Tumbleweed Road: A Novel

Erin Trauth
University of South Florida

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Tumbleweed Road: A Novel

by

Erin Trauth

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of English
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Major Professor:  John Henry Fleming, Ph.D.
Ira Sukrungruang, M.F.A.
Suzanne Strempek Shea, B.A.

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Tumbleweed Road: A Novel

Erin Trauth

ABSTRACT

Tumbleweed Road is a novel that began as a short story in a fiction workshop many years ago. The novel is set in the contemporary American South and traces one tumultuous summer in the life of a 14-year-old girl named Carolina Wells. The plot of the story is as follows: Carolina, a 14-year-old girl from Crow, Florida, does not understand her mother and remembers little about her past. In the story, we meet Carolina, her mother, “Mama,” and two brothers, Johnny and Austin. Carolina does not understand her mother and her wild nature. At home, Carolina is forced to care for her two younger brothers. Carolina’s father is long gone out of the picture, and Carolina was always told by her mother that she has no father – no one worth speaking of, anyway. Carolina can’t remember why her father is gone, but remembers the fight that caused him to leave, and she blames her mother entirely for his leaving when she was just a toddler. Carolina questions her Mama about the disappearance of her father, but she refuses to even speak his name. Carolina desperately wants normalcy, family, and love – through a series of life-changing events involving a range of characters, including a spiritual woman across Tumbleweed Road, a mysterious girl named West and an old friend named Cade, this novel is about Carolina’s quest to find her place in this world.
Introduction

Tumbleweed Road is a partial novel manuscript in fulfillment of my M.F.A. degree requirements at the University of South Florida. This novel manuscript began many years ago as a short story in an undergraduate creative writing elective course at the University of North Florida. This story, titled “The Guest,” would later become Chapter One of Tumbleweed Road. Following the encouragement on my undergraduate instructor, I continued my narrator’s story after the course, and I continued to write and revise the story through the many fiction workshops I took during my M.F.A. graduate studies at the University of South Florida. Through the constructive criticism of my many instructors and peers at USF, I have developed this story into a working draft of a novel that I hope to someday publish for mainstream readership.

In writing the Tumbleweed Road manuscript, I hope to capture the essence of growing up as a poor female in the contemporary American South. In detailing the events of one young girl’s journey to adulthood through the discovery of familial secrets, a budding sexuality, and what it means to be a friend and family member, I hope to reach out to young adults struggling with finding themselves in an ever-increasingly confusing world – especially the American South, where the role of the young female (in particular) is seemingly in constant evolution.

In learning the true past of her parents and of others in the small Florida town in which she resides, my narrator learns her place in the world. Tumbleweed Road, thus, is a
coming-of-age story about understanding the nature and meaning of family and of love in this ever-changing world. As a writer of fiction, I am also quite interested in examining the nature of the mother-daughter relationship, and this novel serves as a consideration of the roles each respective family member plays in the dynamics of one’s life.

In my time as an M.F.A. candidate at USF, I have learned the power of strict editing and how to truly capture my characters’ voices within my fiction. The guidance and feedback from my many professors has been instrumental in finding my voice as an author, and I am quite grateful for their assistance over the last three years.

It should be noted that this is an incomplete draft and is only a reflection of about half of the novel’s entirety. Upon completion of my M.F.A. degree, I plan to finish this novel manuscript and seek publication for a mainstream audience.
Chapter One

There’s a whole lot to being the town slut’s daughter, especially in a town as small as a flea’s butt, like Crow, Florida. First off, you can’t go showing up to church masses or youth group meetings, even when you’re crying and don’t have a soul to talk to about missing your Daddy, who’s been long gone since you were a baby for no real good reason but your Mama’s man-loving ways. If you do show up in the Lord’s house, they’ll get on stage and then call you up there in a hot, Jesus-loving minute, trying to get you to cry for your Mama’s life of damnation and then get you to rope her into coming in next Sunday so that they can banish the devil clear from her soul, once and for all.

It’s not like I asked for this, I tried to tell them the one time I’d, not knowing, walked into First Baptist Church of Crow, thinking that they’d want to actually help me instead. It’s not like I prayed to the Lord asking to be the one girl in town without a real Daddy. The one girl with a Mama that stays out until all hours of the night, howling at the moon when she should be home keeping to her children.

My life, my name…it all went so horribly off mark from how I would have planned it, had the big guy upstairs thought enough to ask me. I could have been one of the Adkins from Veranda, a family of dentists and future dentists, a perfect family of four with even more perfect veneered teeth. I could have been a Smith, which would of let me seep between the cracks of public school pestering, you know, let me endure the easy stuff – just pokes in the ribs, snickers down the hallway – instead of the all-out hell I’d got my whole life so far just for being my Mama’s daughter. Instead, the God of Family
Placement, that God that decides which young Mama’s belly our tiny souls ends up in, put me, Carolina Ann, in the belly of a Wells woman.

And even if I wanted to pretend like I wasn’t a part of it – the whole wild-Mama-running-free-through-the-night-with-everyone-else’s-Daddy-but-my-own thing – it wasn’t like in Crow you could hide from anything, anyway. I swear you couldn’t fart in Crow without someone clear across town knowing it within a few minutes.

Take crazy Miss Winnie Louis, widow of Abe Louis, the old man who’d opened Crow’s first grocery store, Winnie’s. Miss Winnie had a real, live, hole in her throat, right in the center of her wrinkly neck, about the size of a sand dollar. Well, each and every time my brothers and me saw her at the store near the checkout counters, Miss Winnie liked to tell us on her voice box machine that she got the hole from something called emphysema, that Mr. Louis had made her so crazy all the time when he was alive that she’d had to light up ten times a day for the four million years she’d walked the earth. But behind her back, we sometimes said that the hole in her throat was from all those Crow secrets simmering, just raring to bust out of her mouth; she couldn’t keep one single word of gossip in her tiny withered body, no matter who it hurt to hear it. And though Miss Winnie lived at least three miles away from our house off Tumbleweed Road, she somehow could report on each and every guest that ran through our door, no matter how late in the night they’d come in or out.

Every time I went grocery shopping with Mama, Miss Winnie liked to tell me everything she knew, especially when it was about my Mama. She’d follow us through the store, acting like she was stocking the aisles, but really she was whispering things at me left and right from behind stacks of tomatoes or towers of sweet red wine. I didn’t
stop her from telling me things, because I knew she’d known my Daddy, and I wanted to know just about everything I could about him. And even though she whispered mostly to me, I think she wanted my Mama to hear her.

