why she never did this is her fear of needles, her history of fainting.

The room is brilliant white, with tons of small drawers filled with all manner of barbells, needles, and hoops. There's a massage table covered with paper where Brandi will lay during the piercing. She is relieved to find out she gets to lay down. Sitting up would be much worse.

Anna draws a dot with a marker on Brandi's nostril and has her go look at it in the mirror on the back of the door. "Is it even? Do you like it?" she asks.

"It looks good," Brandi says. "Besides, you're the piercer, you'd know better than I." What she doesn't say is she doesn't know how to look at herself, the angles of her reflection are skewed, never look quite right. She still sees herself through judgment.

She lies down and Anna leads her through deep breathing, tells her to close her eyes if she doesn't want to see anything - and Brandi doesn't. Anna explains what she is doing, but Brandi is more focused on waiting for the moment of impact than what she is saying. She knows something goes inside her nostril, some sort of guide for the needle, which will then act as a guide for the bar into which the gold stud will be fitted.

"Ok, deep breath," says Anna.

Then there was pressure and an unpleasant sound, but the pain was worse in her imagination than it was in reality. It is more like getting her ears pierced and, as she feels something standing straight up out of her nostril, the needle she presumes. She is glad she chose to close her eyes.

They make her wait fifteen minutes before she can leave. The adrenaline from the wound makes her feel good and, after her time is up, she walks out with a smile on her face. As she drives home, she feels a renewed sense of self and hope for the future. Though she doesn't know it at the time, the feeling will leave her as loneliness and isolation sets in. The depression, as Erin once told her, will get worse before it gets better. Brandi doesn't recognize the piercing as a self-inflicted bodily trauma. A

week later, she has a dream in which she is pulling a scab off of her right nostril. When she awakens, there is something heavy, foreign in her nose. She blows it and the base of her piercing comes out. As she draws back the covers, she finds the gold stud lying there just below her pillow. She had ripped out the jewelry in her sleep.

It takes twenty minutes of manipulation with fingers and jeweler's pliers to get the nose stud back in. She doesn't notice the pain, is just intent on getting it back into place because the piercing parlor is closed today. The frantic anxiety she so often felt before Nick left sets in; she is afraid of not being able to get it back in, of it closing, of wasting money if the piercing closes. She feels stupid, angry with herself for doing something so strange in her sleep. When she tells Karin about the event the next day, Karin says her body hasn't processed the trauma yet and asks her about self harm, as though it was somehow conscious - or perhaps Karin is afraid that the thoughts run so deep they are subconscious, submerged so deeply that Brandi has yet to uncover them fully.

CHAPTER 30

She meets Bryan through an online dating website in January. It is a chance encounter; he was a random suggestion by the site that popped up on her "meet me" tab. He is close to her in age, posed holding an American flag, and wore a black blazer and white t-shirt. The background of the photograph is grey and, combined with the lightly colored shirt, the paleness of his skin stands out against dark brown hair - hair that fell in a wave and terminated in a slight curl over his right temple. He reminds her of Superman. Despite the slight smile, there is something dark about his look, something that intrigues her. His description of himself shows humor and intelligence - a love for fun that she does not possess. She clicks yes, and they start talking, first through the site and then through text messages and telephone. She reminds him, several times, that she is overweight and, though he claims to be accepting, it is her fear that he will reject her for it.

She isn't sure what propelled her to start dating, not after how badly it went before - perhaps that

she had just come out of a very destructive period. After Nick left, she became depressed again, unable to handle the loneliness and coming home to an empty house night after night. She saw little reason in continuing on, in building a life that only involved her. This, she worried, was codependence. Why couldn't she be happy without a significant other? Why was that so important to her? It'd been a semester of tremendous growth. She took a sensory painting class, her first college level painting course, and hired a writing coach to help her finish her poetry collection *Sometimes I Cut Paper Dolls Instead of Myself*. Her writing coach, Cassie Premo Steele, taught Brandi a new way to write, a way that involved self-care and writing for herself first. As she wrote, she didn't reread her work, didn't think about shaping the manuscript; she simply wrote her emotional truth in poetic form, in fairy tales that were dark and twisted - a mask for talking about the abuse. Despite her work and the continued sessions with Karin, she was better but still alone.

In September, she was still working on the poetry manuscript, the manuscript that would later be published, when she met Cody. She was meeting her friend, Anderson, to talk about the poetry they were both writing at Starbucks on Forest Drive. Cody stood in line in front of Brandi. He

was just shorter than she was, had a round beer belly, and a shaved head. He wore an old grey t-shirt and had a shaved head.

"Hope it doesn't snow," he said, half turned toward her. His accent was thick and she had trouble understanding him. It didn't help that he spoke rapidly.

"It hasn't snowed in the three years I've been here," she said. "They shut everything down when it snows anyhow. The city doesn't have snow plows."

He looked at her and she was glad she chose to wear her turquoise sweater, the only dressy sweater she owned. "I just don't wanna drive in it," he said. "Not worried about myself, just other people."

"Yeah, I feel you. I'm from Colorado and I'm used to driving in snow. The most dangerous thing is other people who don't know how to drive in it."

"Colorado huh? I'm from New York."

They continued talking as their orders were prepared and he was still talking, even though Anderson was at a table waiting for her. He was currently in the Army at Fort Jackson, waiting for discharge paperwork to come through. He had a head injury from an IED explosion in Iraq, an explosion that left him in the hospital with little chance of living. It was around the same time he

found out that his wife had cheated on him with her ex and he asked to be stationed here to be close to his daughter after the divorce. She was attracted to him and tired of being alone, didn't know about his alcoholism, his rage, and the way he would ignore her later on. At the time, she was just happy that someone had found her attractive, worthy of attention.

"Look," she said "I'd like to talk to you more, but my friend is waiting for me. "Do you want to get together sometime?"

"Sure, sweetheart," he said. "I don't know when."

"Well," she took a deep breath, nervous at the thought of asking a man out, "I'm going to see the Wizard of Oz tonight at the Sandhills theatre. They're rereleasing it on IMAX."

"That's not really my thing honey, but I'll go."

Then, she would accept any kind of hurt for the company, the attention of another. Now is different, she is different. It isn't just the dating website, which is empowering in that it gives her a sense of choice and a thrill of excitement to see all the men that respond to her. It gets to the point that she has to turn off the notifications on her phone because they are too frequent, distracting. It is also the feeling of accomplishment in

completing her poetry book, the semester spent learning to oil paint and, by the end, being asked by her teacher to set up a gallery of her work in the hall. She also now has a sense of calm that she didn't feel even a few short weeks ago. As she drives to Rockaway's, a bar she has not visited in over a month, to meet Bryan, she thinks about the last time she was there, the night she finally hit the ocean floor, the night the police were called.

Her therapist called it a dissociative state. When Brandi went to bed the night before Thanksgiving, Cody was beside her. He stayed over to help her with the pies in the evening and to cook the following day as their plans to go to Frank and Kelly's fell through. They had flu in the house and had to cancel. Brandi decided to have a Thanksgiving similar to those when she was growing up, when her mother invited people without family to partake in the meal.

"Are you sure you're going to be here?" she asked Cody. "Aren't you going to see your daughter in Greenville?"

"Nah," he said. "I'll be here with you, I promise. You don't have to keep asking."

She took what he said at face value, thinking it was true and, maybe, it was his way of making up for her

birthday the Sunday prior. The first of her guests, a local artist named Jim, arrived and Cody still wasn't there. She was becoming frantic, having to prepare a nacho bar for eight people. Jim was in the kitchen, helping her finish browning the hamburger, assuring her that it was alright and these were her friends, and they wouldn't care if the food wasn't ready right on time. She went into the living room and called Cody for the third time. It was two hours past the time he was supposed to arrive.

"I'm on the road sweetheart," he said right when he picked up the phone. "I'll be there in plenty of time for your party this evening."

"My party is at one o'clock. Jim is already here and everyone else will be here soon." She frowned deeply, tried to hold back the tears, "You said you would be here to get ready."

"I thought it was tonight. You didn't tell me. How was I supposed to know? Fuck," his voice was loud, angry. Normally she had trouble hearing him when he was in the car - he came through clearly.

"No, I told you when it was. I've reminded you and it was on Facebook. You RSVPd," she said. "You promised you'd be here." She fought to keep her voice even, to not show signs of breaking.

"I shoulda stayed where I was. Tired of you making me feel like shit. Told you I don't make plans. Why are you always going off on me? I didn't know when it was."