Soon as I was old enough to start asking questions, Miss Winnie started whispering to me from behind the meat freezers while my Mama wasn’t looking, things like: “I’m sorry, little one, but your Mama was just asking for it. Your Daddy loved that girl with all his heart, I saw it myself, honey. Most charming, sweet young man I’ve ever met.” I never did understand what Miss Winnie meant about Mama “asking” for it when I was younger – she wouldn’t tell me with Mama right there and she always said I wouldn’t understand until I was older. But I did know one thing pretty early in life: my daddy being gone now was all my Mama’s fault. It couldn’t have been anything but, because the way Mama was, it’s no wonder he’d up and disappeared before I ever even got to know him. But I knew he was out there somewhere, just waiting for me to escape Crow for good and finally find him.

~~~

It was halfway through the summer right before I started high school, the summer I turned 14, and we were sweating through one of the worst droughts Crow had ever seen. It seemed like everyone in town had been irritated with one another since the start of June. Sure, we’d had the usual quick summer storms, but it seemed like there was no quenching the earth’s thirst. I didn’t like rain much myself, but the grass and the crops all over town were so burnt-up, and everyone seemed so cranky from the dry air and their dying plants and crops, the Lord even had me praying for the rain to come falling down from the sky once and for all.
But before that rain finally came that summer, something happened, something big that up and changed everything I’d ever known about my life – the summer that took all my truths, turned them upside down, and then sent them clanging down Tumbleweed Road every which way, right into the sticky Florida air.
Chapter Two

It was mid-July, the left-over firecrackers and bottle rockets from the Fourth long since gone, all of them lit and shot into the dry summer air for all to see, leaving me and my brothers with nothing to do again but swim the creek, hide from mosquitoes, and try not to sweat to death. Mama was about to have one of her friends come over for the night. She’d been real sweet the day before–buttered us up good, you know. She’d gone into town and brought things home in a big, floppy brown box from somewhere she called "the helping place," all smiles when she’d come busting through the front door with the box wedged tight between her arms. She’d been doing this since I was tiny – bringing us presents before she had one of friends over for the night – but I’d always known the presence of that big old frayed and weathered box meant a little more than a helping hand.

This time, the box had gross foods like canned green beans and candied yams and then some pencils for school in the fall, but it also had a few stuffed animals for Johnny and Austin, a couple Care Bears and hand-me down Raggedy Ann dolls that Mama said “had already been loved on a little bit.” Some of them had holes or missing eyes, but Mama said that meant they had character, and my baby brothers didn’t seem to mind much. Soon as she plopped the box down, Austin, the youngest of us three at five years old, scooped up as many of the toys as he could and went running for his room.

“Get back here, you stupid a-hole!” Johnny screamed after him.
I squinted my eyes at him, scrunched my lips so he knew I meant business.

“Johnny, I told you, no cussing!”

“I didn’t even say the bad part,” he said, hardly looking in my direction. “Besides, Carolina, I’m eight now. Eight-year-olds are allowed to say a-hole, duhhh!” Then, he went running, probably to pull at Austin’s hair ‘til he gave up half the toys. “Carolina is an a-hole – an-a-hole! – an-a-hole!” Johnny sang as he high-tailed it down the hallway.

Mama hardly even noticed him, just sighed and shook her head. She reached into the box again and handed me a bottle of Pretty-In-Pink nail polish and a box of Junior Mints, but I could see right away that the polish was runny and the mints were melted. “Still good?” she said.

I smiled up at her, then went to the front porch to go paint my nails with the watery polish and suck the minty chocolate juice from the bottom of the Junior Mints box anyway. “Thanks, Mama,” I said.

Mama went off to the kitchen to make me and Johnny and Austin cookies from a packet she’d picked up at The Dollar General. The night before she had her friend over, she always stopped by there, picked up cookie mix and some beeswax tea lights to fire up so the house didn’t stink so damn bad. Not like that’s gonna help a whole lot, though, I said aloud to no one in particular, looking in from the porch at our living room. A pink hibiscus-print couch was decorated with two snowman pillows that said “Let It Snow,” even though, being dead in the middle of Florida and all, I’d never seen snow in my whole life – and it wasn’t even cool inside, either, ever since our air conditioner had finally had it for good just a few weeks before. A tapioca-pudding-yellow rug sat covered by a scrap purple mat, torn down the middle to reveal deep dirt stains, remnants of roach
poop and bits of white kitty litter that never seemed to get swept up all the way. Tiny tumbleweeds of thick black dog hair sat formed in each corner of the room, at the foot of each couch and chair. A sole picture, some pink and blue sailboat scene under cracked glass that Mama’d got from that “helping place,” hung sideways on the far wall. The tiny TV screen stared blank at me, caked in a dust thicker than a fresh coat of pollen on tumbleweeds, dead for good from a cable bill long unpaid.

The outside of the house, where I sat now, was even worse. The porch was rotting away, its wood moist and chomped away each day by bulging, hungry termites. The house’s paint peeled off in every which direction and green algae climbed the sides like vines might. Soft dirt splotched most of the front yard, and where grass did grow, it was long and dry, and really looked a whole lot more like wheat than anything else.

With Mama’s reputation in town and all, I couldn’t understand why she didn’t care more about what our house looked like or that every day we were being taken over more and more by fat, beady roaches.

They came every night, and I’d always been amazed by them when I was really young, how they must have shacked up in the walls and cradled their half-helmet bodies into the wood of the roof until night finally crept in. And then, as the giant moon appeared in the wide, clear, sky, the hundreds, maybe thousands of them would come scuttling out for their nightly parade. They scurried up and down the dark walls in their blind little march, across the tiles of the kitchen floor, searching for the leftovers that sat sticking in the kitchen sink, stray crumbs in shelf corners, sticky remnants of beer and clumps of cigarette ashes left unclaimed.
The fact that Mama waited days on end to touch the dirty dishes or to put anything away that she thought wouldn’t spoil in a few days’ time meant the roaches had a constant playground. Our kitchen and dining room was their fortress. I imagined sometimes that the king of the roach colony would send out messages to the other roach families in town – “hey, get over to this house – it’s the dirtiest in town!” And those little suckers multiplied like the world was about to end and came running through each night in search of something, anything, to get their tiny tentacles into. And with the heat and dryness of that summer swirling through the air, it seemed the roaches were only getting more frantic.

After the cookies were out of the oven, Mama called a family meeting, calling for Johnny and Austin to follow her from the living room out to the porch with the wave of her rough, sundrenched hands, and we all sat on the porch with glasses of milk and crispy oatmeal raisin Dee-Lites that usually made the whole night feel sweeter, and made us more comfortable in the sticky summer air. We sat and chewed them as quietly as we could – Mama had this thing against chewing noises, mostly because of Great Grandma Honey’s famous death-by-choking on a cucumber slice a few years back. Since then, Mama’d made us suck everything we ate down to tiny pieces before we swallowed it. Even ice had to be whittled down; if she caught us chomping down on anything, she’d start her yelling and screaming.

Mama, with her wild parched hair swirling around her, sat and had her cookies too, with a side of what she called “the spiciest Bloody Mary Florida’s ever seen.” Usually she had something wrong with her – an aching back or a bout of violent skin rashes spread all over neck from the skeeters – but on nights like these, nights before she
had a new friend over, Mama was nothing but a big old smile, staring out in to the
distance like Crow was her own little paradise, just waiting to be taken.

“Thank you for the cookie, Mama,” Austin mumbled with his mouth open and
full of food, smiling like he was sitting in the middle of Disney World and not stinky old
Crow.

The three of them seemed to like Crow a whole lot. Mama had her men and her
bars, and the boys had the woods, the creek, and each other. And for the tourists, Crow
was a place they came from all over the world to put on their bathing suits, slather their
bodies with fat globs of sunscreen, and soak up the rays of the sweltering Florida sun. On
the far end of Crow was Veranda, land of stucco Florida mansions with red tops that
made them look Spanish; people went there to golf and spend their gobs of vacation
money on stuff like flamingo keychains and coconut coffee mugs. Really, Veranda was
just a nicer part of Crow, but it seemed like the people there liked to make sure we all
knew they were in a separate place.

Mama’d always said there wasn’t any shame in where we lived. But I thought
Sidegate Mobile Home Park was really nothing more than a big old dump with a few
hundred trailers in it. The trailers sat in two big ovals on the edge of Chutney’s Creek,
and police cruisers were constantly patrolling our streets, looking for the latest stolen bike
or answering the call for some woman who’d been slapped clear across the living room
by her man.

In the front of Sidegate, the trailers were all right as far as trailers go – fresh paint,
cut yards. But the farther you went back, the worse they got. Most in the back weren’t
homes for anybody at all; they’d long since been ruined by fires or abandoned all
together, left only for the armadillos and squirrels to go scrounging. We lived right in the middle of the park, right by Chutney’s Creek, which was actually more like a big old man-made lake rather than a creek, but in Crow, they called that oceanfront property.

But for me, Crow was the one place in the world I wanted to leave and never return to. Nothing here in Crow for me but a crazy Mama and my two whiny little brothers. And I’d of run away right then and there, but watching Johnny and Austin now as they munched away hungrily on the cookies Mama’d made, I knew they still needed me there for just a while longer. They wouldn’t survive a second without me.

"I met a real nice man at the Jiffy today, babies," Mama said, and suddenly, the cookie in my mouth turned sour. "Johnny, sugar, his name is Jasper. Kinda rhymes, doesn't it, baby?"

*No, Ma, not at all.* I nodded my head up and down anyway.

"Yeah, Mama, sure does," Johnny said. "John-neeey; Jaaasper," he said, sounding it out.

"He's gonna fix the air conditioning tomorrow – it really needs fixing, don’t it?" she went on, a big smile pasted across her face. "Y’all don't need to be sweating in this damn house all summer once I start school. He's gonna help us fix that right up."

I stared at Mama, watching the way her long beige hair ran over her shoulders, permanently reddened by the harsh Florida sun. My Mama’s hair was parched as could be – I knew then that hair is dead, but hers was much beyond that point, eight feet under, blanched, bleached and ripped at with a comb until it finally lost its natural shine. Her thick mane glowed with the eerie white tone of peroxide. Each strand ran in a ravaged
ripple down her back and resembled a piece of ripped straw, the cuticle split and shredded in infinite places. It’s like she didn’t even notice the damage that’d been done.

She flipped her hair then, I’m sure thinking of what to say next, thinking of the ways to make us connect with this new man before we had to meet him.

This, as usual, is when the urge to scream began. Bring home my own goddamn Daddy, and you won’t need to do all this, to cycle through Crow’s finest like old underwear, my insides screamed. But Mama’d thrown his love away, like it’d meant nothing, and it meant nothing to her that I was missing a Daddy in my life so much. It was this Jasper who she wanted now, I guess.

"Carolina," Mama said, breaking my thought, her eyes meeting mine. "Jasper’s got beautiful blue eyes just like you, baby. I expect you to treat him just as nice as you did Daryl Joe, okay?" She looked at me like she was reciting some rule from the Bible, as if to convey just how strongly she already felt about the man she met at the gas station that very day, that we should treat him just as well as we did the last one that had stayed around for a month or so, and then ran off just as quick as the sun sets.

All I could do was nod again; that’s all there was to do. Mama took a long, deep swing of her Bloody Mary, the glass sweating almost as much as we were.

Without another word, she turned her gaze onto the darkening horizon, never looking back into my eyes again that night. I passed the rest of my cookies on to Johnny and Austin, who kept eating happily. My stomach churned, and I could feel the tingle of dread pull up and down, back and forth at my insides.
Chapter Three

The next day, after swimming lessons, my strawberry hair feeling cleaner from
the chlorine than it had in weeks, Mama picked the three of us up from the Y.

“Mama’s gotta get ready for Jasper to come over, babies... no man wants to fix no
air conditioning for a homely lady,” she laughed, tugging a little too hard at her hair as
she pulled our rusty Coupe Deville into the cracked drive that led to our house.

From her purse, she handed me five crumpled dollars. I knew the drill. Nah, we
didn’t have money to keep the water running most days of the year, but Mama needed us
out of her hair so she could get ready for Jasper, so we got to spend five whole dollars to
walk down to Collins’ Convenience for a chiller.

Mama ran to her room to paint herself in reds and pinks, and I, five bucks in hand,
loaded Johnny and Austin into a Radio Flyer that had just been brought to us from “the
helping place” the day before.

Without looking back, I pulled them along the curvy red road that lead into town.
Honestly, I really didn’t mind all that much going up to Collins’, because that meant I
might get to see Cade for the first time this whole summer. Cade Collins and I had met on
the big stinky school bus that had rolled up on our first day of going to Peachtree Middle
School. When he’d plopped down beside me after getting on at a Veranda stop – where
the rich kids lived, but only three stops after mine at Tumbleweed Road since we lived
right on the school district border line – I was horrified.
A boy. Next to me. In jeans ripped at the knees and a faded Auburn Tigers hat, I thought he looked ready to play a game of baseball, certainly not dressed for the first day of oh-my-Lord-I’m-the-little-fish-at-this-school-now. I thought he looked a mess.

“You got gym first thing or something?” I said.

He stuck his tiny pink tongue out at me and told me I looked like I was dressed for a beauty pageant or something. It’d taken me hours to choose my light lilac button down dress (so what if I had only two to choose from). My chin-length hair was pulled back with two plastic barrettes. Even at eleven years old then, I knew school – behaving and getting good grades – would be my way out of Crow forever, and I took it seriously, real seriously, thank you very much, I told him.

But then he smiled and rolled his eyes, looked me over again, and then said, “I’m Cade. From Alabama. Just moved here. I don’t know anyone on this bus, do you?”

I wanted to say I was the most popular girl at school, and I’d love to introduce him to everyone; we’d all just be marvelous friends. Truth is, yes, this was Crow – I knew everyone, and everyone knew me. Except the only thing I was popular for was being that girl with the crazy Mama and being just as poor as a dog locked up in the shelter.

“I know a few people,” I said. “They’re all right.”

Within days, Cade had made quick friends with the popular kids at Peachtree, especially the girls, who all seemed to love the way his hair curled in tiny ringlets on his forehead, the way his big white smile could make you laugh, even in math class.

So, I figured Cade would forget me, and quick, but even after he made friends with everyone else who would never even get caught talking to me at school, we got even closer. Every day on the 20-minute bus ride there and back, Cade and I talked and
laughed; though he was nice to them at school, he liked to tell me all about the popular kids and their all-out snootiness – in Alabama, his family hadn’t had much money at all until his Daddy got a promotion to Florida, so he said he was like a secret spy for the “other side.”

Soon enough, Cade became my one true friend. Even when I’d shown up to the first day of the seventh grade with a big old chocolate stain down the front of my shirt because all we’d had in the house to eat was a Nesquick packet and mayonnaise, Cade had defended me when the girls said I had dirt stains all over me. Then, in eighth grade, when a roach from home went scuttling out from my backpack right in the middle of Pre-Algebra, Cade was the one who crouched beneath my desk, slipped a piece of notebook paper around the roach, curled up the sides, and whispered, “I got it,” before most of the class had even noticed.

But Cade and I had only gotten so close these past few years. He was always trying to invite me out to parties or to come over to his house, but I could never go to the parties because I was watching my brothers, and if I went to his house, I’d have to eventually invite him to mine.

And then there were summers. Every year, Cade went away on fancy summer vacations to the Florida Keys with his family, so I never got to see him unless I caught him when he worked a shift for his Grandpa up at Collins’ every once and a while toward the end. So now, almost to Collins’ with my brothers, my insides were dancing.

Austin broke my thoughts then; peered up at me from the little rusted wagon with a gaze that I just knew shouldn’t belong to a five-year-old. “Carolina, why don’t Daryl Joe wanna help me fix my bike no more?” he said, peering up at me through innocent
gray eyes. “Mama told me he would get me new wheels and spokes and a horn like Billy’s got...but I ain’t seen Daryl in forever.”

I kicked the rocks in front of me and squinted my eyes tight from the beaming afternoon glare. I didn’t know what to say. I never really did when Austin asked me things like that, about the men that had passed through. Like me, Johnny and Austin didn’t have their Daddy around anymore. But Johnny and Austin had each other, and were so young, too, that they didn’t seem to mind much and actually liked some of the guys Mama had around sometimes.

We made it to Collins’ and got what we always did, three Screwballs and a pint of Cherry Madness to take home to Mama. His grandpa, Old Man Collins, sitting stooped over the front counter of his store, gave us a knowing wink like we were kids without a care in the world, just sitting, enjoying some ice cream. The poor man, kind of falling apart in his 85 or so years of age, knew about as much as a blind skunk stuck in Chutney’s Creek, where all the homeless people hung out in town.

“Hey, Mr. Collins – is Cade home yet?” I said.

“Soon, sweet Carolina. Talked to him the other day, though, and he asked if you’d been by to see me for some ice cream.” He winked then, like he had a secret stuck right behind his eyes.

My stomach twisted a bit. Cade had asked about me? To his own grandpa?

I smiled at Old Man Collins, and then I scooted my brothers out of the front door. We sat on the rounded wooden fence and licked up our Screwballs, racing the heat before it could melt it all, getting my brothers giddy like it always did.
Austin pinched Johnny when he wouldn’t give up his gum at the bottom of the cup, and I hollered that I was telling Mama when we got home. I always said it as if when I told her, she would actually do something about it.

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We made it back home just before the sun went down, and Jasper, the new friend, was already there. His rusty old Cadillac, a real piece of work, was backed up into the front lawn like there wasn’t a driveway thirteen inches away from the grass. He and Mama were sitting on the front porch sharing a Marlboro Light, a cloud of smoke billowing between their bodies.

“My babies are back!” She stood to greet us, arms extended and flailing as though she hadn’t seen her own children in weeks, screaming like we’d been missing kids on a milk carton or something. I noticed she had the dress on, the one she bought from K-Mart in two colors because it made her legs look as long as a Daddy Long Leg spider’s, as Austin had pointed out to her right in the middle of the store a few days before. She also had on the lipstick – something she called Jupiter Storm Red. The lipstick looked kind of harsh against her reddened skin, but she always wore it when we had our guests, and it always seemed to do the trick.

Jasper had blue eyes, all right – big, watery blue eyes with ugly red cracks running like lightning bolts through them. One of his eyebrows was shorter than the other. His skin was a faded leather color that reminded me of a horse saddle, caked with dirt in the crevices after you’d been out riding for a whole day. His round, watermelon-sized gut poked out from between a blue checkered flannel and acid-washed jeans, which
looked they’d never seen a wash bin. But then again, none of Mama’s guests ever seemed to clean up real well.

“Oh, Jasper! Meet my baby darlings. This is Carolina, she’s my little Mama-in-training,” she said as she brushed my head softly. “She just loves to take care of my little ones. You never would know she’s only thirteen, would you, Jasper? Look at her with my boys; she just loves being a lil’ Mama!”

“Yes sir, I do,” I said, smiling as hard as I could muster at the dipshit that looked me over. He put his greasy hand on mine, leaned toward me close, too close. He smelled like truck tires and mosquito spray. I held my breath.

“Hey, there, Caroline,” not even getting my damn name right. “I, uh, just fixed up the cooler for y’all; you don’t have to sweat no more inside. It’ll be real nice.” He drew back from our little embrace, and gave me a smile that revealed a mouthful of buttered teeth, a dingy yellow-brown that reminded me of popcorn kernels.

“And this is Johnny,” Mama said as her gaze fell down to my younger brother. “He’s my little future doctor – he just went and won the whole third grade spelling bee last year. He’s gonna be famous, Jasper, I just know it,” she beamed. “You better watch out for him.”

Johnny smiled, his mouth caked in dried ice cream, the whiteness forming a halo around his tiny mouth.

“And Austin, he’s my baby. He’s starting first grade in the fall.”

“I’m big now,” Austin said.

Jasper crouched down and tickled both my brothers, poking at their stomachs with a wrinkled index finger as they giggled. He looked satisfied as a stuffed swine, like he
had already won them over because he made them squeal, and I suddenly felt a tight ball forming in the pit of my stomach. Take deep breaths, I reminded myself, but then my breathing came quicker instead.

I suddenly remembered the pint of ice cream for Mama that was melting in the container beside me on the ground. I walked inside to put Mama’s Cherry Madness in a bowl for her like I always did, although I knew she wouldn’t eat it now, not with her guest there.

The first thing I noticed when I walked inside the house was how incredibly hot it still was. Actually, I swore that it was hotter than it had ever been that whole summer. I walked into the kitchen and pulled a stool up under the air conditioning vent. I held my breath, hoping for a moment that for once, Mama’d be telling the truth – that there’d be cold air blowing from the vent instead of sitting still and dead like it had all summer. I waved my hand in front of its grates.

Of course, there was not a single puff of cold air blowing from the vent. I looked out the kitchen window. Not even a sign of tools near the indoor unit we had bought last summer. So much for the air conditioner, I thought. I went back outside to get my brothers, and brought them in my room for a game of Yahtzee. As Johnny and Austin wrestled for control of the dice over and over again, I looked past them, wondering why I was even still there at all.

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At a little past nine, Mama came in to put Johnny and Austin to sleep in the futon they shared in their tiny little room at the corner of our house.
“I don’t wanna go to bed, Mama,” Austin said, scratching at his eyes in a way that let me know he was ready for it, even if he didn’t want to. “I wanna play with Carolina still.”

“Come on, dummy,” Johnny said, yanking at Austin’s ear.

Mama let me stay up later, and I got to work on the day’s dishes as she and Jasper sat on the porch, working on their twelfth or so shared cigarette. I watched them through the screen window as hot water poured over our old, blue chipped plates.

"Oh Jasss-per," she started, saying his name slowly in a deepened drawl that I’d seen women make for men on TV when they were about to climb into a bed together. "The last one, Daryl Joe, was just such a monster. He didn't do nothing right, just a goddamn loser. I still got bruises on my heart from him and I still got ‘em from the other bastards.” Her eyes misted over and her voice got thicker, like the hot air swirling through our house. "Every single one of ’em, honey.” She looked sad and empty, like she usually did, and I wondered then if she ever hurt for him deep down in the floor of her heart, if she ever looked at these guys and missed her first love, if she felt a burn for him.

The other half of me, the one that knows my Mama, said that it was just her always wanting something different; nobody was ever good enough or could keep her interested, it just so happened that my Daddy was the first. That’s the half I believed the most, because if she really did ever hurt for him, it didn’t seem to phase her much right then, as she leaned into Jasper a little closer, letting little smoke rings she had made billow from the corners of her mouth on to his chest. "I'm so glad you're different, sugar. I can already tell you’ll be a real good one, hon."

I watched the jerk nod like he thought so, too.
"I just wanna raise my babies," Mama went on. “They're all I care about, Jassssper, really. Aren't they just dolls?" I wanted to pop out for a minute, ask her when and where that raising thing was about to start on her end, but then Mama went in for the kill, the clincher she seemed to think really reeled 'em in. "I start classes at Jillian's House of Cosmetology tomorrow, and I'm just so excited, you know. I really wanna make somethin' of myself. And this could be a real good thing for me, Jasper...my babies here, my new career...me and you." Jasper swatted at a mosquito just long enough to take his eyes away from my mother's cleavage, moist and beaded with sweat. He grinned at her, and I shuddered, dropping the dish sponge into the water beneath me.

"Welp, your new life is startin' tonight, sweet thing." Jasper smiled back with a satisfied grin, knowing exactly what he'd be getting from this little speech of hers. And then I made the dishwater scalding hot, as hot as I could take it. I let it pour all over my fingers until I couldn't feel them anymore.

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An hour or so later, when she finally got to remembering I was still up, Mama made this huge production of putting me to sleep in front of Jasper. "Oh, my best girl and me, we always talk bunches before bedtime." I wondered when that had started happening and where I had been when it did, but didn't say a word.

In my bed, I contemplated this idea of her and me actually talking more as I fell asleep. I'd tried to get answers, truths in the past – anything out of her, really, about my Daddy, where he went, her reasons, her regrets – from her before, but every conversation ended with her swatting me away, like I was a mosquito trying to bite her cheeks. After
trying hard to ignore the sound of beer cans clinking open in the kitchen for an hour or two, I finally fell into dreams.

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I was in the middle of an intense dream, something involving a tall and hot-looking cowboy, when I heard it. It was first the whimper of the cowboy’s horse, until I realized my eyes were wide open and I was no longer dreaming. The sound, that sound, only slightly muffled, was what I always heard on the nights when Mama brought home a new friend – grunting from her bedroom, right next to mine.

Every single time this happened, I thought the same thing. Does she not know I could hear everything through our paper-thin wall?

I prayed, as I did each time, that Johnny and Austin wouldn't wake up. They were starting to ask me everything, and I could be sure they’d ask me about those noises if they ever woke up and heard them like I did.

I rolled over to cover my head with my pillow, and in the process, knocked over the glass of ice water sitting on my nightstand. Freezing water streamed on to my comforter, down through to my night shirt and sweating skin, and I cursed the water aloud. Then, I cursed my bed, I cursed the house, and I cursed my mother in the room next to mine.

I crawled out of bed, wide awake now, and I shuffled down the dark, crooked hallway to our kitchen. I turned on the kitchen light, and the scene that unfolded was all-too-familiar. The clock overhead read 4:28 a.m. What looked like hundreds of those beady cockroaches seemed to laugh at me as they scurried to the corners of the room from their previous posts on crud-stuck pots, running over the tops of emptied beer cans.
They loved summer nights like these, and they really seemed to love that I hated them living in our house.

At least twenty Milwaukee's Best cans littered the kitchen table and two green ashtrays were almost hidden by mountains of white and gray speckled ash. Mama's "Daddy Long Leg" dress was draped over a chair and Jasper's pit-stained T-shirt lay on the ugly linoleum floor. The pale moon's light from the kitchen window cast shadows I usually thought were beautiful, but not on nights like this. Nothing was beautiful about these nights.

I reached for a towel in the pantry to clean up the spill in my room, when I heard the creek of my mother's bedroom door, and I heard her stumble down the hall toward me.

"Baby, what are you doin' up, huh?" she asked innocently; as if it weren't her that woke me up in the first place. Her breath was sweet with liquor on my face, her eyes red, her twisted hair streaming wildly down a red man's flannel shirt that hardly covered her body.

"Go on and go to sleep, puddin'. Jack...Jas...Jasper went home... wasn't it so nice of him to fix up the air?" Her eyes glazed over and lost focus from mine, both of us knowing full well she was lying; that this house was hotter than hell itself, that that man hadn't even touched the air conditioner once in his time here.

“Sure, yeah, Mama, real nice,” I said.

"Go on now and get in bed, Carolina," Mama repeated, and her big eyes looked tiny all of a sudden. All I did was nod my head, it's all I ever could do. I turned down the hallway without a word, but I wanted so badly to turn around and kick her. I wanted to
shake her and ask her if it had ever occurred to her how very screwed up this all really
had become. I wanted to question her, to ask her why she kept me up every other night
and ask her why she couldn't be like every one else's mother. I wanted to scream.

*Jasper didn't fix a damn thing tonight, Mama. None of them ever have fixed this.*
*And they never will, either.*

Instead, knowing there would be no point in telling her this once more, I went
back to my bed, and listened to my mother softly cry herself to sleep in the room beside
me, trying hard, as I always did, to remember why she got rid of my Daddy – my kind,
sweet Daddy – in the first place if she missed having a good man around so bad. If she’d
really loved him like she’d said she did, why’d she make him leave? Why’d she send him
away in the first place like she did all these other men, if the truth was that she’d loved
him? Over time, I’d grown to expect this – her crying, like she never had had a chance in
the world for love.

What I didn’t expect that hot, stormy summer, though, is for all those answers, all
those truths I’d been missing for so long – just like when fallen baby Yellowhammers
know to flock right back to the nest where they belong – to come flying straight back my
direction before I even really started searching.
Chapter Four

The morning after Jasper left, Mama sent me up to Miss Winnie’s to pick up some red potatoes and oatmeal. We ate a whole lot of foods like that – Mama said that the heavy, wheaty stuff lasted much longer in our bellies when she didn’t have a the extra money to go around for groceries. Sometimes, between her paychecks, like now, all we had left in the house was a jar of Hellman’s mayonnaise and some Merita bread that had mold on the crust. Walking to Winnie’s with my stomach grumbling like an airboat engine and my skin sweating made me angry.

“Hey, honey,” Miss Winnie said as I walked through the door. A tiny bell clanged each time someone came in, so there really was no escaping her, even if I didn’t feel like dealing with it that day.

“Hey, Miss Winnie. Just picking up some food for the boys.”

“Where’s your Mama?” she said.

“I don’t know, Miss Winnie. Getting ready for her hair class, I think. She starts today and she’s gotta get stuff from Jessie’s Beauty Supply.”

“You mean to tell me she starts up those classes, those classes she had to up and quit working here to take, and she had that greasy man over last night? And what time did he leave y’all’s house last night?”

I looked at that big old hole in her throat and imagined plugging it with one of the potatoes in my hand, shutting her up forever.
“I really don’t know, Miss Winnie,” I said, and turned the corner to the cereal aisle. The sound of Miss Winnie muttering about my Mama through her voice box machine sounded like crickets buzzing after me, and I imagined them crawling and poking at my legs as I walked through the store. As I left, I stomped on every single one of them ‘til the drone of their little wings was finally gone.

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When I got back from Winnie’s, I went over to work at Miss Zell’s house, just across the street down Tumbleweed Road. Miss Zell had lived across Tumbleweed Road for as long as I could remember. It was just a few long steps from our drive to hers, less if you were wearing boots; I’d measured. When I was a little girl, I used to think she had once been a movie star in another country. She had a stream of white, flowing hair that I’d only seen down once; most of the time, she kept it curled into a tiny puffed ball at the nape of her neck that looked a lot like a wild rabbit’s cottontail. Her skin was a perfect golden amaretto color, like she’d been just sitting at the beach working on her tan for the past few years, but for as old as she was, she didn’t have many wrinkles at all on her heart-shaped little face. In fact, even after the two summers since I’d been sent to help Miss Zell with her chores, she didn’t really look like she’d aged at all. “Just got good old genes, sweetie,” she’d said one day after she caught me staring at her hands, the place where Mama always said you could tell a woman’s real age.

Miss Zell was always dressed in bright-colored pants suits like she had somewhere important to be. Sometimes, I watched her from my window, out picking grapefruit from her tree in the backyard with heels on. But I never once saw her shiny red Cadillac leave the driveway to her tiny white house.
I liked to imagine she’d been famous in a movie across the ocean, maybe in Italy or Australia or somewhere exotic, far away from this town, and had been so beloved by her fans that she had had to run away, escape to the hole of a town Crow was. That was the only reason, I’d always figured, Miss Zell never had anyone come to visit her in her home – she wanted it that way, just had to keep a low profile and all being as world-famous as she was.

She had a strong, quiet way about her that seemed opposite from Mama, like she’d been through some bad things in her life, too, but had still come out warm and peaceful on the other end instead of so wild like Mama. I never saw Mama talk to Miss Zell much, they seemed to have always had this arrangement that I would go to help Miss Zell, just as soon as I was old enough.

Whenever I was sent over to help her, she’d fix me brimming paper Dixie cups of lukewarm Hi-C fruit punch, and kept it coming the whole time I hung clothes on the rusty poles along her back porch, weeded her garden, or clipped at coupons for milk and toilet paper from the Crow Neighborhood Gazette. She was always smiling at me, like I’d just picked up and volunteered to help instead of her asking my mother to send us over. “Sweet babies,” she always called my brothers and me when she saw us, and I’d grown quickly to love her. And besides, she paid me $5 a day.

Now, with my angry feelings brimming up like storm water on the creek, just waiting to spill over, I needed Miss Zell’s help. She seemed to know just what to say to calm me down, like she was speaking words God had sent down just for me. Miss Zell was like my one connection to the good Lord himself, since she spent most every
morning at First Baptist Church of Coquina and all, praying and singing and all that church-going stuff I’d figured out a long time ago wasn’t for me.

So, while pulling down clothes from her clothesline outside, I asked her about my feelings of rage.

“Miss Zell, how can I stop them?” I asked. “I mean, I just wanna bust out screaming.”

“Well, you just have to hold it in, sweetheart,” she said.

“I’ve tried to. But those feelings, they wanna take over. I mean, how am I supposed to get to heaven someday with all this hate rising up inside me?”

Miss Zell look startled for a minute, and then sighed. “You’ve just gotta do more good than bad in this world, honey. Ain’t nothing gonna stop those feelings. You just can’t act on whatever you’ve got swirling around in that little head of yours.”

“But how? Mama’s driving me crazy. She’s got another stupid guy…”

“Well, honey, Pastor Donahue always says that all of our lives, no matter how different they seem, are flowing in to the very same river. That’s the river that forks at heaven and hell, sweetheart. You hold that hate off, or your life’s gonna flow the wrong way someday. You gotta try to love them.”

“But Miss Zell, how am I supposed to be so good all the time, when there’s so much evil out there? How can I protect myself from it all without fighting back?”

“You just gotta find the joy you do have in your life, Carolina. You gotta close your eyes and let the river take your life the right way. Just as soon as you start trying to control the current, baby, you’re gonna get sent the wrong direction. You let those waters take you, and he’ll do the rest.”
The thing is, the joy in my life wasn’t even anywhere in Crow. Miss Zell was always talking about this “he,” this big guy up in the clouds who was supposed to be watching over me. I wanted to tell her that if someone was really looking out for me, Carolina Ann, they would have put me in the belly of another woman, someone other than my mama. They would have put me somewhere, anywhere but Crow, where I could actually survive.

“Miss Zell, I can’t seem to get anything from this ‘he’ of yours.”

She was silent a while, and folded two shirts before she said anything else.

Finally, she spoke. “Carolina, honey, do you ever pray to the Lord?”

“I used to try,” I said. “But I don’t really know who I’m praying to anymore. I’ve never heard anything back from him, so I stopped.”

“That’s a shame, sweetheart. But the Lord works in his own time,” she said.

“I’m plain sick of waiting, Miss Zell. It’s not fair. What’d I do to deserve to this life? I mean, all at once, you know?”

“Sometimes, honey, lightning strikes just one tree out of a whole forest. The strike don’t spread, the fire don’t spread – nothing. Just that one tree’s hit, and there can be two next to it on either side left standing unharmed, while that poor tree’s left changed forever. Ain’t nothing but a choice God made. The tree can’t change it.”

My eyes rolled back. More of this stuff from Pastor Donohue. More of this stuff straight from someone I really didn’t understand.

But then, her eyes lit. “You wait here, Carolina.” She set her drink down on the patio table and walked into the house.
A few minutes later, she came back carrying a small wooden box. The box held a flat, turquoise rock in the center had scratches all over its dark mahogany grain. I could tell from the careful way Miss Zell held the box – her two frail hands gripped firmly in the center – that this box meant something real and something important to her. She sat back down and opened the box in her lap. I wanted so badly to peer inside, to see the secrets it held about Miss Zell and her lives, but I kept my neck straight and waited. Miss Zell mumbled to herself as she rummaged, and every so often, a small smile formed at the corners of her lips.

“Ah,” she said, lifting a tiny gold necklace from the box. “Here he is.” She cupped the necklace in her hand tight, as if saying goodbye, and placed it in to my lap. “This is Saint Anthony. He’s the Patron Saint of Lost Things. I know you feel like you’re missing some things in your life, sweetheart. But you talk to him; he’ll listen to you now. You take this home, honey. For your birthday.”

She handed it to me. I stared at the tiny detail etched in to the plated gold – a man’s somber face, staring back at me. I wasn’t sure about talking to a necklace. “What do I say?”

“Honey, you talk to him about the things that are lost to you. It could be a person. It could be a soul, or a love you’re missing. You just talk to him, and he’ll help you get it back in one way or another.”

I wasn’t so sure how this gold-faced man would get me my Daddy back. If he was anything like this Lord guy, he was just gonna sit in my pocket and ignore me, even if I was downright screaming his name for help. But at this point, gasping for air in the middle of this parched old summer, just about anything was worth trying.
Chapter Five

After Jasper’s first visit to our house, the summer days started chugging along like they always did, the smell of sweat and cigarette smoke churning together in thick circles in our house, the sound of bullfrogs and crickets screaming us to sleep every night. Every day that summer, me and Johnny and Austin swam at the same YMCA downtown, and I did the same weed-picking and clothes-hanging for old Miss Zell next door. And every night, Johnny and I sat on the porch and watched the same flock of screeching Yellowhammers fly over the ditch in our backyard at sunset. That summer, for some reason, I started dreaming the same dream every night. I dreamed those Yellowhammers just one day picked up and flew far, far away, never coming back to Florida, never coming back near our creaky house again. One of them cawed down to me as he flew that he knew where my Daddy was. He sang that he could take me away from this place and bring me to a better life, somewhere amazing, where my Daddy would take care of me and where I was always supposed to be. But in my dream, my legs were thicker than oak tree trunks, wider than the creek, even thicker than the sea. My legs couldn’t carry me away, and those Yellowhammers didn’t have the strength to hold me. I knew I couldn’t follow them – not just yet.

So, now, all I had to do was wait for school to start up again so I’d be out of this house and on my way to Jackson High School, one more step closer to getting out of here to go find my family.
It was by chance, a little splash of luck, that I was even able to go to Jackson. Our house, by the grace of God, was just on the border of the Crow and Veranda school districts. And when I say just on the border, I mean the faded red dirt line that separated the two school districts literally ran straight through our back yard. All the kids to the left of the line had to go to Crow’s Meridian Gables School of Discovery, a high school that had a dropout rate of around 43%, I’d read in the county newsletter once. Those were some remorseful chances of survival, if you asked me.

It seemed like if you were a boy and went to Meridian, then you took up auto shop in the ninth grade, and then you became a mechanic after three years or so. If you were a girl and went to Meridian, you ended up pregnant by your sophomore year. And then you married one of the mechanics. That's just the way it was. I had nothing against babies or mechanics, but something told me there was more to life that I had to see before settling down in Crow with a man with perpetually dirty fingernails.

If you went to school at Jackson in Veranda, on the other hand, you had "a world of opportunity," as the pamphlets exclaimed in big, bubbly cursive letters. Jackson had a real football team, the kind that makes it to state every year and has real cheerleaders and fans in blue t-shirts carrying signs at every game. The school was one huge, brick building, built in 1901 and tinted to a pale shade of brown by the harsh Florida summer sun. Flowy, gray Spanish moss trees lined the brimstone walkways. There were bright Magnolia bushes planted all along the sidewalks, and the school was one of those historical places that people on the History Channel always mentioned when they talked about Florida. And, best of all, Jackson High School was where Cade would be going to school in the fall.
I knew that it was the place for me, and I told Mama so starting the day I had started eighth grade.

"Mama, next year, I have to go to Jackson," I said that day, after Howie Kingston, a 12-year-old future Meridian mechanic, teased me on the bus ride home, said he was surprised I didn’t already have a few babies with different daddies just like my Mama.

"And why's that, baby?" Mama asked, hardly looking up from her National Enquirer, her attention focused on a picture of Will Smith's latest girlfriend. Mama herself had gone to Meridian Gables. “Meridian not good enough for you?” she said.

"No, Mama, it is. But Howie Kingston pinched me for no reason on the bus and said I have fat on my belly like I go to Meridian or something. And I just don't want to have a baby next year, Mama."

“Carolina, you're being flat crazy. For one, you’ve gotta be gold-plate rich to drive your kid all the way up there to Jackson every day." She snorted, nostrils flaring. "And just because you go to Meridian doesn't mean you're going to get knocked up."

I wasn't having this. There was no way I was changing diapers next year, and no way I was going to the school that made her in to the selfish old person she was.

"Oh, yes it does, Mama. Shannon Fitzpatrick, you know, down Tumbleweed road – she was so nice last year. She never even hung around boys, Mama. And then she went to Meridian."

I leaned into the billowing cigarette smoke forming a halo around Mama's head for dramatic effect, trying to get her wavering attention. "And, then… BAM! Knocked up with twins a year later. And Mama, I asked them – ‘cause we live right on the school line,
we get to choose. I just have to take an earlier bus. You won’t even have to drive me, Mama.”

"Carolina, get out of my face," Mama said, shooing me away with yellowed nails. "You go to whatever school you want. It’s up to you. But don’t you get there with those rich little brats and decide you don’t want to go no more because they all think their shit doesn’t stink like ours. Now quit botherin' me."

I was half happy she’d said yes, half surprised she hadn’t given me a harder time about it. She flipped her hair at me to say the conversation was over.

I stared. Whenever she flipped her hair at me, like that, I wondered if that was part of what had made my Daddy love her in the first place. Mama’d been so beautiful when she was younger, I remembered from that picture, and I often imagined her whipping it that same way at my Daddy ever since, except she’s in another place, ringing up groceries before he bags them at Miss Winnie’s, where they’d first met so long ago. When I see my Mama through his eyes, she’s young and selfless, and he’s falling in love with her streaming, whitish-blond strands, getting lost in their gleam, falling headfirst, eyes wide, nose-unplugged. She’s giggling at him, throwing lemons and peppers into plastic bags to help him, and he’s imagining his fingers running uncharted through her hair, his life unfolding wide before him and before her. I imagine him loving her so deeply, it’s the stuff of movies, and then, I’m rocked back to reality.

That was then, and this was now; Mama’d thrown his love away like yesterday’s newspaper, like it’d meant nothing to her at all, and now it meant nothing to her that I was missing a Daddy in my life. These things, it seemed, were long gone from her heart.
But the good news was, I’d gotten myself my ticket out of Crow. I’d get good grades, stay out of trouble – and I’d get myself a big scholarship at a big college that had a library I could study in and look up my family tree. Before I knew it, I’d be on my way.

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So, now, with school looming in the hot air just a few weeks away, I just had to survive the rest of this damn summer, and also live through yet another one of Mama’s big birthday hurrahs. This year, I’d be fourteen birthdays down – only four more ‘til I was out of this place forever.

Mama tried real hard to make a huge deal out of our birthdays; they were Mama’s most favorite holidays of them all. Christmas and Thanksgiving she didn’t like much – too much to do for a day she said she wasn’t even sure why we celebrated. Halloween was just an excuse for us kids to get filled with sugar and bounce off the walls all night long, she said, and Easter, well, she didn’t believe in celebrating that day at all. “Nobody comes back once they’re dead,” she said. “When you’re gone, you’re gone.”

So birthdays were her thing. She would announce mine every year in the Brevard County Newsletter, inviting each and every neighbor in an eight-mile radius, stretching from the rickety old shacks on the edge of Chutney’s Creek by our house to the rolling hills of mansions full of rich folks near the high school in Veranda. This birthday, for my fourteenth, she told me to go ahead and invite my friends to the party, too.

"Carolina, baby, you invite all your little friends from school, and I promise I'll clean the house up real nice. We'll even rent a horse for y'all to ride, baby," this year's pledge for a full-blown party sounding even less convincing than in past years. I told her I would. And of course, I didn't. The only friend I’d want there was Cade, but I wouldn’t
dare bring him to our house, for fear I’d lose him forever when he saw where I really came from.

By my birthday, Jasper was staying over with us a lot, practically living with us in our tiny, russet-stained home just off the creek. I still hated him more than I hate seeing dead animals lying wide-eyed on the side of the highway, but he didn't say too much, so he was tolerable for the time being. Mama’d been trying hard to convince me that Jasper wasn’t so bad, but I knew the truth. Just like the others, she’d send him packing just as soon as we got used to him being around.

I was getting really good at ignoring the dim-witted, over-exhaustive breathing noises he made at me constantly, too. It’s like he always had something caught in his throat. And apparently, on the side of his air conditioning business, Jasper had big dreams to start up a company that sold “Florida authentic” decorative toilet seat covers, so he spent a whole lot of time in our garage, gluing little white shells and seahorse cut-outs to the top of porcelain white toilet bowl covers. He’d also taken to answering our house phone with little phrases like “Jasper’s Pool Hall, how may I place your balls?” All I knew was that it was a damn good thing I didn’t have any friends calling.

Plus, Jasper was getting good at silencing Mama when he did gross things to her multiple times every night in the room next door to mine, which was a better effort than any other male guest we'd had in the two years or so.

Every night, instead of the previous reckless abandon and throat-curdling screaming and pounding, it was now something like "Uhhh …oh yeah…Miranda….uhh…wait…wait…wait, your girl's gonna hear us again," echoing from her room to mine through the paper-thin walls. I was so very impressed by his
courteousness. And so very grossed out he thought to mention me, consider my thoughts, as he pinned Mama to her bed once more.

Mr. Considerate had been better at winning over my brothers, too. He fixed up Austin's bike so he could ride it to kindergarten, even hooking it up with those colored spokes that Daryl Joe hadn’t, so Austin began worshipping him. I found it to be a very clever move on Jasper's part – bait the baby and the others will soon follow.

Johnny let Jasper take him fishing for bass near the creek, and Mama told Johnny when she started making some money from the hair salon, she'd get it stuffed up real nice for him so he could hang it on the living room wall. He was just as happy as a dog rolling around in a pile of dead meat.

But then again, for as happy as he seemed to be making everyone but me, Jasper had some problems, too. Every so often, like when he lifted groceries from Mama’s trunk or left Mama’s room, red-faced and panting, he would grip at his chest like he was ready to keel over right then and there. He’d cough and heave and sputter, gripping tight at his shirt and twisting it into a circle between his fingers on his chest. I didn’t dare ask him what the problem was, but Mama told me after one of his episodes one day that his heart just didn’t work the way it was supposed to, and hadn’t worked right since he was a little boy.

And sometimes, as Jasper gripped and coughed away, I’d feel the mean rise up in me like tidal water, that side I’d been trying hard to keep jarred up inside. I’d look right into his eyes and secretly hope his heart would just stop then and there – maybe not long enough to kill him, but at least enough that he’d have to move out and go see some fancy heart specialist in Orlando and never come back our way again. Something told me God
would not be proud of this thinking, but no matter how hard I tried, it rose up more and more each time he started, and I couldn’t do much at all to keep it inside.

It was hard not to want to bust out screaming, though, when Mama all of a sudden wouldn’t leave me alone about doing my hair. Ever since Mama had finally started the accelerated program at Jillian's House of Cosmetology and was already! about to graduate with her degree in what she called "hair-fixing," Mama’d been begging to do my hair. She’d been in some course called “The Art of Hair” at Jillian’s, where she learned to cut and curl the hair of little doll heads attached to a hair-dressing chair, and now she wanted to do it to my hair. She said she’d cut it with layers and put highlights in it, “dress you up and make you a little movie star for your birthday, darlin’,” she’d said. I’d shaken my head a hard “no” in response, my long hair wild and frizzed and puffed by the harsh Florida sunshine.

I told her she could do it just as soon as she stopped going out every night, and she’d gotten upset like I’d gone and proposed something doggone crazy. I told her I’d make my hair pretty for my birthday – in my own way, by my own doing, thankyouverymuch.

The fact is, I flat out didn’t want Mama to even touch it. Last time I’d let her cut my hair, she’d done it drunk, thrown a glass bowl over my head, and cut clear around it. I looked like a shaggy-haired boy in all my pictures for years. Then, as it grew out, it only got worse – as my hair grew longer and Mama stopped paying attention more and more, no one noticed that I wasn’t brushing my hair. Really, I just couldn’t bear to deal with it, its mess of dark beige-ish knots and ever-twisted, rebelliously wavy cuticles. I’d go from early morning games of Man Hunt to afternoons splashing in the community pool to bed
at night and back again, weeks on end without myself, or anyone else, taking a comb to it. At the end of the summer, I’d lift at the crown of the fierce rebellion growing on my head, and feel the zoo of inch-thick rats’ nests that had formed. Balls of clumped hair hung from my scalp, and when school started up again, my mom said it’d be best for me to cut it all off. So, I’d pretty much always had short hair.

For my fourteenth birthday, though, I wanted my hair long, exotic, like the girls’ at school. I wanted it to reach down below my bumps for breasts so that if I were ever naked with a boy, (which, of course, would never on God’s green earth happen anytime soon) I could let the hair stream down over my nipples and sway for him, all sexy and free, not caring if my hair covered my bare breasts or not, like those women did in those Playboys Johnny and Austin hid beneath their mattresses sometimes.

So, the day before my birthday, instead of letting Mama touch my hair, I snuck into the Williams’ back yard and yanked five lemons off a towering, sun-lit tree, squeezed it all into a plastic spray bottle I’d borrowed from Miss Zell, and doused my hair until it was wet and sticky and smelled like a giant lemon meringue pie. I laid in the sun, right by the West Gate community pool, for hours and hours and hours on end. My dreams by the pool involved me, looking tanned and sun-streaked and perfectly put-together like the other girls at school, ready to win over any boy I wanted to, maybe even Cade.