Her lungs burned, she didn't understand how she was in the wrong, how this was her fault, how she was always to blame even in other relationships. He ignored her for two days after that, not answering his phone. The silence wounded her and, after the party, she fell apart, couldn't hold in her sobs. She wanted to be dead, should be dead because of the how terrible she was, how undeserving of love. When he finally met with her, two days later, he tried to break it off with her, said he "wasn't stable enough for a relationship" and she knew he meant the drinking, the memory problems, the anger. She begged him to stay, to not throw her away like those before him. That was when he promised to be there for Thanksgiving.

When she woke in the morning, the bed was empty. She put on her leopard pajama pants and went out into the living room, but he wasn't there. She hoped that he was out getting breakfast since they were up late baking pumpkin pies, but there was no note - she didn't really expect there to be, it was wishful thinking. She called him on the phone.

"Hey sweetheart," he said.

"Where are you baby?" she asked.

"On my way to Greenville, I gotta see my girl. I didn't want to wake. If I did, you'd cry and I'd feel like shit. I couldn't handle that."

"You just left me with no note. Do you know how much that hurts? You promised. You already ruined my birthday. Why would you do this to me?"

"My kid's my world, I told you that. Thought you understood that."

"I asked you and you promised you'd be here so, no, I don't understand. You also said you weren't going to sleepover at your ex's house anymore since she tried to sleep with you."

"Look, I can't handle this shit. This is why I didn't wake you. I gotta see my kid and if you can't that then I don't know what."

He hung up on her and turned off his phone. She made it through the holiday as only two people, her friend Jim and her tattoo artist, showed up. As on her birthday, once the apartment emptied, she folded in on herself. Demanded, in an endless loop in her head, to know how she could be so stupid as to let him back into her life. She must've deserved to be hurt and she hated herself for it.

The rest of the weekend, a brief break during the semester, was a blur. The leftovers in the fridge allowed her to not have to cook. On Friday, she only had a slice of pie with whipped cream for breakfast. She knows she didn't put on actual clothes, instead staying in her pajamas all day, stayed in bed until the afternoon. In the evenings, she searched the web, trying to find out where Cody was as he still wasn't answering her. He had a key to her apartment, she gave it to him after he left her drunk and alone one night so he could go out with a friend. The door only locked from the outside, so instead of coming back in and telling her, because he thought she was passed out, he left it open. She was obsessed with getting the key back, sent angry messages, became convinced he would come back in the middle of the night and hurt her. She took a dining chair and propped it up under the handle of the door when she slept.

By Saturday afternoon, she had enough. She texted Elise, who had been writing her all day, and told her that she couldn't take it anymore and turned off her phone. Brandi sat in the armchair, chest heaving, the dogs, afraid of the outburst, were snuggled up in bed. She had two choices, she could go to the corner store across from her apartment building on Whaley Street, or she could go into

the bathroom and find the paper packet of razorblades under the sink and slice her flesh like her father cut rings of watermelon on the kitchen counter when she was small. There were no other options, nothing else her mind could come up with, the pain was too great, too pervasive, too all encompassing. She doesn't know why cigarettes even came to mind as she hadn't smoked since Jimmy. Looking back, it doesn't make logical sense but, at that point, she was incapable of thinking clearly.

When she stood, she didn't know what choice she would make. Her feet moved as if of their own accord, propelled her toward the door and across the street to the gas station. She returned, sat under the bike garage by the back door of her building, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Trails of smoke poured out of her lungs, her throat, her mouth as she opened it to the sky. Though the weather was mild, she wore her black down jacket, wanting to feel covered. Time passed, but she wasn't sure how much as she stared out into the parking lot. Her vision was eventually interrupted by the arrival of a police car. The young officer, thin but well-muscled, walked toward her. *He's here for me*, she thought, put out her cigarette, and entered just after him.

She got on the elevator, the same elevator the officer was on and he pushed the button to her floor. As she walked out ahead of him, she could feel him trailing after. She put the key in the lock, she turned her head and saw him striding toward her.

"Are you here for me?" she asked.

"Are you Brandi?" his voice was even, strong, what she expected in an authority figure.

"Yes," she faced him.

"Your parents called. Said they were worried about you. Some kind of problem with a boyfriend."