When I looked in the mirror a few hours later, though, my hair was a light shade of tangerine, the orange color of sunrise at the beach. And even worse than that, my skin was burnt to a bright shade of purplish-red bruises, the kind I got on my knees when I fell from my bicycle or from a tree.
Since the sun didn’t get my hair that whitish-blonde color the girls at school bought at salons and did on each other from boxes, I had to take other measures. House bleach was the same as hair bleach, I figured, so I stole the jug from the laundry room and then dipped my hair straight into it, watched it boil all the gold color from my hair right up.

I looked in the mirror. My hair was now all crazy shades of orange and white, so wild and chunky that I looked like a zebra with highlights. My hair was knotted in bird’s nests all over. Not beautiful. Not sexy. Certainly not naked-girl-with-swaying-hair material. For a moment, I wished I’d let Mama do it herself. But of course, I’d never let her know that.

When Mama got home, she was angrier than all hell.

“Carolina Ann! You look like Medusa’s own child! What in the devil’s name did you do to your hair?”

“Nothing, Mama. Just lemon juice. It’ll fade away.”

“Look at it. Just look at it! You messed it up bad, Carolina. It looks like a goddamn rat’s nest!”

I noticed Jasper's beady eyes pounce on me from the TV room. My stomach churned, and I quickly cursed him under my breath, suddenly hating the new chemical addition to my hair, suddenly hating myself for having tried to do anything at all to it in the first place.

“Let me fix it, Carolina,” Mama said, grabbing at my hair with her brush from work. She started ripping through the nests in my hair, snarling it every which way and pulling at my scalp.
“No, Mama! Leave it be!” I swooped away from her and out of the brush’s grasp.

“So you’re telling me you ain’t gonna let a goddamn proven professional fix your hair? I’m your mother, Carolina!” she said.

I ran to the bathroom and locked the door behind me. After Mama quit banging on the door ten minutes later for me to open it and let her in, I spent an hour massaging runny gobs of lilac White Rain shampoo on to my scalp and scrubbed and scrubbed under scalding faucet water until I was sure I’d sudsed them up enough. After the shower, I found Mama’s old straight comb and ran it through each layer of my hair, gripping it all halfway down from the roots to keep it all from ripping and pulling at my scalp. I combed through each knot that had been left to knot and grow for God-knows-how-long since my last haircut, and I soon felt the tug of sleep sitting on my eyelids, and I gave up on my hair for the time being to go lie down.

Laying in bed, listening to the lull of the love bugs swarm outside my window, combing through my hair the smell of flowers, I thought of the times Mama had had me brush her hair so long ago. I couldn’t have been old enough to tie my own shoes yet, but Mama, just before my bedtime, would prop herself down in front of the couch where I’d sit, cross-legged, watching television before bed-time. She’d hand me the brush – an old, wire-bristled round brush with a bright pink plastic handle – and I’d automatically start brushing stroke after stoke. Every so often, I’d accidentally bump her shoulders with my hand, and I could feel just how dewy her skin was. I became mesmerized by the river of her thick hair, watching the bristles cut through all the layers of her golden mane. I’d imagine that I could just borrow it all for one day, just pop off all her hair and place it on my own head like a wig. When I started to fall asleep, Mama would mumble, “Just a
little bit longer,” and it went on this way until my strokes became long and disconnected, my hand sometimes falling on to the couch, and until she was just about asleep, too. But that was a million years ago, I thought, and I fell to dreams on my last night as a thirteen-year-old.
I woke up the morning of my birthday to my Mama’s singing. "Laadeeeedaaa….laaa laaa deee daaa," she droned, as she clinked around with spoons in the kitchen, working on my token birthday apple pie. Mama was funny like that with her singing; she had a real nice voice, almost like a canary's, but she only sang those days when she was cooking or when she seemed really happy, which seemed like hardly ever. "Laaa leeeee da da da," she continued.

I checked my boobs in my full-length mirror to see if they had grown with my new age; checked my butt for any added curves. To my disappointment, though, I saw nothing spectacular, just the same old me with a whole lotta new colors streaked through my hair. I stuck my tongue out at my reflection and walked out to the kitchen.

Mama pinched my butt, sending chills down my unusually achy spine. "Look at my oldest girl!" she proclaimed, her parched blonde hair flailing around her head in a wild halo as she danced about. "My only girl! Fourteen! I can't believe it!" Her eyes looked abnormally red for ten in the morning, and she seemed a bit too cheery for having just yelled at me about my hair the day before, but I shrugged it off and glanced past her to the little pink box perched on the kitchen table. I was relieved to see that Jasper was already gone for work.

Mama followed my gaze to the box on the table. "Open it, honey," she said, her eyes glimmering with crystal blues. "It's the best one yet."
Johnny and Austin gazed up at me from behind the cereal box castles they’d from Fruit Loops and Cocoa Puffs boxes, wanting me to open it, too.

"Mama let me help pick it out, Carolina! Open!" Austin exclaimed, pointing at the box as if its contents included a real live African lion, just raring to rumble out on to the kitchen table. "Open it now!" he shrieked.

I smiled and tore through the shiny crimson paper, tossing it aside. I opened the box, and found something I had discovered in various colored boxes every single year for thirteen years before that day: my birthday dress. My little tradition.

This one was in fact a beauty, and I could tell from the tag that it was from Betty's Sweetheart Consignments, me and Mama's favorite store. The white cotton dress was shorter than I had gotten in past years, and it scooped daringly in the front. A delicate lace layer covered the crocheted top and flowed in fragile swirls to the edge of the material. "Mama, it's beautiful," I gasped, really meaning it. I was astounded with my first grown-up-looking piece of clothing. It was so beautiful, so white, that I wanted to save it for my wedding day. Mama, however, had other, more immediate plans for it. "You're gonna have all the boys droolin' in that little number, sugar. Just you wait and see."

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Just like every other recent birthday, it was me, Mama, Johnny, Austin, and whichever man was around at the time, this year the lucky one being Jasper, who, with the putrid smell of Freon announcing his entrance, rolled up in his air conditioning truck just minutes before my birthday breakfast.
"You thank him for takin’ off work just for your birthday," Mama ordered when she saw me scowl openly at Jasper's entrance.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you so much for making it." I smiled, wanting with every inch of my being to slap him straight into the next year.

There was no mention made of the friends that never showed up (I never invited them) and no appearance of a birthday horse to ride (Mama never ordered one). Instead, the five of us sat around the table with a box of runny vanilla ice cream from Collins’ Convenience and Mama's apple pie for breakfast. Johnny and Austin had gone in to buy me a pack of new playing cards, which they ran off to play Spider with just as soon as I’d unwrapped them.

At Mama’s request, I tried on my new dress. It fit perfectly, the bright lace accentuating my summer tan and the stretchy cotton bringing into light rather grown-up curves I was delighted to see. I felt sexy, and I wanted to wear it forever. I kept it on even when we went outside after breakfast, promising to be careful with it on.

We spent the rest of the light hours in the yard, Jasper, Johnny, Austin and I playing numerous games of kickball, Florida’s summer sun beaming down on the top of our heads. Whenever I ran, I held the corners of the dress to my sides, and I made sure not to make any slides into bases.

Jasper played pinch hitter, slipping and falling on his big stupid knees at least seven times, each time with a big old “Godamnit!” sent echoing from his mouth into the sky. He sucked down cans of Milwaukee’s Best, making a pile of crushed and empty cans for us to slide in to at home plate. Each time I slid into them, I imagined the cans flying up, hitting Jasper right between his big red eyes.
Mama sat with her bottomless Bloody Mary on the front porch, her feet soaking in a shallow blue kiddy pool she had bought with one of her first tips from fixing hair, screaming out at me all day not to rip my dress as I ran the makeshift bases over and over again.

As I rounded the bases for the hundredth or so time, I wished for most of the day that I did have some friends I could invite over, that I could have a real birthday party like the girls at school each year. Then, I wished for my father, wondering if he was out there somewhere thinking of me on my special day, if he even remembered it was my birthday at all.

Dusk crept in finally, the mosquitoes starting their battle against our skin, and we went inside to hide from them. Mama put the boys right in to bed, not bothering to peel them from their dusty clothes. Tiny red splotches that looked a lot like rounded ring worms flashed on to Jasper’s face as he watched her shoo them toward the bed the boys shared.

"You always gonna let them go to bed all nasty like that?" he grumbled, apparently a little drunk and maybe more than a little pissed off that I had beat him in home runs. I wondered since when he had the right to talk about parenting, but then again, it was about that time that Mama started letting him take over.

I reached for Miss Zell’s Saint Anthony necklace around my neck, felt at its smoothness on my skin. I glanced out to the back yard from the window, deciding that this would be a good time to get on out of the house. I was going to creep out for a little time alone. I needed a moment, a moment to just be alone, to just be free and to wear my
dress a few minutes longer. From around my neck, I swore I heard Saint Anthony whisper, “Go.”

So, I popped my head out onto the front porch where Mama was babbling off something to Jasper and told her I was going for a quick walk in the back by the creek. "Mhmmm, baby, whatever you want, birthday girl," she replied, her eyes intoxicatingly glued on Dipety-Doo Jasper. I scurried off into the back, out of the screen door and into the woods before she could change her mind. I pulled my new white dress high, over my knees, as I ran from the house just as fast I could.

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With Mama and Jasper out of my hair for one Godforsaken second, I felt free. I looked like a woman in my dress, and I damn well was one now, as far as I was concerned. And so I went, pacing the woods behind our house, not sure if I was looking for anything at all in particular, but raring to get away from the house for a while.

The bullfrogs usual screaming was dulled to a soft lull along the water, and I looked up at the moss hanging from the trees above me, trying to think of how many times I’d explored this part of the woods. I’d been playing back there most of my life, most of the time by myself, often pretending I owned it all, that I was the Queen of Chutney’s Creek, and all the crickets, bullfrogs, snakes, and even gators were my subjects. The woods ran alongside Chutney’s Creek, and you could follow the creek all the way out of Sidegate, where the woods kept on going for miles and miles until you hit Veranda, where the construction companies were working to tear down more trees to make stucco houses that all looked like cookie cutter versions of each other.
I thought of Cade for a moment, and tried to imagine how many miles I’d have to walk through the woods to get to his new house in Veranda. I thought of the last time I’d seen him – our very last day at Peachtree Middle during the Last Day Celebration – and I remembered the weird, bubbling feeling that had run through my veins when he’d hugged me. It’s something he’d been doing for years, giving me a hug on the last day of school, but that last hug had sent something shooting through me like my insides were on fire.

All the other girls at school seemed to like Cade a whole lot, but he’d always been my friend, the one guy I could trust not to make fun of me from where I came from. But after we’d separated our arms from each other’s backs, I’d looked right at him like it was the very first time I’d ever seen him, and the tingling feeling didn’t go away for a whole fifteen minutes afterward.

Thinking about it now, even without Cade there, I suddenly felt the tingling again, and strong. Without even thinking, I crouched to my knees on the soft dirt ground, forgetting momentarily about the white dress that cascaded around my legs to the ground. But then I thought about my Mama, probably doing awful things with Jasper at that very instant, and I suddenly didn't care about the stupid dress anymore.

I lay then completely on the ground, and I closed my eyes tight. I crumbled the soft dirt in between my fingers, slowly, carefully, like I was introducing myself to it for the very first time. It felt so smooth in my palm, and I imagined for a moment that it was white sand from some exotic beach, somewhere far off the coast. Somewhere I could start my life brand new, where no one would know me but me.

I closed my eyes tight, and in my mind, a boy appeared, his face a blur but still familiar. I slid my right hand under my now dirty dress, and then I saw him very clearly.
He was tall, taller than any man I’d ever met. He was dark in every way – his eyes, his skin, his hair, his voice. The closer I honed in on his facial features, the more I realized he looked a whole lot like Cade. In my mind, he wore a dark hat that he took off in my presence…a fully-bloomed woman's presence that is. I imagined him there with me, lying on the soft earth's floor. He complimented my dress, and his sweet voice beckoned me like it always did. He asked me to leave with him, to leave Florida forever to live by his side. He told me I’d be safe; I’d be free forever.

I felt my hand become his beneath me, and he felt me slowly and deeply, over and over and over again until I felt my toes curl and my lips purse tightly together. Then, I fell back into myself, feeling my back arch slightly as a familiar sensation tingled from my ears to my toes and back up again, shaking me.

I stretched then on the ground, keeping my eyes closed tight, letting the bubbling feeling radiate from my face to my toes. It wasn’t until I opened my eyes again until I realized a girl, my age, was walking toward me, just a few yards away.

I shot up quick, feeling guilty suddenly, feeling as dirty as the dress that was now covered with soil. I frantically tried to scrub away the mud, but I knew it was too late. I prayed to God that she hadn’t seen what I was doing there on the ground.

As she got closer, I could see that her wide brown eyes were looking out onto the waves that lapped softly on the shore of Chutney’s Creek, and she looked like she was searching, or maybe listening for something. Whatever it was, she had gone somewhere else, far away from there, and I was surprised she’d even noticed me there, wiping the dirt from my dress.
As she walked closer, I looked the girl over. She wore an oversized, grass-green men’s work shirt tucked into dark, frayed jean shorts that spit out a pair of lanky bronze legs. One arm of the shirt was rolled up to her elbow; the other sleeve was unrolled and had white speckles all over that looked like bleach. Her feet were bare. A river of shiny beige hair flowed down into spiraling curls around her shoulders, and though I would later find out that her hair was hardly ever brushed, it appeared as though it had been worked for hours into a streaming crown of wavy, woven silk. The girl's skin, bronzed cocoa by the sun, was clear and tight, like I imagined a Barbie’s might look if she were really alive. She looked like a little bit of every movie star, every model I had ever seen, pretty much everything I had always wanted to be like combined. She was a big difference to the mess I looked at in the mirror every day, with my eternally frizzing mop of dark strawberry blonde curls and dull, pale, often pimpled skin.

The girl stopped walking, and she stood just before me, taking in my muddy white dress.

“Hey,” she said. Her eyes bore in to mine right away.

“Oh, hey” I said. “Be careful. I just slipped and fell in that mud there.”

She looked only partially stunned by the stupid words I’d just thrown up.

“That sucks,” she said with a shrug of perfect toned shoulders.

She looked at my dress again, and I knew I needed to change the subject, and quick. "What's your name?” I asked.

"Oh, I’m West. West Beasley."

"West?"

"Yep.”
"Like, West West? The Wild West? The direction?"

"Yep," she said, bowing her head down in a nod, like she’d done this before. A strand of the pretty beige hair fell over her right eye. “Who are you?”

“Oh, I’m Carolina. Carolina Wells. I live that way,” I said, throwing an index finger in the direction of my tiny, brown, beat-up house. I hoped she couldn’t actually see it behind the mass of trees surrounding us.

“Okay. Well, I’ll call you Carolina,” she said, like she had just gone right there on the spot and named me herself. “So whatcha doin out here?”

“Was just getting away from my house for a while, you know. It’s actually my birthday today, and I just wanted to get out of the house for a while…What about you?”

I watched silently as her broad chocolate eyes took me in. Somewhere close, suddenly, a bird called out, loud and long, like it was desperately looking for something.

West glanced toward me, her meditation broken. "Did you hear that?" she asked, like she’d just now realized I was right in front of her.

"Oh," I said. “Yes. The bird, right?”

She shook her head. "It’s a baby mourning dove, I think. I’ve been trying to figure out where she is,” she said, turned her eyes back out toward the creek. “Mourning dove Mamas never leave their babies alone…those daddies pick right up and leave, but not the Mamas…. I think that one yelling there’s been deserted. Mama must’ve picked up and went looking for the rain.”

“How do you know what kind of bird it is?” I asked.

“I’m gonna be a bird keeper when I’m older,” she said, flashing a perfect row of off-white teeth in my direction. “I know what all birds sound like….I can almost even
hear what they’re saying, most of the time. And that little bird; she wants her Mama. And she wants her now.”

I was starting to think she was a bit loony, talking to birds and all. I wasn’t sure if I was excited to have a crazy bird girl living just across the creek now. We didn’t need much more crazy around there.

I changed the subject. "So, do you live here in town?” I said, squinting through the sun.

"Yep," she said, flashing the teeth at me again. “Just moved in a week or two ago. Live just across the creek there. Hey, you wanna go find the mourning dove with me?”

I wasn’t so sure we’d be friends, but what else did I have to do? It was the end of the slowest, hottest summer Crow had ever seen, the kind of summer that made me want to get back to school just as quick as I could, and it was either go home to play another round of Uno with my baby brothers in our sweltering sauna of a house and wait for Mama to come stumbling in at some point, or spend a while looking for a sad baby bird with the beautiful future bird keeper.

The bird cawed again, this time longer and even more sad-sounding. And for a moment, I swore I thought I heard her call my name somewhere in her sad, billowing OOOOcoo-OH-ooo-OOOOOO.

Now, I know it could’ve just been the heat and the mud and the mosquitoes that had started to buzz in circles near my ears, but I was a strong believer that if God’s got animals calling out your name in the middle of broad daylight, you’d better listen, so I picked right up and followed West out to the woods.
We spent the next hour or so walking along Chutney’s Creek, cawing back at the sad baby bird until the boiling tangerine sun began to dip deep down below the trees. The whole time we walked, I listened to West’s bird stories: Did you know that mourning doves usually only lay two eggs? You’ll never believe this, but the Bar-tailed Godwit can fly non-stop for 6,300 miles! Red-footed boobies lay blue eggs – isn’t that the neatest?

Really, I wanted to know where she had come from. How old she was. Why they had moved here. How long they were staying. Her favorite color. Her favorite song. Her tips for kissing boys. But I didn’t get one second to even start to ask questions. She talked and talked and talked, like she had been stuck in a cave for a million years with a book of bird facts and nothing else, and now here she was, just ready to unload it all on me.

We walked what seemed like a hundred miles, just circling the woods and looking up at every little tree branch for the nest as she spilled out all her bird knowledge out to me. She told me that despite what people usually think, it’s best if a young bird leaves the nest as soon as they possibly can. Even though people think of a bird’s nest as being a safe place, it’s actually really dangerous for them, because all the things out there looking to get them know just where to find them.

I nodded, amazed at how much I had in common with the little birds.

Finally, West asked me what I thought about birds, if I knew anything exciting or interesting about the birds in Crow.

I couldn’t think of a thing. Most of my questions and thoughts had been about her and how strange she was, really. So, I was honest

“Well,” I said. “Whenever I watch the birds back here, I usually just wonder: ‘If I could fly, who would I poop on?’"
West turned and stared at me.

_Damn, I've already run her off_, I thought.

But then, she threw her neck back like a crane might and howled hysterically.

Maybe, just maybe, I thought, we could be real friends.

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Just after the tangerine sunset beneath the edge of the farthest trees I could see, after no luck of finding the dove, West said something about Maybelline and having to eat dinner, which left me wondering why she needed to put on makeup just for suppertime, but then again, this girl was just not right, from what I could tell so far. She asked if I wanted to meet tomorrow, same time, same place, to look for the baby bird again, and I said I would. She flashed me the teeth and skipped away in the direction of the little white house, humming the beat of some disco song as she trotted off.

I looked around me, and realized I could hardly see a thing. It was almost pitch dark. I ran back toward the house, wondering how long I'd been gone.

I thought I could sneak through the side door to avoid Mama and Jasper noticing like I always did. I slid the door open slowly, crept in as quietly as I could.

Mama and Jasper sat right there as I burst in, both of them sipping on their evening beer. It was apparent from the castle of Milwaukee's Best cans on the counter that it wasn't their first since I'd been gone in the woods. I stepped into their view, feeling my body tense all over.

Mama took one hard look at me, her eyes fluttering over the dirt stains all over my dress. Her newly-lit cigarette fell from her mouth to the floor as she opened her mouth wide.
“It’s pitch dark out!” she said. “And…and your dress! Where have you been?”

But Jasper chimed in before I could utter a word.

"You ungrateful little bitch!” he yelped, chucking his beer can down as he rose shakily from his chair. Mama stood, too, but he threw his arm in front of her as if to say, *I'll take care of this.* The thing is, though, is that while I knew Mama was mad, she wasn't quite in the state Jasper seemed to be in. It was a dress, it could be fixed. I knew that. Mama knew that. But Jasper didn't, I guess.

"Your Mama spent a whole week's tips on that damned ugly dress!" He veered toward me with pink eyes, his breath hot with the smell of the alcohol, and he stumbled to the side from the suddenness of the move. He charged forward, swinging a clenched fist toward my chest. I ducked, feeling only the whoosh of air in front of me, and I couldn't hold in the tiny scream that flew from my lips into the murky air. Jasper stumbled backward from the force of his own missed blow, and I ran straight down the hallway toward my room, the trailer walls shaking around me, not looking back. I slammed the door behind me, sobbing, my body shaking from his reaction, from his suddenness. I crawled underneath my covers, waiting for the worst.

"Miranda, it's one thing to let your goddamn sons to bed dirty, but dammit, they're boys!" Jasper screamed from the kitchen. "I won't have none of that in my house, none! His house?

“Dirty little bitch! Put her on restriction, right now, Miranda, and tell her you ain't fixing that dress for her!"

As I lay there in my room, sobbing to myself, I could see the drunken thoughts scurry through Mama's mind. *Disagree, and that's another man out the door.* I knew
what would come next before she even did, but for once I wished I could be wrong. I wasn't, though, and my premonition was confirmed as I heard Mama pounce down the hall and bang her hand against my door.

"Carolina Ann!" she started. "I…I can't believe your actions, tonight, young lady! You are restricted for…for as long as Jasper and I say….and don't plan on me fixing that dress for you!" I could still hear Jasper muttering to himself in the kitchen, something about bitches and nonsense. My eyes welled up with more fat tears than I thought they could handle, and I began to swallow them as I gasped for air beneath my comforter.

*Stupid asshole Jasper... stupid me... Why did I mess my dress up like that? Stupid cowboy...stupid fake cowboy... So much for my wonderful fourteenth birthday. So much for...* suddenly, my thoughts were cut short when I heard a soft creak on my door. I first thought it was Johnny or Austin, sneaking in to cuddle with me, but when the figure that had caused the creak sighed, I knew it was Mama against my door.

Her hand pressed against the door. I held my breath to keep from crying, and I sat for what seemed like hours, waiting for the voice, the voice that bruised me worse than Jasper’s fists ever could if they’d gotten at me.

Then it came, like it did each morning I’d woken up with her in my arms. I just barely heard her soft whisper, "I’m so sorry, baby. I had to do it… Carolina, please forgive me…Lord…good Lord…please, please forgive me at last."

There’d been a whole lot of daddies in our house over the years. Nice ones who kind of tried, buying me thin gold necklaces and taking us all for ice cream at Collins’ after Sunday dinners. But most were mean ones who never so much as grunted in our direction, or spent all their time taking out their old ghosts on us, spanking our bare butts
with hot hands or even with the cold buckle of their belt. My mind flashed to one of Mama’s men – his name was Claude, I think – the one who’d told me to call him “Daddy” just a week after he’d first come over to play with Mama. I refused to do it, and he’d tried to spank me, pulled my shorts over my butt and threw me over his knees like he was gonna flat-palm spank me. I’d bitten in to his leg as hard as I could before his hand had come down on me, though, and that was enough to send him running for good. I imagined going out there to the living room right then, biting Jasper so hard that he’d leave our house for good.

Funny how Mama had those men running through our house all the time, day and night, all types of men – nice men, creepy men, handsome men, men so ugly I wouldn’t let a horse kiss them. We’d had so many daddies Yet Mama couldn’t have the one man I wanted, the one man I needed just a second more of. Just to ask one more question of. To know his face. My Daddy.

But not one of these daddies was mine. Not one was the man I wanted, for once, to look in the eye and see myself back in the reflection. I imagined Daddy somewhere in between all those daddies I’d had over the years. Sweet but stern. And Daddy wouldn’t let this happen. Daddy wouldn’t try to hit me just for getting some mud on my dress. Where was he? Why’d he never come looking for me, if I’d been his life?

I really didn’t know all that much about my Daddy other than what Miss Winnie had told me here and there the past few years. And I’d only tried to find him once so far, in the back of my Mama’s closet.

It was the first night I could remember Mama going out to visit those friends of hers I hated so much. The night I made my first-ever bargain with God. It was the day
before my fourth-grade class was supposed to go on a field trip to Pidley's Peach Plant, the biggest peach farm in Central Florida.

I was reading up on peach crops in my agriculture book when she came to me. The clock said it was after 11 p.m., and at first, I figured she was coming in to fuss at me for still being up reading or to yell at me for asking about Daddy.

Instead, she was sweet. "Carolina, baby girl," she started, sitting on my bed, her long legs crossed out in front of her. "I'm gonna go visit with my friends for a bit." She smiled gently, as if this was normal, for her to be leaving us alone at 11 p.m. rather than until then like she usually did, like she was saying she was just going down to visit Grandpa in the old folks' home in the middle of the night.

“You just stay right here in bed, you get your beauty sleep,” she said. “Johnny’s just fine, so you don't worry your little head.” She smiled down at me, her blond hair, still damp from the shower and hanging flat from her head like yarn from a mop. "I'll be back in an hour or so."

And before I could say anything back, she was up and gone. I heard the door slam and then lock behind her. I waited an hour, staring up at the ceiling, wondering who these friends were. I had never met them and never heard of them. Why did they have to meet at night, I wondered. And what was wrong with the daytime? Could they not play Bunco and go on play dates with the babies during school hours like the mothers of the kids at my school did?

After the second hour, I got real worried, thinking of her dead in a ditch somewhere. She hadn't even told me where she'd be meeting these friends, and I had no idea how to get a hold of her.
This is when I tried to speak to God. I told him I would do the dishes for an entire month, no complaints, if he returned Mama home safely that night. I even promised to dry the dishes all the way before putting them away, something I usually scrimped on when I was stuck with that chore.

Even with my promise out there floating to the Lord, I still didn't feel so great with Mama not there. I needed to get to sleep, and quick. I had my field trip in the morning. But each time I went to close my eyes, they popped right back open again, no matter how hard I squeezed them. I tried again to imagine my father’s face, but each time I did, all I could think about was Mama.

I couldn’t sleep. So, I did something I was never allowed to, but was always dying to do - I rolled out of bed and walked across the hall, right to the door of Mama's room.

Mama's room was what she liked to call the Great Big Mess. I guessed that's why we were hardly ever allowed in it - she made us keep our own rooms so tidy, while hers was practically the town dump. I caught glances of it now and then when she came in and out in a hurry, but the door was otherwise always closed and we were told to not even ask to come in. She called it her private adult place, a place where she could get away from us brats for a while. I always thought of my friend Annie when Mama said that, because Annie's parents had the most beautiful bedroom in the world, with green and gold trimmed walls and a big brown oak bed. On a birthday sleepover a few years before, Annie's Mama had let us all, five girls hopped up on Pixie sticks and Coca-Cola, jump right into the bed and make a tent below the covers. I could smell her Mama’s sweet perfumes all over the bed, and I’d wished that Mama would let me do that in her room.
The glimpses I had had in to Mama’s room in my lifetime were quick, but I could tell there was a whole lot of stuff in there, like piles of clothes on the floor and big cardboard boxes. The boxes had always confused me...we had lived in this house my whole life, but it seemed like Mama had never got to finish unpacking, or maybe like she was getting ready to up and leave at any time. There was usually a waft of thick, standing cigarette smog that filled the air in there— if it was daytime, the sun's rays cut through the cloud that settled in her room like thousands of tiny knives, raring to cut through. If it were night, it just looked kind of scary in there with the smoke lingering in circles just above my head. I knew it would look that way that night, and I braced myself as I turned the door knob slowly and peered in to the room.

"Ma?" I said, my lungs quickly filling themselves with the knock-out smell of old tobacco. I knew she wasn't there, but I figured I ought to check before I got a butt-whooping for coming in to the room.

I inched my way through the door. The light switch, I knew instinctively from the rest of the house, was to my left, and I flipped it on quickly. The light danced across the room, revealing suddenly the mass of parts I had been seeing in bits and pieces for many years before. Her bed, a queen size mattress set on the floor, was covered hastily in a hunter green sheet that had one big, mysterious faded circle in the middle. Two pillows sat undressed at the foot of the mattress. Four plain, frayed cardboard boxes sat in the corner of the room, all of them unopened with shiny brown tape still hugging their seams. An old TV, the kind with a little black knob for changing channels, was propped up on a wooden hutch directly across from Mama's bed. The various piles of clothing, all knotted into little laundry mountains, sat in three places in the room. A few Busch Light cans
sprinkled the floor next to the mattress, and a tiny dresser boasted piles and piles of
papers and receipts stacked on more little piles of clothes on its top. The tan walls were
drab and barren, with the exception of one tiny crack, no bigger than a hair, that
splintered down from the ceiling to a spot right behind the mattress.

I stood there for a while, taking it all in. Why did she hide this? I mean, it was pretty messy, but what was so bad about it that we weren't allowed to see? I didn't exactly see this as being any sort of getaway for Mama, and I still couldn’t understand what she was trying to get away from in the first place.

I tip-toed to the far side of the room, where her closet was. The closet I'd never seen; no brief glimpses, no nothing.

I was afraid to open the door, but something inside of me, something deep in the pit of my stomach said, Carolina, open it. Now. The door creaked as I cracked it open. I couldn’t see anything at first, just darkness. I didn’t see any skeletons hanging, though, so I felt that was a good sign. Half sure now that I wouldn’t be barraged with a swarm of bats or a ghost of any kind, I opened the door wide in one swift movement.

I could see its contents clearly now – a large pile of clothes, some empty hangers, a few old t-shirts hanging that I had never seen Mama wear, and more small plain cardboard boxes - nothing overtly interesting. I was about to close the door when I saw, in the right-hand corner, what looked like a tiny plastic ladybug.

I reached for it. Poking out slightly behind a faded Grateful Dead t-shirt was a tiny dress hanging neatly from a tiny plastic hanger. Hanging next to it was a tiny nightgown. The dress looked as though it could fit no bigger than a newborn baby. I held the fabric between my hands. It was red and white checkered, with a white frill slip
attached and two large red buttons that kept the overall-style sleeves intact. The ladybug sat atop a red bow and attached to the middle of the dress. The tiny nightgown, also fit for a newborn, was light and thin. It was striped with blue and white seersucker, and its frills running the edges meant it was also probably made for a baby girl. I tried hard to think, to remember my time as a baby. Were these my dresses? Had I worn these at one time? Why’d Mama kept them? I didn’t recognize them at all.

I pulled at the lady bug dress to release it from its hanger, and from the shelf above the dress, a Polaroid photo fell to my feet. It was a picture of her, my smiling young Mama, young and round. She was pregnant. She wore a light green dress, and with her belly sticking out from her stick-like body, she looked a whole lot like a giant pear. Down her right shoulder curved a single braid, the color of dried wheat, shining. It looked ferocious, snake-like, and rests at the very top of her belly. She stood in direct sunlight, and her eyes were squinted, her pink lips shiny with a wide smile, the kind from the gut, the kind I didn’t see from her very often at all. I stared at her. She was so beautiful, so young, a child herself, and I realized this picture had to have been when she was pregnant with me.

There was, in the very bottom left-hand corner of the picture, the very edge of a face, very blurred, but definitely a face, like it’d been trying to jump into the picture at the last minute. The face had dark stubble, big pores – a man’s face. The face was smiling. Pulling the picture closer, until my nose touched it, I noticed the tip of a dried thumb invading the bottom left-hand corner of the picture, covering half of Mama’s belly. Covering half of me.
I turned the photo over. On the back, in wide black letters, it said: *I love you forever*. My Mama’s handwriting, I knew. This was my father’s picture of Mama. And on that picture, that blurred face and thumb, was my Daddy.

I don’t know why, but I smelled the picture. I thought it smelled like baking soda, or maybe deodorant. Could this be Daddy’s smell? I closed my eyes and tried to bring it back. For a moment, sitting in my mother’s closet, staring at the image of half my Daddy’s face, I thought I could remember his smell. Was it oil? Oranges? Did he wear his own special cologne?

Then, I tried to remember his eyes and what color they may have been. Were they the gray of worn machinery, a knight’s armor, like mine, a deep ocean aquamarine, or were they a paler blue, almost purple, the color of periwinkle? I wanted to see his face, to know if we had the same nose, the same color eyes. I wanted to know if he loved me, if he thought of me ever, and if maybe, just maybe, he still loved my Mama and if he might take her back.

Suddenly, the door bell clanged into my thoughts.

*Da-ding-ding-ding. Da-ding-ding-ding.*

The police. It *had* to be the police, there to tell me Mama was dead. There to give me the news that not only did I not have a Daddy or a real family, but my Mama was gone now, too.

I stuffed the photo down the one of the pockets of my sleep shorts, and ran from her closet to the front door.

It was Mama. I went to the sound of her clanging, her weight against the door. Through the peephole at the front door, I watched her rummage through her purse, her
eyebrows clenched with a fix of anger. I wondered why she’d rung the doorbell when we hid the house key right under a rock by the mailbox, but I opened the door anyway, and Mama barged in.

“Wha…where… where’d you put my house key, Carolina?” I stared at her swaying body in disbelief. Mama’s hair was knotted all over, a spider web of golden strands formed around her face in various sizes. It was matted to her neck. Her blue eyes were dotted in reds and pinks, and her dress was wrinkled like it had never seen the likes of an iron.

She continued to stare back at me, questioning. “You tryin’ to keep me out, huh?” Her breath was sour.

I had not a clue what she was talking about. I just wanted to lie in my bed, trace my Daddy’s face in the picture I’d just found, see if I could get closer. I also remembered again that I had a big field trip in the morning, just a few short hours away. I told her so as I wiped sleep from my eyes, hoping I looked like I’d just woken from a dream. But Mama wanted a brawl that night, and her eyebrows plunged south with irritation. She stepped toward me.

“What you mean you don’t know what I’m talking about? Huh? You wanna keep Mama out so bad, why’d ya even let me in?”

This scared me, and I shuffled backwards, hoping she’d back off, that she’d let me go.

Instead, she dropped her purse and gave my chest a push with her freed hands, her weight pressing against my limbs, knocking herself unsteady, then backwards. She fell in slow motion, arms flailing. I lunged my sleepy body forward, arms open, and fell with
her, cushioning her fall. Her weight pressed on my arms, and I leaned us both against the
couch, suddenly very awake. My eyes burned with tears as I noticed the silver glimmer
of her house key on the ground with the rest of the contents of her purse. It’s as if she just
wanted to wake me up for no damn good reason. Her hair, now loose and moist,
surrounded me, stuck to my chest.

On the ground, Mama started a soft snore immediately, her hot breath tickling my
arms. I didn’t dare move her, so there I sat, holding my sleeping Mama, her weight
bearing me down to the ground like I imagined a trillion tons of water might. My body
ached, and I stayed awake for a few hours, wondering much of the night if there was
possibly another nine-year-old girl out there, holding their drunk mother as she sleeps it
all away. If they were out there, I wished them love and escape.

I thought of my father that night, wanting him there, wondering where he was,
what he was doing that very second. I imagined him there with us, taking Mama from my
arms and tucking me back into bed. You know, the way it should have been. With her
asleep in my arms, I took the photo out again. I looked at it and then back at her, the
Mama that once was, and the Mama I had now. She looked a whole lot happier in that
picture, smiling with the anticipation of her life to come.

The next morning, I woke to find her staring at me, her blue eyes clear again, her
breathing slow and raspy. We’d changed places through the night, because I was now in
her arms, and she cradled me.

“Baby, why’d you let me sleep out here?” she asked, sweet as sugar. “I sure was
tired,” she said, acting as if she’d just nodded off in church for a moment or something.”
She smoothed my hair, curling it around my ears with her shaky palm. “You wanna hear a story, honey?” she said.

When Mama wanted to, she told the very best stories. Arms waving and wide-eyed, she’d tell the story so well you’d think you’d been there right with her.

“No, Mama, I’ve got school,” I said, and just like that, she got up from the floor, brushed her dress out, and walked out of the living room. I stared at her in disbelief, my head pounding and my mind racing. I reached for the picture in my night shirt, and realized it was gone. I looked under the couch; it wasn’t there, either.

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I could hardly even wake up for school the next morning, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t keep my eyes open, just the opposite of the night before. While my class went off to the orange grove that day at school, I faked a stomachache and spent the day in the infirmary sleeping. Mama didn’t bring it up, and neither did I, hoping if we didn’t talk about it, it would never happen again.

But two nights later, it did. And a night after that, again.

After that first night, Mama went to “see her friends” at least four nights a week in the middle of the night. The nights were random, and it seemed the grumpier she was during the day, the more likely she was to go out. I never knew, but I had quickly gotten used to waking up in the middle at the sound of the door. Every night she went out, she came home smelling of whiskeys and beers and cheap wines, – smells I knew from sniffing at the bottles Mama kept under the kitchen sink sometimes – and then coated with a layer of cigarette smoke and different perfumes. And, like they had before Johnny was born, the men came. Mama brought all kinds of men to our front door – short ones,
fat ones, tall ones. Cowboys, businessmen, guys who looked like wannabee rock stars. It was never the same one, and they usually looked more jacked up than Mama. They usually never said a word to me if I scrambled out to the bathroom or to get some water. If they did speak to me, it was a mumbled something, and it was more like they were telling me to get out of the way than anything else. She would murmur *Get on in bed, Carolina,* and retreat quickly down the hall with the man, giggling.

He was always gone by the morning.

Sometimes, though, it was just Mama, and those nights were usually the worst. Those were the nights she had it out with me, blaming me for locking the door, stealing her keys, burning supper that night, ruining her life. Whatever her tribulation was, she had it out with me right there from behind my bedroom door. It seemed the later it was she came stumbling through the front door, the worse trouble I was in, and I’d listen to her screaming until she made herself sick.

But the words she’d had with me never made it to the morning. They were simply forgotten by her, like nothing in the world had happened. I, on the other hand, remembered every word, took them with me, carried them through my days.

That night, laying there remembering those first nights so many years before, I could still hear the baby mourning dove’s constant, deep, sad cry bellowing out to the crescent moon through my bedroom window as I tried to fall asleep. I wondered where she could be, and just what she might be crying so unhappily for.
Chapter Seven

The next morning after I’d met West and Jasper’d gone swinging at me, I woke up achy and still really tired, like I hadn’t even slept at all. I snuck into the living room to make sure Jasper and Mama were gone for work, and sure enough, there were no cars in the driveway. I decided right then and there, over a bowl of thick apple cinnamon oatmeal, that I’d forget about the imaginary cowboy for a while, and just try and make it through the summer until school began without making everyone so damn angry. I was making trouble everywhere I went, it seemed, and laying low and staying out of Mama’s and Jasper’s and everyone else’s hair seemed like the best plan to me.

I found myself wanting West to come find me like she had said she would. Something about her both confused and excited me, and now I wanted to know more. Maybe it was the summer heat and dryness of the earth frying my brain, or maybe I just kind of liked her, but it seems that West had blown right into town, beautiful and bizarre, all rolled into one, and maybe she was just what I needed to get me through the rest of the days until school. Surely, though, as soon as we started school and just as soon as West met my Mama and knew who she was in town, she’d stop being friends with me.

Mama left early for her hair-fixing job that morning; Jasper was gone, too. Johnny and Austin went off fishing, leaving me with nothing to do but wait. The mourning dove had stopped crying, or at least I couldn’t hear her anymore, and I wondered as I finished up eating my grits alone at the kitchen table: Had West went off and found her? Was the bird still alive? Had she even been real? After all, we had looked where the noise was
coming from a million times, and still hadn’t found the bird. Maybe the sun was finally getting to me, zapping my brain like Mama said it would if I spent too much time outside in the summertime. Maybe West herself hadn’t even been real. Then I would know I had finally gone insane. Death by hallucination, my obituary would read in the county newsletter.

I spent the day on the porch doing crossword puzzles, sweating and bored, sulking at my God-rotten luck that we lived a trillion miles away from anyone else my age, and that even if someone lived close, they probably wouldn’t like me anyhow. I almost wanted summer to just go ahead and end, so I could get back to doing something, anything. West had seemed to like me, I thought, the first girl in a long time that didn’t already know about my Mama, who wouldn’t make fun of me just ‘cause I was her daughter. West didn’t know anything about me, and I liked it that way. Plus, she really seemed so strange, but maybe in a good way. Either way, I realized that she was all I had to get me through these last few weeks. For most of the day, I wanted to scream. I wanted to go right out to the creek, cup my hands into a microphone, and just yell for her. Find me, I wanted to shriek. Teach me about the birds, I wanted to shout. If I did that, though, somebody out there would hear me, and next thing I knew, I’d be a crazy bird girl, too.

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Mama got home from work around seven, in one of her better moods, meaning she walked right past me on the porch, strawberry hair flying behind her, didn’t say a word, and went straight for the kitchen instead of yelling at me. I heard the clinking of glass, the crunch of celery sticks, and the strong mix of tomato juice, Tabasco and Worcestershire sauce wafted quickly from the kitchen to the rest of the house. She was
thirsty again. For a moment, there on the porch listening to Mama, I closed my eyes and imagined myself as the baby mourning dove way out in the woods. I saw myself crying, screaming out into sky from my flimsy nest. I can’t fly yet, so here I am, stuck way up high with jagged twigs and pine needles poking me every which way. Thick, cream-colored down surrounds me, almost suffocates me as I squirm; the very thing meant to comfort me has made me sick, made me sad. But I can’t move too much, because the nest is weak; I can see through the holes to the ground, the dark, frightening ground miles and miles beneath me. My fluffy gray arms aren’t ready to carry me from here; my backbone is not yet strong. I’m not yet a fledgling, ready to try my wings; I am still in so much need. My mother, a great big gray bird with a tan chest and bustling feathers, wasn’t supposed to leave me. But she’s gone; she’s been gone a while. And I don’t know how to get her back, how to fly to her, call out to her, how to bring her back to me. So I keep screaming; I keep crying to the heavens, to the big open sky, until I’m found.

At the beginning of supper that night, Mama shakily set a pot of spaghetti down for us. It was quiet; me, Johnny, Austin, Mama, and Jasper, sitting silent and ready to dig in to our noodles and meatballs, just the buzz of crickets and the bellow of the bullfrogs yapping in the creek behind us.

“Mama,” I said. “I know I’m on restriction, but Miss Zell needs me to help her with some stuff tonight, all right?”

Jasper mumbled, but Mama just rolled her eyes and then swigged down the last few gulps of her Bloody Mary, head tilted back far in an attempt to suck down every last drop. She got up to make another, bumping into the kitchen counter as she walked. “Sure, Carolina.”
I gobbled a few bites down, listening to Mama continue to slurp at her drink and her spaghetti, Jasper making ugly, grunty breathing noises as he ate, and Johnny and Austin were fussing as they “secretly” kicked each other under the table. All of them making their different noises at the same time gave me a strange feeling, like I had caught a bunch of crickets and put them in a Coke bottle, the way Johnny and Austin and I did sometimes when we were bored in the summertime. All the words and sounds jumbled together, bouncing off one another, stewing and churning together, sounding just like the crickets thumping violently off the sides of the plastic as they tried to escape, just ready to explode out and hop far away.

When I was done with my dinner, I flew out the door without saying goodbye, bursting right out like one of the heated crickets escaping from the soda bottle.

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When I met West out by the creek, she was propped up against the side of a dying, dried-out old palm tree that stretched high above the earth, her back arched in a little half-circle that followed the tree’s spine.

I almost didn’t see her against the tree that rose from the shore, halfway between the white house and my own broken-down old shack. Her knees were locked and bent toward the sky with both of her elbows propped above them. Her hands were squeezed into tight balls beneath her chin, and her head rested heavy on her small hands. She didn’t look the least bit comfortable all balled up like that, yet there was a quiet peace swirling around her, kind of like I thought an angel might look like.

She was wearing a neon green overall dress over a tie-dyed yellow and pink tank top, with bare feet again, and her wild golden hair was twisted into lots of tiny braids, all
tied up at the ends with rainbow-colored plastic rubber bands. She looked like a walking neon rainbow straw.

West didn’t even notice when I came up behind her, my bare feet crunching hard against the thick Bahia grass; she didn’t even look when I plopped down and sat down right beside her. She was still staring out at the water. She didn’t even blink.

"Hey," I said, looking at her toenails, nude and unpolished, but still delicate at the same time. I looked at my own feet, a mess of bony toes stuck to feet with big black circles on the heels from walking around barefoot all summer. “Whatcha doing?”

“Oh, nothing, just thinking. So, you wanna come to my house for a little while?” West asked.

I usually use the same rule I did with Cade – don’t go to their houses, because then you’ve got to bring them to yours. But I was so curious, I couldn’t help it.

“Sure,” I said.

We walked into the backyard and around the creek, to a tiny white house I’d never been in, never seen up close my whole entire life of living across from it. West was still talking to me as we walked, carrying on the conversation about her thoughts on eating meat, which she definitely did not approve of.

“It just doesn’t make sense to eat something that is just going to turn around and eat us when we’re dead and gone and become dirt,” she said. “And besides, chickens are birds, and I’d never do that; I’d never ever eat the birds.”

She kept this going until we right in front of her house, and the whole time I wondered if she knew how much ground beef I had just eaten in the spaghetti, wondered if she could smell the meat on my breath.
Before we even walked in the door to West’s house, still on the creaky front porch steps, I could hear a woman’s voice yelling something about being so sorry, the kind of halfway, kind of unconvincing sorry you say when you’re smack dab in the middle of doing whatever it is that’s making you so regretful, the kind of sorry my Mama used a lot of lately. The woman’s voice was husky, like someone who had either smoked for years or had been screaming all day long.

West looked startled.

“What’s that?” I said, slowing my steps before we reached the door’s threshold.

“That’s Maybelline,” West said, and her wide eyes crinkled as she turned her head to face mine. “She’s not supposed to be here right now, actually.”

“Who?”

“Maybelline. Hang on just one sec.”

She walked into the house in to the small front foyer, coming closer to the hollering. The inside of the house smelled strong of bleach, and a little bit like oranges. West lead me to the living room and signaled for me to sit. I sat, listening to what sounded like something liquid squirting from a bottle and a repetitive thumping noise, like the person apologizing was cleaning her windows and tap-dancing at the same time. I wasn’t so sure if that would surprise me.

I looked around the tiny living room. The dark, wood-panel walls were covered with multi-colored ribbons, the kind that say “1st place” in tacky gold cursive but don’t actually say what activity the person placed in. It could have been a knitting contest; could have been for a flag-football championship. From what I could tell from West so
far, it really could have been either. One wall was tacked up with what had to be fifty of them, reds and blues and yellows of thin artificial silk placards that awarded various places in nameless contests. The opposite wall was a mix of more ribbons, and several different pictures of what looked like the same horse head, all drawn on white construction paper – there was a drawing made with pencil, an oil-based, a water-painted, even a paint-by-numbers horse head. An ironing board stood in the center of the room, with a mammoth pile of women’s clothing exploding every which way off the top of the board.

The room had only one couch, a ratty green leather loveseat with what looked like rows of little cat scratches down the side. Smushy, bright yellow foam poked through the scratches. There was nothing else in the room but the rug, a furry, fluorescent green area rug that had been matted down from years of people walking on its fluffy hairs.

Somewhere very close, the woman was still making a God-awful commotion. After a few minutes, West led me into the kitchen, and there she was, the apologetic tap-dancing cleaner – except she wasn’t cleaning at all. She was stomping, rather, on an army of sugar ants that were parading from the plastic-tiled floor onto the corner of a dark wood kitchen cabinet. A can of Raid was clasped in her right hand, and a thick haze of the poison wafted in the air above us. The woman wore only a pink towel that had been streaked with bleach and frayed on corners that were matted to her skinny legs. She was beautiful, too, I quickly noticed, with dark hair cascading in thick curls for what seemed like miles down her back. She was covered from head to toe with light freckles that kissed her milky skin in tiny constellations, and I could make out the Big Dipper from a cluster of seven thick freckles that spattered her right shoulder. She didn’t look old
enough to be West’s mother, but looked enough like her that she had to be related. Her toenails were painted bright purple, and her feet were still smashing violently into the sugar ant brigade.