"Oh, I'm fine," she said, "just left my phone upstairs when I went to get a pack of smokes."

She doesn't realize until she is back inside, leaning against the door, that he didn't ask her how she was doing, just asked her about Cody. Her parents had made the call after her sister contacted them. She finally told them the truth, told them how her desire to die, the compulsion to end her life began in childhood, how she came so close to it, it scared her. The thoughts in her head scared her, made her cry. The next morning, fulfilling a promise she had made to Karin, she called her to tell her what happened.

A month later, many broken promises later, she broke up with Cody, telling him that she had slept with someone else, anything to get him away from her. She needed something permanent, something she couldn't take back. There was no other way she could keep herself from contacting him, despite how much pain he brought her. The breakup marked an end to the erratic behavior, nights of getting drunk despite her medications, painting strange creatures with her fingers when her PTSD was set off by firecrackers or other loud noises from the parking lot below her apartment, getting more piercings - this time a second nose piercing and a barbell through her bellybutton, and spending hundreds of dollars on tattoos she couldn't really afford - tattoos administered in her artist's house, where she stayed up until the sun rose, where she slept with him after getting drunk one night, where she woke up the next morning bruised on her biceps and breasts, where he asked her if he could hold his gun to her head next time.

She arrives at the bar around eight, just in time for trivia. Her memory doesn't conjure up images of sitting at the bar, getting drunk, and writing poetry. Instead, she is worried about Bryan, about what he will think of her, about his potential rejection of her because of her size.

Despite all she had come through in three years, she still feels intense shame about her weight, knows that dealing with it will be part of her recovery, that it will be years before she is fully better. The day at the beach has all but faded from memory. She cannot conjure up that same sense of self-love and acceptance that washed over her.

Still, there was a loosening inside of her, as though pieces of the wreck had been lifted out of the water by flotation balloons. The balloons were outside of herself: writing, painting, self-care, therapy, and a support network - her friends and family that, when she confided her illness to, supported her, loved her. There were memories she had to leave at the bottom, the derelict, what may never be recovered. It will never be quite clear to her what happened, those gaps in time which she wished desperately to fill. She made peace with that. As Karin told her, she doesn't have to like it but to accept it and acceptance means simply acknowledging without judgment. For Brandi, acceptance meant slowly letting go of some of the anger and resentment, of transitioning to a survivor. It didn't mean she was well, but that she had made great strides.

Her evening is filled with soft caresses and even soft, exploratory kisses. He looks her in the eyes when she

speaks. When she is silent, he stares at her, taking in her features with an appraising, approving eye. It was years since she was last looked at like that. They hold hands and Bryan runs his thumb over the delicate skin of her wrist. Electricity crackles - she imagines tiny blue sparks leaping between their flesh. He says that he wishes that the night would last forever, and she wishes for that too. They leave when the bar closes at 2 a.m.

When she returns home, her mind is rushing with the first flutters of love - *too soon*, she chides herself, but she doesn't care, needs to believe in hope. She also knows that no matter what happens with Bryan, or anyone else for that matter, life will continue. The dogs greet her with the familiar jingling of collars and she smiles, goes to her desk and opens a new notebook. There, in the still air of her apartment, she begins to hand write what will become her thesis, her memoir about moving to South Carolina and dealing with the abuse, the ghosts that have haunted her, the depression. The work pours out of her, though sometimes she struggles, as though she has been writing her book for years. She knows that no matter what she will write, write in a way that focuses more on expressing emotional truth than writing for others, that

she will silence her internal editor through meditation and gentle music, that she can finish the work and graduate.

From there, she is unsure where life will lead her. She will create, will always create, and she will keep becoming the person she's always wanted to be, a person she can live with. She also knows that mental illness will always be a struggle, that it is merely exacerbated by negative circumstances - like her marriage to Nick - and not caused by them. There is a peace in that too, in knowing that there is cause for her the emotions that are so often overwhelming. She came so far from the patient who didn't really want to tell her story, who didn't know what she wanted, what her purpose was, or why she should continue to live. Now, her purpose is clear: to heal through writing and to help others heal through writing. It is something she can wrap around her when she is struggling, almost tangible like the afghan her grandmother crocheted her when she was a little girl. Though there is pain, there is also great strength inside of her and that strength is beautiful. She has faced the wreck, received it, and can now begin again.