“Little shits!” she went on, continuing her strange dance. Stomp, spray, stomp, spray. “Ant bastards!” But she was so sorry, she said in her trance, and she hoped that they all went straight to ant heaven, and she would pray for their little ant bodies, but she just could not have little buggers all over the house. Crumpled brownish-red specks littered the floor around us. The woman did not look our way as she continued to drown the bugs.

“Get out of here!” she yelped, spraying Raid in our direction, but I wasn’t sure if she was talking to us or to the ants.

“Maybelline!” West yelped right back.

Stomp, spray, went the woman.

“MAYYYBELLLLLINE! We’ve got company!”

Maybelline stopped exterminating. She turned around fast to look at me, her damp hair spinning in a tornado from her back down on to her shoulders. Dark chocolate eyes, like West’s, bore into me.

“Well, hey there. Aren’t you a pretty little thing,” she said, smiling, her features softening all of a sudden, a sun to the moon she had been just a second before. I stared back at her. Never in my life had I been called a “pretty little thing.” Did she really think so? I hadn’t known anyone to call me pretty for as long as I could remember. I’d been called “real sweet” and “smart,” and I’d gotten a “she’s real cute” from one of Mama’s work friends one time. There’d only been one time I’d halfway been called “sexy,” and
that was by one of Mama’s friends one night after they’d both had too much to drink, when I’d woken up with a growling stomach and snuck out to the kitchen for a snack in my long white socks and shorts. I’d run smack into Mama’s friend, and he’d taken a long look at me and said “Damn, little girl, you’ve got some sexy legs there.” I was afraid for a minute that Mama would be upset, but instead, she’d laughed real hard, smacked him on the back playfully, and said “Wait til you see where she gets ‘em from, sugar.” And even though she’d laughed, I’d taken one look at her shaky body and red, red eyes and saw that she looked a little bit scared.

But Maybelline had just called me pretty, and coming from her, I believed it, even if it was just for a minute. All of a sudden, just like that, I loved this woman standing in a giant pool of stinky white poison in half of a bleach-splattered towel.

“This is Maybelline,” West said. “My sister.”

“Hi,” I said.

Maybelline smiled at me, and then brushed my head with a French-manicured hand. “Well, I’d love to get to meet you better, Carolina, but I’m actually just on my way to work now.”

“You don’t really have a job, May,” West said.

“West! For the love of Christ, why don’t you shut your trap for one second of the day,” Maybelline said, shaking her head hard, damp hair flying. “I do have a job,” she said, looking at me, like she had to explain. “I just don’t like it much.” She pulled the pink towel tighter to her body.
“‘But May –’” West said, scolding a sister that looked at least 10 years older than herself. I was starting to figure out that West really had some big ol’ balls, as my Mama would say sometimes about the people who would whisper about her in stores.

“Okay, West, whatever,” Maybelline said. “I’m working on it, okay?” She set down the Raid and looked at me again. “Y’all hungry? I’ve gotta go to work, but we can eat real quick before I go.”

I wasn’t hungry at all, still full from swallowing down the spaghetti at my own house so quickly, but I’d eat something, I said, feeling a weird but strong pull to please this woman all of a sudden. She was like an older West…only even stranger, and even more beautiful.

Maybelline said she’d be back in a few minutes and left the room. West walked to their tiny white refrigerator, shooing for me to sit at the kitchen table, an old wooden rectangle board tacked together with four thick pieces that looked like real tree trunks. I watched as West put together dinner, my second meal of the night. She pulled three plates, all a metallic orange color, from the cabinet next to the one Maybelline had just gone crazy spraying. Each orange plate had a different picture of ALF, that little orange alien I had seen on TV a few years before, on its base. Mine was ALF on the telephone with the long phone cord tied around his alien fingertips, while the other hand gave a thumb up.

West pulled different containers from the refrigerator, putting together a meal of potato salad, leftover French fries from a McDonald’s carton, Chinese Lo mein noodles, and sliced tomatoes. She looked really happy all of a sudden, started humming that disco song again as she worked. As she pulled the containers out, I noticed that there were
several glasses on the top shelf of the refrigerator, all with only about a sip of a drink left in each. A cake, chocolate with rainbow sprinkles, sat on a shelf unwrapped and half-eaten, with at least five different holes all over the place in what looked like someone had just sat there eating in front of the refrigerator, fork in hand. I thought of Mama, knowing she’d kill me if I’d done that with the cake.

West put all of the different foods into small clear bowls with tarnished silver serving spoons. She poured apple cider into three glasses, and sat down next to me. Her ALF was dancing, with a blue tutu on and his arms arched in a half circle above his head. What I figured was Maybelline’s plate had ALF singing with a big black microphone and music notes dancing over his head.

“Dig in, Carolina,” West said. I reached for the potato salad, my stomach full, suddenly realizing I was in the coolest place possible – I mean, West had no Mama around to yell at her and drive her crazy with her ways, to make her life miserable like mine did. I felt the pull of green pure jealousy run through my skin.

Just then, Maybelline thundered back into the kitchen. Her long hair was smoothed back and tied up with two black chopsticks, and she wore a tight black jacket that was closed and covered her like a dress, almost all the way to her knees. She wore tall, skinny black heels that made her thin legs stretch and her calf muscles tighten into little half-circle shapes. Her face was painted with different shades of pinks and grays, and her eyelashes were swept and curled out like the wings of a dark, newborn butterfly. I thought she looked mysterious, foreign, and beautiful, like an actress from one of the black-and-white films from the old days Miss Zell liked to watch. I noticed that she did not smell like Raid anymore; instead, she smelled like orange blossoms. I counted
backward in time, guessing it took maybe 15 minutes for her to make herself look and smell like that. I figured it would take at least a few hours to even get me close, and I sat there, dumbfounded, chewing on the potato salad.

Maybelline grabbed a handful of the French fries and three tomato slices. “I’m sorry, you guys. I’m runnin’ later than I thought I was,” she said, walking toward the back door. She put her hand on the door to open it, but then spun around back towards us like she had forgotten something. She kissed the top of each of our heads. I felt a chill rush down my body as the strange girl’s lips brushed my hairline.

“But, I thought you didn’t have to leave yet…” West said. Her eyebrows scrunched up, and she stopped chewing her French fry, the first time I had really heard her stop talking yet.

“I forgot that I’ve gotta go in early tonight,” Maybelline said. “Sorry, sweetie.” She looked at me. “Carolina, you’re a doll, and you come back over soon so we can get to know you better.” She shut the door behind her, and I heard her heels click out on the driveway until she hopped into the red Chevy and started its bellowing engine.

“Where is she going?” I said, confused.

“To work,” West said.

“But I though she didn’t have a –”

“She does have a job. Just not a real one.” West reached for her apple cider and took a long gulp.

I wasn’t entirely sure what she meant, or what all this job stuff was about, but I wasn’t going to ask. Not yet, anyway. If I started asking questions, West might starting
asking questions of me. And that, I knew from experience, was exactly how I’d ended up with no friends in the first place.

We continued our meal, the two of us silent, the only sound in the air a jumble of our squashy chewing noises, the clinking of our forks against the ALF plates, and suddenly, something far off in the distance that sounded a lot like the baby bird we had been looking for just a day before, calling out loud and long again. I asked West if she could hear her too, the mourning bird we had looked so long for. I told her I hadn’t heard her the whole day, and that I had wondered where the crying had gone until just then. I had even wondered if it had all been real, I told her, that maybe we were just imagining the noise.

“No, Carolina, she’s real,” she said, looking out the window at the driveway, as she cleared our plates into the kitchen sink. “And she needs our help. She’s probably drying out like a corpse in this heat. She needs water, food, protection.”

“What should we do?” I said.

“We just need to find her.”

“And then what?”

“We just find her, and then we love her. That’s all we can do. All we can do is love her to help make it better.”

Somehow, suddenly, I understood exactly what West meant.
Chapter Eight

Later that night, one of those violent storms brewed, one of those ones that scared me to all hell with their whipping, howling winds, crashing thunder, and torrid flashes of electricity all in matter of five minutes. These storms came through Crow almost every day, but they were never enough to help moisten up the parched grass everywhere. We were still by the creek, and the bull frogs started their croaking and arghing, and the ivory clouds began to simmer into a pale orange-gray. I knew it was just bursting to rain, and it made me mad, gloomy even, that my time with West would be cut short for the day.

“Let’s get inside somewhere,” I said to West, who was squatting on the ground next to a pile of thrush and tending to another baby bird that had fallen from its nest.

“We will,” West’d said. “Just wait for it to come.”

“What – the rain? This storm? Just wait for it?”

“Yes, silly. The storm. It ain’t gonna hurt you, silly.”

The truth was, that’s exactly what I’d always thought it would do. My usual response to a storm like that one that was coming was to hide in my closet, maybe even under my bed until it passed. For me, Crow was nothing more than a place where tornadoes and summer storms roared, where tornado warnings crossed the TV screen every summer afternoon and lightning strikes were as common as raindrops – a place to run from, hide from.

“But, um, I don’t really want to get soaked, West,” I said. “And my Ma will kill me if I come home all dripping wet.”
“Well, I think you should stop worrying so much about your Mama and just let yourself feel the rain when it comes,” she said, smiling up at me as I paced in little half circles beside her. “Just let it pour all over you. It’ll be good for you – believe me.”

This girl, I thought, is really crazy. I stared up at the dark orange clouds that swarmed close, in what seemed like just a few feet above our heads. Goosebumps rose up and down my body, and the soft white hairs on my arms stood at attention. A bullfrog croaked somewhere close by, which meant he was getting closer, probably to hide out beneath the thick brush that surrounded West and me, obviously much smarter than the two of us. I really didn’t want to sit there in the rain, but West seemed so determined to stay parked right where she was, and she stuck her open palm out my direction, motioning me to sit down beside her.

“You know, now we’re gonna get muddy, too,” I said. “And then, electrocuted. And then –”

“Carolina’ you ain’t never just sat in the rain?” she said. “You know, just really sat still and tried to be a part of it all?”

“It’s not just rain – not in one of these storms – we’re gonna get soaked and muddy and electrocuted for no reason. We’re not far from your house, right? C’mon, we can hide there.” I pulled down at her arm.

“Girl, just calm down. Whenever it rains and I just let myself get caught in it, I always end up having the best day,” West said. “Rain’s good luck. I know you wouldn’t think so, but rain’s a sign of good things coming.”

I sighed loud enough that I’d known she’d hear it, but she just ignored me, kept on crooning to the tiny bird she had cupped between her hands. I sat, imagining my
funeral, wondering who would actually show. Would my father be there? Would he even know I was gone from the world? Would Mama even be sad to see me go?

And then, just as if on cue, the sky had erupted above us, and warm, fat rain drops ran down from the sky. West placed the baby bird beneath the pile of thrush and covered the gaps with a giant palmetto leaf, then smiled at me. I felt silly, just sitting there, letting the drops soak me, as my body was screaming for me to get up and run for cover.

As the drops plunked against my head, and then rolled fast down my back to the top ridge of my shorts, the goose bumps rose up all over my body once more. As the rain came faster, and the thunder cackled out into the sky, I cradled my arms into my lap and curled like an armadillo might, but before I could lock myself into the little self-made cocoon, West grabbed at my hands again. Except this time, she was pulling me up, and I felt suddenly relieved: she’d finally come to some sense, we were going to leave the little bird be and run for cover.

I could hardly see her at that point; the rain was spraying down with the fervor that mid-afternoon Florida rainstorms usually do. I started in a sprint, but West yanked at both of my arms and jerked me back.

“What!” I said.

“Just. Let. Go,” she said, her wide grin opening to me. With both of my hands in hers, West began spinning, leaning back with a force that caused me to steady myself and then spin along with her: otherwise, I was headed right for the clumpy pile of mud that had formed on the ground below us.

West spun faster and faster, until I was hurled into the motion, my feet running sideways through the thick mud, pulling outward as part of the spinning, lopsided circle
we’d created. We spun pulled harder and quicker into a tiny fury, until I felt rhythmic, cyclical, like I was part of a tornado running wild in the woods, where no one could see me. West howled in laughter, lifted her head back and shouted words I couldn’t hear to the sky. Circling through the rain like that, the thunder and lightning roaring and exploding around us, suddenly, for the first time in a long, long time, I felt fearless, feral in my ways. It was if I could take anything on, out there spinning as part of the storm’s fury, with this girl I hardly knew at all but knew so well all the same.

It was after we had stopped spinning, sitting in the last bit of the clouds’ trickle, laughing, hysterically my chest heaving in both excitement and exhaustion, that I realized that West had come to town that summer for a reason. I realized, then, that she was there to take everything I knew, turn it upside down, and shake it till it all fell out in front of me, in front of all of us, right out into the sticky Florida air.

After the storm, when the grayness of the clouds cleared out and the deep maroons of the night crept in, West and I laid there right in the mud, looking up at the wide sky.

West grabbed my hand. “You see those stars?” West said, her eyes wide and bright, her index finger circling different spots in the sky. “That scene right up there, that’s one of God’s good ones. My Mama told me they’re nothing but holes in the floor of God’s bright heaven. See, heaven is spread in a big circle around the world. All the bad stuff – all the sadness, all the bad things people say to each other – turns to black each night, floats up, and fills the sky with darkness every night to remind us that we should be better than we are. The stars are God’s way of letting us know that there’s still hope, that there’s something out past the borders of our world waiting for the good ones.”
I smiled, hoping that all this stuff West liked to tell me was true. I wanted to believe it, that’s for sure.
Chapter Nine

The summer days after I met West crept along like an old train, sliding slowly down its tracks, puffing all tired to some far-off place that seemed miles beyond sight, not even in the hot tangerine horizon that dotted the sky each night behind Chutney’s Creek. Summer wanted to just keep on riding forever, it seemed like, just dawdling on down the path on the way to fall, and I hated it, I mean I really hated it going on so slow like that. It was hot as hell’s living room every day, so sticky and sweaty and itchy that I had even taken to wearing my old cut-off pair of Gitano short-shorts, not even caring if anyone saw my beat-up, mosquito-bitten legs and all.

Besides, with West walking around like her beauty-queen-looking-self all the time, it’s not like I thought anyone around was going to take a second look at me, anyway. West was a living, breathing, explanation of what beauty could be; what she had, with her wild chestnut hair and those huge chocolate eyes, was the missing piece, the whole package I wanted, and probably just what you’d want as a boy looking for a girl to guide on your arm through the hallways during the school year. Me, I was that girl who just always might be beautiful if only, and no one, not Cade, or any other boy I could think of for that matter, could ever possibly want me for their own.

West and I’d spent every day together since meeting in the woods, and it wasn’t but after a few days that I kind of felt like she had been my best friend forever. Yeah, she talked a lot and all, usually about silly hippie stuff like birds and animals and the earth
and peace, but that just let me be quiet and listen, pretty much how I liked it – I didn’t have to tell her anything about my Mama, my missing family, nothing at all.

In the days after meeting Maybelline, I hadn’t asked West about her again, and West hadn’t had me over to her house, even though I wanted to go back and be around her more. West seemed like she didn’t want to talk much more about it, changing the subject every time I brought it up. I still hadn’t had time to ask many questions of West at all, actually; we’d been so busy talking about other things, in fact, I was starting to realize I knew hardly anything at all about them.

We spent the long first days of knowing each other walking around the woods, building forts, looking for baby birds, staying out of the sun and keeping cool under the huge, droopy trees laced with Spanish moss around the creek behind my house. We went swimming in our clothes almost every day, going out neck-deep in the creek and splashing each other silly until we were cooled-off again. Sometimes we just floated upside-down in the water, trying to look up at the sun without burning our eyeballs out of our heads, usually drifting slowly with the current until it pulled us out too deep to still stand on tip-toes. The sweltering sun sucked up all the wetness so quick afterward; I never once had to worry about Mama screaming at me for not bothering to wear a bathing suit. She’d never even know, West told me every time with a lop-sided grin.

West told me stories, lots of them, mostly about animals and the earth and how it all came together, how we all worked together to form this big, round, constantly changing system and all, stuff I’m sure I had learned in school a gazillion years ago, but never really cared about.
We talked about boys, and how she was waiting for the right one to finally stumble in to her life. She said she’d been saving it all.

“You’ve never even kissed a boy?” I said. I found it hard to believe she’d never been kissed, her looking like a movie star and all.

“Well, no, not really,” she said. “What about you?”

I told her about Cade, and how I wanted just to feel what it’d be like to kiss him. How I’d never even thought about him like that until he’d been gone for so long and I’d started missing him so much, like I couldn’t take another day without seeing him. I wanted to kiss him, and bad, I told West. And if I ever went further, I had to make damn sure I didn’t get pregnant, I told her.

Sex, I knew what it was, but I didn’t know much about it, so I just nodded in a way that I hoped showed West I knew what she meant. Too, I guess Mama had been so busy all the time that she’d forgotten to tell me about the bird and the bees and what happens when a girl becomes a woman. The first time I’d started bleeding, in fact, I plain out didn’t know what it was coming from, plain out thought I was dying right there in the middle of my sixth-grade class. With Annie and the other girls cackling over my stained jeans from the back of the room, Ms. Babs had to escort me personally to the school clinic. It was Aida, the school nurse who looked way too young to be explaining the facts of life to kids, who told me about periods and maxi pads and that I should feel very grown up and proud as can be to finally be becoming a woman. I wanted to tell Aida to mind her own damn business, that I’d become a woman on my own time, thank you very much. Becoming a woman meant I had to fall in love, and I knew falling in love meant I might end up like my Mama someday.
But when West told me about all of it, I listened. Sometimes I listened so close to all the stuff she told me that I thought, I had told her one day, that when she opened up her veterinary clinic when she was older, that I would just have to work as her assistant, or her secretary, or anything, really, anything to be a part of it. West said she’d love that, that we’d be partners in the business, and that we’d both marry men that looked like Donnie Wahlberg from *New Kids on the Block*, buy a big piece of land up high on some mountain range far from Florida, and build big white houses with backyards that ran right into each other. We’d even get horses. Her daughter would marry my son, she decided, and then we’d be sisters or cousins or something. We’d be related, anyhow, and she could talk my ear off as we sat sipping lemonade on our back porches for as long as we lived. Things for West and I, though, were about to change.

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One day, out by the creek, West showed up to meet me wearing a tiny, silver filigree-laced locket around her neck. It looked about a hundred years old, with dirt caked in the tiny mirrored edges.

After swimming, as we lay under one of the huge oak trees by the creek, I asked her what she had in there.

She grasped at the locket, caressed it between her fingers. She hesitated for a moment. “Now, I don’t show this to just everyone,” she said. “But I’m gonna show you.” Something about the way she said it made me feel important, like she was sharing some big secret world inside her tiny little locket.

Then, she smiled softly and clicked it open. Inside, there were two picture holes, but no pictures.
“It’s beautiful,” I said. “But there’s nothing –”

“Yeah. My Mama and Daddy gave it to me.”

“So how come you don’t have a picture of them in there, then?”

West looked to the sky. The sun beamed so bright on us that her eyes reflected white, and she looked weird and eerie.

“They’re dead. They both died just a while back,” she said. “And I don’t have one picture of them. Not a single one.”

“Is that why you’re here with Maybelline?” I said, feeling the words pour out. “Cause your parents died?”

Her eyes misted, but she turned away quick before I could see any tears.

“Yeah,” she said. She snapped the locket shut, closing my view of her life before Crow and apparently my questions about it, too. “And don’t you tell Maybelline I showed you this,” she said. “She’s still getting over it, you know.”

“I’m sorry about your parents, West,” I said. I wanted then to tell her about my parents, to tell her about my crazy Mama and how I didn’t even know my Daddy. To let her know she was lucky, at least she’d had time with her parents before they’d up and left or just gone crazy. My jaw wired shut, though, the weight of a million times I’d been laughed at for my family before trapping it. I was terrified to tell her anything at all, for fear she’d go running from me, acting like I had cooties just because my Mama was who she was like everyone else in town did.

“Hey, you wanna go back in the water?” she said. “I’m so freaking hot. And the storms will be coming through soon.” Without another word, she got up from the ground,
brushed the red dirt from her legs, and ran toward the creek. I couldn’t think of anything else to do but to follow.
Chapter Ten

The next day had to of been the hottest, driest day Crow’d seen all summer. Mama’d been working a whole lot during the day, and Jasper was at work, too, so I knew we wouldn’t run in to anyone but maybe brothers, who were busy playing baseball down at their friend’s house for the day. So, after we’d been out in the woods for a while and sweating to all hell, I invited West in to our house to make some sweet tea.

I figured we’d fill up a plastic pitcher of sweet tea to take back outside with us to the creek while we swam and get on out before we had to run in to anyone. In the kitchen, I’d pulled down the pitcher and had West seeping the tea when I realized that there Jasper was, pretending to watch re-runs of Wheel of Fortune on the TV after he got back from work at the air-conditioning store. I’d forgotten he got back early some days to work on his toilet-bowl-cover business, but of course he really didn’t do anything but sit on his butt in front of the TV. As he walked in toward the kitchen from the living room, I could see his reddish, beady little eyes dancing all over West’s body, staring at her like she was going to be his supper or something. West didn’t seem to notice him as much as I did, which I guessed meant she was probably used to it.

My stomach growled loud in protest.

“Hey, girls,” Jasper said as he walked toward us, his eyes fixed at West’s tiny, tan belly button, which was poking out from under her orange spaghetti-strap tank top. “Y’all gonna share that tea?” Jasper’s own belly button, covered in a forest of thick, curly black hair and surrounded in one giant, roll of grossness, poked out from under his tight-fitting
white undershirt, like a deformed, hairy marshmallow trying to explode out at us. Light yellow arm-pit stains formed huge half-circles under his arms, and he smelled like vinegar, or Freon, or maybe a little bit of both.

“Sure, you can have some,” I said, half-smiling, wanting with every ounce of me to dump the pitcher, lemon bits and all, right over his head. Instead, I poured more cane sugar into the pitcher and stirred the little wire whisk in circles, hard and fast.

“Thanks, honey,” Jasper grinned back at me, a row of jagged beige teeth sticking out over his lips in a way that made him look much like a wolf, raring to pounce. He turned right back to West. “So, West, right?”

West nodded.

“How’s ya like living here in Crow so far?” He leaned on the counter, rested his pointy chin on his hands. I looked at his fingernails, caked in a black crud, and thought of those same hands that touched my mother night after night, doing things that kept me up through the night when all I wanted was to sleep, to get to the next day so that summer’d be over, to not hear them ohhing and ahhing through the walls.

“It’s great. Real good.” West smiled politely, and suddenly became really interested in picking at her cuticles.

“Well, that’s good. Glad’s to hear it. Ya know, come to think of it, we ain’t never had you over for a proper welcoming yet,” Jasper said. “You have dinner with us tonight. Miranda’ll warm up some extra pot roast for you.”

“We’ve got plenty,” Jasper said, waving a big, dirt-caked hand the direction of the refrigerator.
“I don’t eat meat, so thanks anyway,” West said suddenly, her eyes fixed on Vanna White walking across the television screen in a sparkly, pool-colored dress. She was starting to look uncomfortable for the first time since I had met her. She started chewing softly on the edge of her right thumbnail, which was half-covered with chipped, fluorescent pink nail polish.

“We’ve got enough to feed you, darlin’. Don’t you worry about her,” Jasper said.

My stomach churned. I had asked God on several occasions to do something about Jasper, to get him out of the house and far away from here. He had already taken Mama, and I could not let him take West from me now. I couldn’t tell him no, of course, Mama couldn’t have that, but I’d keep him away from West, anyhow, any way I could.

“And you’ll just eat the vegetables, anyway, won’t ya?” Jasper said again, winking, in much more of a command than a question.

West nodded. “Well, yes. I mean no. I really can’t make it. My sister –“

“Well, I insist,” Jasper said. Case closed.

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West and I went out on to sit on the front porch steps to wait for supper. The creek would have to wait, she said, but we’d get back to it first thing in the morning. She didn’t seem upset she’d be eating dinner with us, but my heart was beating so fast I thought it might burst right out from my chest there on to the porch. We sat on the crooked front steps, sipping on the sweet tea. I watched as a fat black roach stumbled from underneath the porch’s wood panels and skittered in my direction.
I looked then at West, wondering if she’d notice that roach and do the same thing all those girls in my class had done – up and run away from me just as fast as they could, like I was the roach that was gonna go and bite their toes off.

Instead of running, West wasn’t paying attention at all. She sat silent, and had that faraway look in her eyes as she stared out at the heat waves dancing in the distance of the dirt road that ran from the front of the house into town.

Mama pulled in to the drive, and we both watched as she tore up the drive. Mama got out of the car, her black apron still on, sprinkled with little stray hairs floating off every which way, in every color, from all the hair she’d cut that day. She had a glass of dark red wine in her hand and was taking big gulps, so big that I could hear her swallow from where we were. She did not look happy, and she walked through the side door of the house without even noticing us there on the front porch.

A minute later, after some clanging on the kitchen, I heard her say from inside, “No, we don’t have enough to feed the whole damn neighborhood, Jasper,”

“Sorry about all this,” was all I could think to say to West, as I started picking at a big pink mosquito bite on my knee. It began to bleed.

From somewhere close, a tiny cricket chirped loud and long in the stale summer air around us. Each chirp seemed quiet and quick enough on its own, but them rubbing their limbs all together like that, I thought, it sounded like one constant scream. West got that faraway look in her eyes as she stared out at the heat waves dancing in the distance of the dirt road that ran from the front of the house into town.

West blinked once, ran her fingers through her hair, and kept on looking out in to the distance. “You know, Carolina, the sound of crickets is a sign of good stuff coming in
a lot of places. They’re usually pretty peaceful bugs, kind of just doing their thing and making all that noise all the time.” She took a long, deep breath, and then took a big swig of the tea, leaving little grains of sugar stuck on her lips. Her wild hair streamed every which way down her shoulders, and she turned her dark eyes to meet mine. “But, those little insects have another side to ‘em. The very second a cricket dies, his family will eat his body whole. They don’t think twice about it, they all just watch the cricket die, then chow on its body until they’re full.”

All I could do is stare back at her, look right into those huge cocoa eyes, thinking of how easy it is, in the hot midsummer days of Florida, to lose track of the time that’s passing by. One day folds in to night which folds in to the next, and before you know it, days become months and months become centuries, all stuck in to one long, sweaty day. Really, I’d begun to feel like I’d known her forever, and although I still couldn’t quite understand what she meant when she told me the things she did, I still knew why West said them. When she looked at me, I think I saw myself, but in a different way. It’s like we were on opposite sides of a fire, staring at each other through the dancing blaze. We could look through, and see the other through the flames, a little blurry and a little crooked, fluttering in pieces behind bright orange flames to form one whole. I was her and she was me, as we both burned in ways neither of us understood. I wanted to tell her this, but instead, we sat silent there, with the crickets still carrying on around us, me thinking that, West thinking something probably very different, but somehow very much the same, until we were called in for dinner.

I tried then to pray to Saint Anthony nothing would happen at dinner, but I wasn’t really sure how. I know Miss Zell had said just to talk to him, but I knew there was some
certain way. I’d always wanted to go to church, but Mama’d never taken me. I remember the times Miss Zell tried to take me when I was a kid, but it seemed like there was always someone talking about sins and trying to get me to bring Mama, so I stopped going. I thought there was something out there, at least, but I still hadn’t felt it. Touched it. Seen it. Sometimes, I imagined God himself would one day just reach out, without her even asking, and touch my Mama’s soul to make her happy again. But then again, God could only do so much.

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Like Jasper had promised, Mama worked to heat up extra roast, extra vegetables, extra baked potatoes for West. From the porch, I could hear Mama inside moaning like it was just outright painful, just plain killing her to be fixing another plate of dinner for my friend, but Jasper kept yelping for her to knock it off, woman, so she’d quiet down for about 45 seconds and then come out and groan all over again. With each loud clang of a serving spoon against a dish, each crashing clink of a dish taken down from the cabinet, though, I could tell Mama was steaming hot about West staying for dinner, but I didn’t quite know why.

After Jasper poked his watermelon-sized head out to call us in, I went to grab the extra aluminum chair from the hallway closet for West, until, staring at the empty space occupying its usual spot, I realized Jasper already had. And when I got to the kitchen, I saw that he had plopped the chair for West down not next to me or my brothers, not by Mama, but right next to the light wooden chair he’d been plopping his big fat butt around the table each night.

Mama sighed and gave West a look I didn’t like.
“Sorry...” I mouthed to West, who didn’t seem to see me waving her back my way, and instead, she walked right toward the empty chair, oblivious to the big, sweaty buffoon just waiting for her to sit next to him. A heavy, swirling feeling in my stomach told me I had to save her, and quick.

“Oh, no...you can have my chair, West,” I said, hoping she wouldn’t think anything of it, and slid in the chair Jasper had meant for her before she could scrunch herself down into place. She smiled at me, and then sat to my right, in my usual spot, right next to Mama. In my head, I cheered a little victory song, even if it meant I had to sit next to Jasper’s Freon-smelling self now. He didn’t look very happy, but he didn’t say a word and only grumbled something directed at his round, hairy belly as he shoved a fork overflowing with shreds of wet brown roast into his mouth.

West picked at a plate of vinegar-drenched collard greens, mushy peppered white cauliflower, and a tiny baked sweet potato as the rest of us – Mama, Jasper, and my brothers – ate all of that on our own plates, and big piles of the steaming pork roast, too. I tried really hard to not eat the meat in front of West, but I was just so damn hungry from being out in the heat all day long and so nervous about West being there, my first friend over for dinner in years, that I really couldn’t help myself from scarfing it right down.

Johnny and Austin, home from a day of spear-fishing and cast-netting for mullet out on the creek and hyper as ever, took a few bites each of their pork roast and spent the rest of the time gawking and making big, matching blue googoly eyes at West. She just smiled sweet and asked them about school, asked them what they knew about animals, that kind of small talk she seemed to be so good at.
Mama sat poking with her fork at her sweet potato and just stared into space, like West was doing something illegal just by talking to my brothers, and she was trying real hard to either ignore it or just plain act like West wasn’t sitting there.

Mama’d finally taken her work apron off and now wore a stretchy red shirt, which matched the liquid in the glass that sat what seemed like permanently close to empty by her dinner plate. Her long strawberry, blonde hair was pulled into a tiny bun, which fanned little hairs up behind her head in a weird spiky halo. I really hadn’t looked at my Mama very much in the past few weeks, her being at work all day and then usually out right after dinner all the time, but I noticed then that she really just looked sleepy. Her eyes, tired and grey, were not the strong, steel blue color I’d once known. Her skin looked like it was falling, chicken meat off its bone; droopy, reddish, clammy, like it was melting right off her.

Just when my stomach finally stopped vacuuming in all the food and started to get halfway full, Jasper started asking West stupid questions that he probably already knew the answers to and then nodded over-enthusiastically with drawn out “Oh, wowwwwws” whenever she said something really interesting back (“Did you know most armadillos are almost blind?” “Oh, wowwwwwww.” “Did you know that when butterflies first come out of the cocoon, they have to spend one to three hours inflating their wings?” “Oh wowww!”)

The crickets outside were still screaming out into the air, and Mama still sat, chewing her food, sipping hard from her wine glass, and gave West that horrible look like she was trying to throw poison at her straight through her eyeballs. So far, though, she hadn’t said a word, and I was grateful, but knew it couldn’t last.
And sure enough, after West had told some joke about koala bears that had Jasper rolling and clapping like a handicapped walrus and Johnny and Austin giggling like little sunburned baboons in their chairs, Mama spoke.

“Damn, it’s hot in here, ain’t it?” Mama said above the laughter, pushing all her weight back in her chair hard enough that it screeched against the linoleum floor. Jasper’s eyes got big and round, like he’d been deep asleep and Mama had just woke him up right there at the table.

“Carolina, where’d you say your friend was from?” she said, raising her eyebrows into tiny half-crescent hills that took over her face as she peered over to West, who sat next to her nervously and looked like she’d rather not be talked about just then. She began to chew hard at the edge of her thumbnail.

Two things occurred to me then. One, by asking me that, Mama was doing that thing she did where she didn’t speak directly to a person because she’s already decided she didn’t like them. I’d seen her do it before, to people at the grocery store or at family reunions. And when she did that, there was no turning back, no chance at all for that person she’d made her mind up about just right there and then. They were done for.

The second thing I realized – I really didn’t know the answer to the question, the simple question of where West was from. I still didn’t know West’s middle name; her favorite color. Her favorite song; her religion – no clue whatsoever. And better yet, I didn’t know what had happened with her parents, really, and why Maybelline took care of her and North when she wasn’t even taking very good care of herself. In fact, I think West had talked about every subject there is to talk about on this Godforsaken earth except herself. West had spent the last few weeks telling me so much about animals, the
world, other people; you name it, West knew it, but I didn’t even know where she had
moved here from, and I hadn’t even had the time to ask because she never stopped
yapping.

“We’re from Jacksonville, ma’am,” West said, when she finally noticed the
unmoved air that still sat where the answer should have spilled out from me. “Up north,
just up 95, almost in Georgia.”

Mama looked surprised West had spoken, jolted that she had spoken directly to
her, like West has just shaken her and should definitely not have. My brothers squirmed
a bit in their chairs, waiting.

“Oh yeah? And who’s we?” she said.

“Just me and my sister,” West said. “I came to live with her.”

“Oh yeah? And who’s your sister?”

“Maybelline. Yes, like the makeup,” West laughed. “Maybelline’s real name is
actually May. Our Mama named her for her birthday month, but ever since Maybelline
got in her head that she was going to become a famous make-up artist, painting blush
circles on big movie stars, she’d asked to be called Maybelline. Maybelline thinks her
name is gonna catch people’s attention, kind of like this man I once knew, Dan, went and
opened himself up a seafood restaurant and then changed his name to ‘Fish.’”

Mama’s eyes got real wide; and her big black pupils suddenly shrunk to pin points
as she stared at West for what seemed like the first time and the longest time ever.

“Maybelline? Maybelline Beasley?” Mama said.

“Yeah, how’d you know? That’s her.”
Mama set down her glass and folded her hands atop the table like a judge might, ready to deliver a verdict.

“And just where’s your Mama, honey? Why are you just living with Maybelline with no adults around? How old’s Maybelline now? 17?”

Wait – how’d Mama know how old Maybelline was?

“Well, it’s a long story, but my Mama’s gone,” West said. She squirmed, worm-like, in her chair. “But, speaking of Maybelline, I’ve got to be going, actually,” West said, standing suddenly. “Thank you for dinner, ma’am, the collard greens were –”

“That’s nice, sweetheart, but that’s not what I asked you. I asked about your sister. Not about where you had to get goin’ to. In fact, if you really care to know, I didn’t even ask you here for dinner tonight, and if it weren’t for your goddamn sister, Jasper wouldn’t have even had you here tonight, either.”

What was she talking about? Maybelline? How did Jasper know Maybelline? How’d Mama know her? Something wasn’t right. My stomach, which had already been in knots, felt like it flipped suddenly, tangling my insides in one big flop. My jaw wired itself shut, and my body locked, a concrete statue, a feeling I knew I’d felt before. I knew what was about to happen, and I silently cursed the angel that God was supposed to have sent to make sure it didn’t. Where was she? And why had she forgotten to save me this time?

“Miranda –” Jasper said, looking very awake and sweaty, ready, but so very unable to put out the fire that was about to explode before him.

“Shut up, Jasper.” Mama looked right at West, who sat dumbstruck with a mouthful of sweet potato still in her mouth. I thought for a moment she’d do just like she
had with the storm, tell me it was fine, we’d sit right through it. I imagined that West
would fight back before Mama even started in to her. But, she didn’t.

“Listen, West,” Mama spit the name out fast and rough, like it was made of drops
of poison running from her mouth, and she wanted it out, hard and quick, so it’d be all
over West instead of inside her. “I don’t know what little girls your age do in
Jacksonville, but here in Crow, honey, you don’t invite yourself into people’s homes for
dinner, then hardly eat the food that’s been made for them.” My mouth, my body, still
locked, wanted to grab West, wanted to hold her, to protect her. But, I couldn’t move, and
I sat locked as Mama went on.

“And lastly. Most importantly, sweet pie. In Crow, in my house, you don’t come
in here with your stomach and your ass and your little baby tits hanging out of your
clothes trying to steal a grown woman’s man. You tell your sister that stands for her, too,
honey. Now get on out of here, and don’t come back looking for Carolina.”

I half-expected West to yell back, to defend herself. West hadn’t even been with a
boy yet; why in God’s name would Mama think West was trying to steal Jasper?

I wanted to scream out, to tell West I knew none of what my mother had just said
about her was even close to true, that the wonderful, wild girl was just the me behind the
fire, was the half that had just made me somewhat whole, was not the person my evil
mother was claiming she was. And what about Maybelline? I’d never seen her near my
Mama nor Jasper, not once. But all I could do - all my body, all my forgotten angel
would even allow me to do - was to sit silently, body stiff, in the hard metal chair as the
best friend I had ever made ran crying from the house into the sticky summer night air. I
sat in disbelief, astounded at how quickly Mama’d done it, how easily she’d broken West.

Mama shook her head hard and headed into the kitchen, mumbling under her breath, something about a “sonofbitch,” as Jasper stormed off angry into the bathroom. Johnny and Austin went to their room, with heavy heads and quiet little lips, like they’d just witnessed the death of one of their beloved Power Rangers or something. Silence, then the sounds of doors slamming splashed through the house like an empty ravine faced with the weight of gazillions of gallons of water coming from every direction. I felt flooded, ravished, beaten down, my little victory robbed from me once more. And as everyone disappeared, I sat there alone, motionless on the hard metal chair, waiting for the crickets outside, still screaming and chirping aloud in the night, to finally come in and devour me whole.
Chapter Eleven

After that night, I was sure West would never speak to me again. This, my Mama and her secrets, her anger, her stupid explosions, is why I had no friends, why I never could bring anyone in. I couldn’t apologize for my mother; it seems I never could make up for the things she did. I wanted my father there; surely, he’d fix this. I had taken a chance, and God had laughed down at me again, it seemed.

I was also sure I would never speak to Mama or Jasper for as long as I lived. Mama hadn’t come out of her room all night after she made West leave, and Jasper had sat out and smoked on the porch until long after I went to sleep. I had gone to bed, willed the summer away once more, and sat staring at my ceiling, listening to the wildlife make their night noises outside my window until I finally saw the blackness of my dreams take over.

The next morning, I ruffled through my nightstand and pulled out the Jackson High School bulletin that had been sent out at least a month before. In big, bubbly blue cursive letters, the parent newsletter said that school started on August 20; only two weeks left to suffer before I could forget this whole summer. Then, I’d get my chance to work my way to a college scholarship, get my chance to get the hell out of Crow, away from her.

I put the pamphlet away, and stretched my achy back. I hadn’t slept a wink, and my hair was still matted and sticky on my neck from sweat and the tiny tears that had flowed from my eyes throughout the night. My arms itched and my legs felt heavy, like
they’d sucked up all the anger I had and didn’t want to move anymore. I laid in bed for another hour, with nothing to do, until Mama knocked on the door and told me through the door that she was sending me to help out old Miss Zell from across the street for the day, and that she might be out late after work that night to celebrate Jasper’s promotion at the air conditioning store.

Because of Mama and stupid Jasper, though, I wasn’t exactly in the mood to hang clothes and sip warm fruit punch at Miss Zell’s house, pretending like I didn’t have a care in the world for the little old lady who smiled at me every so often.

The thing is, though, after all that time helping her out, I didn’t know much at all about Miss Zell, just like I’d known hardly anything about West. She knew everything about us; I knew she could hear Mama hollering and could see the different guys she had running in and out of our front screen door each morning and night. Mama had only invited Miss Zell over to our house once before, but even so, I knew Miss Zell could tell what was going on in our little house by the way she always stroked so softly at me and my brothers’ hair, like we were those children she wanted to save, but just couldn’t. I’d asked Mama about Miss Zell’s past before, and Mama had just said I should mind my business. Miss Zell didn’t have pictures up of anyone in her house; the wooden-panel walls were almost bare, except for a few frayed cardboard pictures of a young Jesus and a signed snapshot of Elvis Presley right by her rocking chair. The whole inside of the house was decorated in mauves and purples, and not one speck of anything looked like she’d once shared it with a man of her own. The one time I asked where she kept the pictures of her husband, her kids, her grandkids, she’d said something about hearing the roar of the afternoon storm coming, and sent me packing back across the street before she could
answer. That’s about when I started the movie star idea – a woman so sweet and beautiful like Miss Zell had to have had at least a man in her life at one time, at some point in her life.

I told Mama through my bedroom door that I wasn’t going, that Miss Zell could do her own stupid chores. She swung open the door.

“You get your butt over there, Carolina,” Mama said as she scrambled to throw on her work apron and yanked at her hair in my doorway, her eyes pinkish and small. “You need to keep those devilish hands of yours busy. Those girls you’ve been hanging around ain’t no good, and I better not catch you around them. And besides, that woman loves having you around.”

“Least someone does,” I said under my breath as she walked away from me down the hall.

“Oh, and Carolina,” she called from the hall. “You stay away from that West girl. And don’t you dare go near that sister of hers, you hear me?”

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Miss Zell hummed some slow oldies song as she handed me her white silk nightgowns and random pieces of pantsuits to pin against the thin metal pole that ran along the perimeter of the rickety back porch. She was wearing an electric blue suit that looked heavy and itchy. It made me hot just looking at her, and I felt the soft ooze of sweat trickle down my back. I tried to keep thoughts of the night before out of my head, but with each bead of sweat that fell wild down my back, I did. No matter what I tried to think of, West’s face all scrunched up with hurt, running from our house like I never thought she would, kept popping into my head. And then, what about Maybelline? What
had she done for Mama to hate her so bad? She’d been so nice, so kind when I’d met her – she couldn’t possibly have done anything wrong to Mama in her short time living in Crow. I stopped pinning the clothes and turned to Miss Zell.

“Miss Zell?”

She stopped humming, and looked a bit startled, like I’d woke her up from a dream.

“You ever lost a best friend for something you didn’t do?” I said.

“Well, of course. I’ve had plenty of friends, honey,” she said.

“But a best friend? You lost one?”

“Oh, I’m sure, honey. At some point I think I’ve had that happen in my million years here on earth.” She titled her head in a way that let me see that she, too, had sweat building along the edge of her forehead. She looked past the back yard with a faraway look, like she’d seen a ghost running clear through the backyard. The sweat filled ridges along her face revealed deep wrinkles, wrinkles I’d never noticed, and Miss Zell suddenly looked very old and fragile. “Why, honey, yes, you know what? I can say I’ve had something like that happen.”

Then, I couldn’t help it, it all came spurting out, and I suddenly wanted to tell her everything. “Miss Zell, I lost my best friend, all cause of Mama. She came over for dinner and Mama started yelling at her for no good reason at all – now, I lost my best friend, don’t have nothing. I don’t have my Daddy anymore –”

Miss Zell grabbed my hand and sat me down on the white wicker couch behind us. I stared at the tan hand on my own and began to cry, and hard. She cradled me into her shoulder, and fat tears that tasted like sweat streamed from my face onto the back of
her blue short-sleeved suit jacket. She petted at my hair, and my trembling shoulders bobbed against her arm. When I cried out everything I could, every last ounce of what Mama had done, where West had gone, I pulled away from her. I thought maybe she’d explain to me why Mama was the way she was, thought maybe she’d tell me how bad of a person she thought Mama was.

Instead, all she said was, “Listen, honey. I like to stay out of other people’s business, but your Mama – she’s trying, I just know it. Now, c’mon, baby. We need to fix that hair of yours.”

Inside, leaning on her mauve couch, Miss Zell took a brush to my hair, and slowly yanked at the tiny snarled rat’s nests that had blanketed the bottom layer of my hair over the summer. “Child, you have got to start brushing this thick old hair of yours.” As she pruned at the gnarls of my matted hair, I thought of when, a long time ago, Mama and I used to brush each other’s hair before bedtime. She’d sit on the floor beside my bed with her knees bent in front of her, her long, whitish hair stretched down her back, and I’d brush and brush and brush for so long, my movements became rhythmic and the downward flow of my arm to the brush to her hair hypnotized me. The soft lull of crickets humming from my window only made me closer to sleep. Sometimes she’d sing her own song, or hum beneath her breath as I brushed, and when my eyes began to close, she’d take the brush from me, sit on the edge of the bed, and run the brush from my scalp to the ends of my hair.

Then, as Miss Zell rubbed lilac lotion on my hands, I thought of the time Mama taught me to make my own perfume. It was back in the fifth grade, when all the girls at school had started getting perfumes from the mall for birthdays at Christmastime. They’d
come to school soaked in the stuff, and they’d giggle and hug each other and laugh about
the perfume getting all the boys to like them. The boys would actually just plug their
noses and tell them they stunk and smelled like their grandmas, but I could tell they
didn’t mean it.

“Mama, I want some perfume so I can smell like a grown-up,” I’d said when I got
home from school.

She’d frowned for a moment, like she was gonna tell me no.

“We don’t have that kind of money, Carolina,” she said. “I don’t even own a
bottle of perfume myself.”

I’d started to sulk a bit, and then her eyes got real wide.

“I got it!” she’d said. “We’ll just make our own.”

She’d taken my hand and led me to the backyard, then pointed to the small patch
of weeds growing near the woods.

“Just pick you some wildflowers from the edge of the woods out there, right along
our backyard,” she said. “And only pick the wilted ones.”

I ran to the grass, stooping low to pick at the tiny yellow flowers, crumpling them
in my hand tight so I could get as many crammed in there as possible. They smushed and
left a grimy flower oil all over my palm, but I was so excited to think that this might
work, I didn’t even mind.

In the kitchen, Mama took all my flowers and put them in to her big light blue
blender. She pulled a tiny plastic bottle labeled “Vanilla Extract” from the pantry and
dumped a fourth of it in.
When the blender finished mixing it all together, Mama pulled the glass top from the blender and let me smell it. It didn’t smell exactly like perfume, but I’d thought it smelled pretty damn good. We named the smell “Carolina,” and I wore it dabbed on my wrists every day for a week until the mixture sitting in the blender had run out. As Miss Zell brushed and massaged on, I tried hard to remember the smell of Mama’s perfume until my eyelids became heavy, and I was long gone into dreams, the bird-like singing of my mother beside me just in the distance.

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I didn’t even realize I had fallen asleep until I woke up on the mauve couch a while later, maybe hours after. Miss Zell was standing in front of her stove, clanging a spoon against the side of a giant silver pot. She watched me as a sat up. “Well, good afternoon, child,” she said, her face somber, soft. “Come on over here. I’ve got something to show you.” She motioned me to the kitchen bar. I sat, groggily, wondering what time it was. Then, I noticed what Miss Zell had laid out across the bar before me. Pictures. Hundreds of them. Mostly black and white pictures, but quite a few colored ones sprinkled the pile. I didn’t even ask, I just went ahead and picked them up: pictures of smiling blonde children holding shells on a stretching beach, a baby held over the holy water by a priest at her christening, a beautiful newlywed couple standing by a brick stone church on their wedding day. “Who are these people?”

“My family,” she said, staring down at the pictures. She rubbed at something on her eyebrow, and I thought for a moment she was going to begin to cry. She didn’t, though, and instead, she wordlessly began to softly finger at the corners of each picture as though she were handling silk. After a few minutes, it seemed as though she forgot I was
even there, and I watched as she moved her fingers from photo to photo, from faces of blonde babies crying in the bathtub to an anxious-looking young boy in bobby socks, clutching the key to the Camaro he stood beside, Miss Zell touching each photo with such a sweet tenderness that I once again wondered why Miss Zell’s home wasn’t constantly filled with family – if I could have just one ounce of that feeling, I’d never let it go.

“Miss Zell, when’s the last time you looked at these?” I said. “And where’d these people go? How some they never visit you?”

Nothing. She didn’t look up. Then, a minute later: “It’s been a long time, dear, a real long time.”

I wanted so badly to ask her why she never looked at them, and where all these people were. I realized suddenly, though, that these were the people she’d lost, the people who never came to visit, the very reason Miss Zell was always alone. But why? Who couldn’t love this sweet old woman? I was scared to ask, though; I’d knew I’d upset her, break her sweet motion of piecing through her faded pictures one by one. But I had to.

“Miss Zell, how come your family doesn’t come to see you?”

She sat silent, mesmerized, with the photos for a while longer, myself sitting there equally as mesmerized by her. Finally, when she came to a photo of a pig-tailed girl, around my age, wearing a light-colored sundress, squinting and smiling wide with her hands open and outstretched, as if she were going to hug the person holding the camera, Miss Zell’s eyes did mist over, and with that she pushed the photos away, and looked up at me.

“This ain’t my business, but I want you to know something, Carolina. Really know this. Your Mama, she loves very much, and she’s trying. I know you don’t want to
believe that, but you gotta. You just gotta.” Miss Zell ran her index finger across the photo once more, then pointed it at me. “And your Mama – she needs you bad. She’d doing everything she knows how, but that’s just it. That’s all she’s got.”

Did she know what Mama’d put me through? Didn’t she know the things she’d done, the hurt that had settled in me hard like cement?

“Then why does she–”

“There’s no real reason why, sweetheart. No good reason why. But life is hard, real hard, and you don’t know the things she’s been through. Just know she loves you with everything she possibly can.”

“But Miss Zell, I just wanna get out of here, get away from her, get out of Crow for good. I want to find my Daddy. I mean, Mama doesn’t need me. I mean, I woulda run away a million years ago if it weren’t for Johnny and Austin.”

“Well, Carolina, if that’s what you’ve gotta do someday, then do it. But I think your Mama needs you more than you think she does.”

“So how do I know whether to go or not then?”

“Honey, I don’t know, really. Pastor Donohue’s always saying, and I learned this a long time ago – your ears will hear a word behind them saying ‘This is the way –walk’ if you’re going the way you’re supposed to.”

“What if I don’t hear anything?”

“Then you turn around,” she said.

I suddenly wanted to hug Miss Zell, to tell her I believed her, even if I really didn’t want to ask her how she knew these things, but before I could, she stood and reached into her pants suit pocket and pulled out a five-dollar-bill.
“Here you go, sweet baby. Thank you for your help today.”

I wanted to remind her that all I’d done was hung a few pieces of clothing and done not much of anything else, but she crumpled the bill into my palm and then shooed me out the door in a hurry, closing the door to her house fast and hard behind her.
Chapter Twelve

When I got back home from Miss Zell’s, Mama and Jasper were both still at work, so I offered to take Johnny and Austin up to Collins’ Convenience Store for ice cream with my money. Really, I thought maybe Cade would be working; maybe he’d help me feel better with that smile of his.

It was at least a two-mile walk to the store, and like always, Austin rode in the Radio Flyer while Johnny and I took turns pulling him along the quiet, dusty dirt road that led in to town. I wished I were small enough to fit inside the tiny red wagon, young enough to know less than I already did about life, about the angels of God that seemed to ignore me so much. I hoped for a moment a car would drive by and just take me wherever they were headed, maybe my father would whoosh by in some shiny new car, ready to come back into my life and save me from Mama. The silent, empty road, nothing but me and my giggling brothers walking, though, told me that wouldn’t be happening any time soon. Then, I wished I could fly away, just start flapping my arms and take off in to the sky like the birds I had grown to love so much that summer.

Instead, I kicked rocks far into the heat waves that constantly danced in front of us as we walked, dragged my feet the whole way there while my baby brothers chattered on and on about school, superheroes, and fishing, unknowing, un-understanding of all that had and would happen in their lives.

I wanted someone to talk to, or at least to be talked to. I wanted to ask West all the questions I hadn’t had the chance to. I wanted to tell her how much I understood,
how much I knew her, how much she was me. I wanted to know Maybelline, know what
she really did with her time. But now it was too late, it had been taken away, just like it
was supposed to, just like it always was. West would never talk to me, and would
probably be best friends with Annie McDaniels just as school started up again. She’d be
making fun of me before I knew it – about my house, about me missing my Daddy so bad
– she’d use it all against me.

When we got to Collins’, Cade was nowhere in sight. We ordered three banana
splits, and Old Man Collins, like he constantly did, asked me how my Mama was. Of
course I didn’t say “Well, she’s horrible; a mean, awful drunk, please, please save me,”
like I wanted to; instead, I smiled and said she’s fine, thank you, like always, like I’d
been trained to do so long ago. Breaking loyalty, Mama had always said, is something
that would never be forgiven, never be made right. I remembered a time when I was nine
years old, at a mall with Mama shopping the after-holiday sales, a stranger at a mall
asked how my Christmas had been. I had told him it had been awful, that my Mama’s
present to my baby brothers and I had actually been two bottles of Jack Daniels for her
and then a game of whose-but-can Mama-beat-with-this-belt-more. Mama must’ve heard
me, because when we got home that night from shopping, my Mama used that same belt
on me in a whole new game, in a whole new crazy strength I had never seen and never,
ever wanted to feel again. My body had burned for weeks and weeks.

Outside of Collins’, Johnny and Austin and I sat on the old picnic tables that had
been there since Crow even became a town, letting the freezing ice cream soothe the burn
of the blistering heat swirling around us. It was so hot, so dry outside, that the ice cream
melted faster than we could even lick it up.
I was on my very last slurp of chocolate syrup from the bottom of cup when I saw her, just across the road in front of The Orange Pit Restaurant, talking to Mr. Franks, the owner of the run-down old diner that served the best fried macaroni and cheese that side of the creek. It was West. I didn’t know what to do, where to go, what to say. We locked eyes. Should I run? I thought. Should I take my brothers and go inside? What could I say to have her forgive me for my Mama? Was she going to yell at me, like so many had done in the past, blame me for what Mama’d done, for what she’d said to run off my newest friend?

Before I could get my brain to tell my legs to start running, West locked her eyes to mine and started walking across the street in my direction. I tried to keep from staring back, but her eyes looked so damn wide and round, like a snarling cat’s does when she’s about to pounce and then munch on a rat, that I couldn’t help but keep on staring back. I thought maybe to turn around, but my legs locked, knees and all frozen straight as rulers; I thought maybe to fake some sort of heat-induced fainting episode, but knew from theatre class that it just wouldn’t be convincing, so instead I just waited for West to stomp her away across the dirt road until she was standing right but four inches from me. I knew what she was going to say, what they all say eventually: you’ve got one fucked up Mama, one fucked up situation, and I’m steering clear from that huge pail of claptrap. Something about a reputation, something about an apple not falling so far from its tree.

I started to shoo Johnny and Austin back into the ice cream store, thinking maybe we’d hide out there till she was gone, but before I could even take their little hands in mine, though, there she was, waving goodbye to Mr. Franks and heading my direction.
As she crossed the street, I once again noticed her beauty. Her dark hair fell in thick curls down her shoulders, and even in the summer heat, flowed frizz-less and river-like.

“Hey, Carolina. Hey, boys,” she said, smiling wide.

“Oh, hey, West,” I said, trying hard to pretend I hadn’t hardly even noticed her walking toward me. She stared at me, waiting, I thought. I didn’t know what to say. “Listen, I’m –”

“So, hey,” she interrupted. “There’s something going on tonight, something you might want to go to with me,” she said.

Then, she pointed to my brothers, then her ears, signaling me to get them out of earshot. “The pits. Party. Your friend Cade’s home,” she whispered.

I couldn’t believe it. She still wanted me around? To still be friends? And she’d been invited to a pits party?

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I offered to buy West an ice cream, but she said she’d just eaten some fried zucchini at The Orange Pit, and had applied for a job there as a hostess. I let my brothers finish off their ice cream, then paid them off with the rest of my money from Miss Zell’s house – $2 in all, $1 for each of them – and told them to walk home, with the promise that they’d tell Mama I’d stayed behind to help Old Man Collins stock the freezers with new gallons of ice cream, like I’d done a few times before. I threatened to feed them to the alligators if they so much as wavered from that story, and as I watched the two of them gallop off happy back home, both of them stuffed with ice cream and feeling gloried about their new fortunes in hand, I knew they were too excited to say a word.
West smiled. “Let’s go get you ready.”

Still in disbelief she was even talking to me, I followed West on the half-mile walk back to her house, in the opposite direction that my brothers had gone, right around the creek.
Chapter Thirteen

West and I walked down Tumbleweed Road for a long time, a whole three miles to her house, our sandals scuffing at the dusty clay and flat pebbles that lined the road. It was getting dark, and the mosquitoes started in on our elbows and cheeks. Car and truck tracks dipped the road in every so often, probably where someone had gotten stuck in the mud during one of the raging summer afternoon storms. I imagined them sitting there, elbow hanging from the truck, looking down at their tires in frustration, just wondering when they were gonna get enough thrust to get them out of that muddy hole and out of Crow for good. I wished right then, walking with West, that we could just pick up and squeal out of there like they eventually had.

West didn’t say much at all while we walked, and I kept trying to apologize for the night before, but she kept on changing the subject to the party. She’d been across the street at The Orange Pit, just filling out a job application to be a hostess, when she heard a hostess there – her name was Annie, West said, giggle something to another hostess about what she’d be wearing that night to the pits. West had asked her what the pits were, and next thing she knew, Annie had invited her to join them.

“She was pretty nice,” West said. “Really friendly, ya know?”

Of course she’d think that. Why wouldn’t Annie McDaniels make friends with West right after West had found about my crazy Mama? I told West I agreed, though I knew this meant we were just one step closer to me losing West to the popular girls like Annie in town. Before I knew it, Annie and the other girls would realize West didn’t have
parents around at her house and they’d be throwing parties left and right. Parties I would not, of course, get invited to anymore.

“Annie said that Cade was gonna be there, too.”

“Cade?” OhmyLord. My stomach twisted. *Would he look at me, know automatically what I’d done in the woods thinking of him just a few weeks back? Had he missed me?*

“Yep, Annie told the other girl that she was gonna wear her hair down since he was gonna be there. Said she heard he likes girls with long hair.”

My stomach curled a bit, thinking of seeing him, not knowing how I’d act around him after not seeing him for so long. And how could I compete with Annie McDaniels? But there were other things to talk about now. I still needed to apologize for my Mama.

“West – I just wanted to say …I shoulda warned you,” I said. “My Ma – well, she’s just plain crazy.”

West stared at me, her eyes kind of droopier than I had seen them, like there were little pockets of water just waiting to burst under her skin. I imagined she’d tell me off right then for even bringing it up, tell me to go back to my house and never to try and find her again, like I was the one who’d called her the names. Maybe the pockets would burst and she’d cry, tell me how much I’d hurt her by allowing her in the house just for my Mama to go yelling at her.

“Nah, Carolina,” she said. “Ain’t your fault she’s a cuckoo bird, right? Gotta forgive.”

For her, I guess, it was just that easy, and I wished just for a moment that things like that came easy for me, too.
And just like that, I knew it was okay to tell West. I spilled it all right there into the air – my crazy, slutty mother and her refusal to talk about my daddy, who’d been gone since I was a baby. I told her about the teasing, the girls who’d said I would end up just like my Mama.

West looked at me, smiled. “We can fix it all,” she said.

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After we got to her house, West took my hand and brought me straight through the dark hallway of the house to Maybelline’s bedroom door. I hadn’t even realized she was home, but as we got to the door, I heard the dim hum of some sort of trance music seeping from the door’s frame.

I’m not exactly sure how she knew West and I were there, standing breathless from our walk in the hall, but Maybelline opened the door before West even knocked on the surface of the flimsy brown wood. From the soft glisten of sweat that sat on the edge of her forehead and her head-to-toe black outfit, I could tell Maybelline had just gotten home from work. She looked tired, a tired I’d seen plastered across Mama’s face and body after she’d been out through the night hours.

“No?” she said, looking out at something past our shoulders, then fixing her glare on something between my eyes, probably a long hair I hadn’t caught in my monthly tweeze-a-thon.

“May, Carolina needs your help,” West said, and I felt invisible and hollow for a second, like they were talking about me as if I wasn’t there.

“Oh hey, Carolina,” Maybelline said, focusing her eyes on mine. “Help with what?”
“Well, we’re going to this party tonight,” West said. “And there’s this guy. And Carolina ain’t feeling so pretty lately, so...”


Maybelline smiled at her, looked back at that stray hair I was sure was just sprouting out to all’s hell right there off my face and in to the hallway. Then she grabbed my hand, and pulled me into her room.

Maybelline’s room was a pig sty, and smelled like one, too. The walls of the room were bare, but the floor was a mess of random droppings – t-shirts, black scarves, a blue plastic Gatorade bottle, empty Pall Mall cartons, random assortments of faded, ripped jeans. A glossy magazine was strewn across the floor like someone had opened it and shook it hard until all the pages went flying into a tiny tornado of celebrity gossip across the room. A stack of half-empty drinking glasses sat on the dresser, just raring to tumble over onto Maybelline’s extensive, colorful, and somewhat frightening make-up collection. The smell of the room wasn’t so bad, kind of like a mix between dirty dishes and some dollar store floral perfume, but the more I inhaled, the more I realized it definitely needed a bull dozer or three to come wrecking through the disaster to clear it all out and rid it of the stench, or at least a good, thick coating of some Lysol. I thought of my own room, where everything always had its place and usually stayed there, especially since it seemed like I was actually there less and less, and continued to stare.

Maybelline guided me to the dresser, and she steered my shoulders downward until I was sitting on a pink-checkered vanity chair. West picked up a few pieces of the gossip magazine from the floor and plopped herself onto Maybelline’s unmade bed of pink silk.
“Don’t those need to be in order for you to read them?” I said.

“Not everything has to be in order, Carolina,” West said, like I’d asked her the world’s silliest question. “Now go ahead, let Maybelline take care of you.”

“But I’m not sure,” I said. “My Mama, she’ll kill me if I let someone else touch my hair.”

And just like West had done when I’d said the same thing about swimming in the creek in my clothes, she waved her hand flippantly and sighed “She’ll never even notice, Carolina.”

Before I knew it, Maybelline yanked my neck until it pointed downward, and then took a wire brush to my hair, although I wanted to tell her it would probably take something stronger than that to sort through the rat’s nest I knew had been growing back there for some time.

“So, what’s his name?” Maybelline said. “The boy you like?

“Cade, and I don’t really like him. I mean, I like him as a friend, but –” I said, not realizing the stupid, enormous smile that had spread on my face until I caught it in the mirror, saw my jagged vampire grin glaring back at me. I wondered if Maybelline had a quick fix for crooked teeth, but she was still fighting the frizz ball atop my head, grunting a bit with each yank of the brush toward the floor.

“Yeah? You wanna make out with him?”

“Well, no. I want to, I mean, like, just go on a date with him.”

West and Maybelline laughed aloud at the same time, which sounded so much alike that if it weren’t for me seeing both their mouths open wide while they guffawed, I’d of thought only one of them was doing it.
“Hate to be the one to go and tell you this, sweetie, but you’re 14 years old, wanting on a 16 year old boy” Maybelline said. “Only date you’re gonna have is a quick ride in his truck and then a ride in his backseat, if you know what I mean. Might get an ice cream cone from the Dairy Queen out of it if you’re lucky, hon.”

West told Maybelline to shut up, but my stomach turned sour anyway, and I felt a soft hotness tingle at the edge of my cheeks. I coughed, and my head jerked so hard that I ripped my hair clear out from the grasp of Maybelline’s brush stronghold, the brush taking several wispy, broken strands of my hair with it. Maybelline yanked my chin back in her direction and took to it with her fingers. “Sorry, hon,” she said, and went right back to squeezing at my face and sticking various pink and black colored pencils in my eyes and around the edges of my lips. I sat, silent, thinking hard about Cade and how he wouldn’t be like that, how if he took me on a date, it’d be different from what West and Maybelline knew. Right? Is that all Cade would want from me? Is that all any of them wanted? Would he expect me to be like Mama? He wouldn’t be the back-seat guy they’d told me about, no way. I mean, he just couldn’t be. They couldn’t all be like that, like Mama’s men. Right?

And what about Mama? I couldn’t let her see me with the makeup Maybelline was painting on my face – and even more so, Mama could never know I’d even been back there around either of them.

Before long, West was asleep on Maybelline’s bed, snoring softly, and Maybelline just kept on working, humming some disco-sounding song I didn’t know, an opposite beat from the trance stuff still blaring from her radio, as she rubbed a creamy beige lotion on my thundering temples. I wondered what she was doing to me, if I’d end
up looking like her. Would she make me look fake? Too made up? Would I even look like myself? Would Cade like it? Would anyone? Would Mama not notice, like West said?

After what felt like hours, Maybelline stopped the poking and clipping in every which way, and pulled back from my head. “There,” she said, smiling wide. “You’re sexy.”

I looked over at West to see if she agreed. She was still asleep. It was funny, sitting there in the silent house all dressed up, the crickets chirping their night songs away outside somewhere in the distance. I wondered if Cade would like the look, if he’d even notice what we’d done. I did look nice, maybe even halfway pretty, a full face of concealer, mascara, even lipstick on in thick globs across my pale face. Even with it all, though, I still didn’t look like them. I wondered what it might be like to be like West or Maybelline, just naturally beautiful all the damn time, so careless with the beauty they held so loosely in their perfect, feminine palms, without all this stuff clumped all over their face. I wondered, too, if Maybelline really cared so much about looking so pretty, so made up for the men she must have danced for every night. As she stood behind me, her face sweaty, her own makeup melting off in slow beads down her face, her soft hands resting on my shoulders as we both stared at my reflection, like a proud mother and daughter might after some crowning moment of beauty pageant glory, something inside told me she didn’t care at all about looking pretty herself– not anymore, anyway.

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West and I left for the pits around nine-thirty. Half walking-half running there, I was terrified Mama and Jasper would come rattling down one of the roads toward the
next bar and catch me out of the house, but I felt good that Johnny and Austin would keep their promise and tell them I’d be stocking shelves for Old Man Collins’ for a few hours, at least, if they even came home. I only needed a few hours. They’d never ratted me out before, in the few times I’d ever paid them off to keep our stories straight. If Mama or Jasper did catch me, though, God knows what they’d do to me then.

As we got to the edge of the pits and heard the faint buzz of kids laughing, I knew I’d made it home free, for the time being, anyway. Sure, the pits had been around forever, maybe since Mama was in high school herself, but there was no way Mama or Jasper would find me hidden back there surrounded by all the woods and empty buildings. In the center of the pits, which was really just a quarry that was at one time supposed to be the site of new homes built by what Mama had called some “high-falutin contractor from the city” until, for some reason, all the construction stopped, sat three pick-up trucks, each with its bed facing the center. The truck beds made a triangle, and about fifteen kids either sat on the beds or in the center of the three trucks. A fire raged in the center of it all, and I could hear the girls chattering like little squawking birds. My stomach churned.

West smiled at me, pulling my arm toward the party, walking faster.

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As I walked into the center of the trucks, I felt the other kids’ eyes on me. I recognized some of them from school, along with their thinly-veiled looks of disgust. Mama’d always told me that jealousy was a dangerous thing. So I tried hard not to feel green-eyed when the girls at school always came up a little prettier, a little sweeter, a little more liked by the boys than me. But I never quite got why they deserved all this more than I did.
Everyone looked the same to me – the girls in sandals, cropped jean skirts and white or pink tanktops, their hair tossed into a loose, casual ponytail or ironed straight down their backs, their French-manicured hands gripping icy white bottles of grape Smirnoff Ice or the occasional bottle of Budweiser.

The guys, sipping at canned beers, Natural Lights or Milwaukee’s Bests, all wore flannel button-ups or t-shirts with jumping fish prints and jean shorts, their heads naked and shaved or topped with a faded gray baseball cap.

I looked down at my own outfit – a yellow sundress Maybelline had thrown over my head and a pair of bruised-looking plastic white flip flops – and realized I’d overdressed a bit for the occasion. West wore short jean shorts and a green tank-top, an outfit that looked close enough to the other girls’ to fly. Suddenly, I felt naked.

“Do you see Cade yet?” I whispered to West.

“No, I’ve never met him. Remember, silly?” My stomach did a flip-flop. For that I was glad. Because one look at her, and she’d be the one he was in love with.

Within seconds, an older guy I didn’t know started talking to West. His name was Axel, and he guided us over to his truck bed. I sat next to her as she chattered to him, and I sat, staring into the fire, wondering if Cade was really coming.

No one talked to me, and West was apparently into this Axel guy, because she was giggling high like someone was tickling her, even though she was just sitting there talking to a brown-haired boy from Crow. I wondered if I should just go and grab a drink from the giant red cooler that sat on the truck opposite me, or if I should wait until someone offered. Not like I’d drink it, anyway, but my hands felt empty, and the other
girls were guzzling them down around me like the drought was affecting Crow’s water supply.

West didn’t have a drink in hand, but I knew that was by choice; surely Axel had at some point offered. If it hadn’t been Axel, any of the other guys here would have already got West anything she wanted.

Finally, though, a kid named Lee I knew from middle school Pre-Algebra offered me a sweating can of Budweiser. “Yo, Carolina, what’s up? Why don’t you cheer up. Start drinking,” he said, throwing it into my hands before I could think of a cool response for why I wouldn’t be drinking that night. It wasn’t a bottle like all the other girls had, but it was something. I popped the can open and took a revolting sip, and the smell and feeling of it instantly reminded me of Mama. What had her first sip of the stuff been like? Did she always love it, or did she have to make herself drink it at first? I wondered then what Mama and Jasper were doing that very instant, and prayed that they didn’t decide to come home early from their celebration. I sipped at the can again.

West gripped my thigh. She now had Axel’s Florida Marlins baseball hat on, and was still giggling at him. She looked at the can in my hand and whispered, “You’re not really drinking that, right?” I just shook the can at her, then shook my head in a circle, in what could have very easily been a yes as much as it could have been a no; that way, I wasn’t lying to her if I really was.

“Okay, good. Hey, I’ll be right back. Axel wants to show me the hill.” She smiled, then took Axel’s big, outstretched hand, and they walked off pushing each other and laughing like hyenas until they were behind the truck and into the darkness.
Through the glow of the fire, I watched everyone chatter and laugh. I stared at their straight, white teeth, and tugged at my pointed, crooked set. I took a deep gulp of the beer. I looked at their perfect tanned skin and then down at my own reddish, clammy outer layer. I glanced past them, noticed how dry everything looked. Patches of grass looked more like hay and many of the trees looked sparse and ready to uproot. I glanced at the unopened beer can in my hand and thought again how nice it would be to be able to water the earth with the liquid in my hand.

But what good would it really do? Another sip. I looked back to the kids and wondered how they all got so lucky, how they were not only beautiful and carefree, but were also born to normal parents, normal families, and what I had done wrong along the way. They lived in nice houses, got rides to school in their parent’s air-conditioned new cars. It wasn’t until I heard Cade’s voice that I broke my thoughts of feeling sorry for myself, and it was then that I realized I’d drank almost the entire can of beer.

“Hey, Carolina! Nice dress,” he smiled as he scooted on to the truck bed next to me. The beer buzzed through my body as I stared at him, his beautiful hazel eyes, perfect, wide Chiclet-teeth. The feeling was warm, and it made me feel an eagerness and motivation I’d never felt before. At the same time, I felt wrong, very wrong, but Cade was smiling at me, and Mama and Jasper were nowhere to be found to ruin this for me.

“Hey, Cade! How are you!?‖ It took everything I had to keep my butt plastered to the truck bed, to not jump up and hug him tight.

“I’m good, Carolina.” He reached down and wrapped his arms over me in a hug.

“Hey, you’re really drinking that?” he said in a whisper, pointing at my empty beer can.
“No,” I lied. I could smell the grain on my lips as it wafted toward Cade.

I dropped the can down beneath my feet, and Cade scooted in next to me.

He smiled at me, his thin lips curling like the edges of a ribbon wafting in the wind. I couldn’t tell, though, if he was upset or really smiling at me. Cade was tough to read sometimes like that.

“Well, good, then. You don’t need none of that, right?” He smiled again, and I was surprised at how badly I wanted to kiss him all of a sudden. I wanted to take him in my arms, right then and there, and touch my lips to his, see what it felt like to be that close. Just like they did in movies.

My words spilled out. “How’s your summer been so far? How was vacation? I’ve been by Collins’ to see you, but you were never working.”

“Yes, I actually just got back.”

“Oh.”

“You really do look nice, Carolina,” he said. I felt something stir inside, something that made me feel like I was about to explode clear across that place.

“Nah,” was I could muster.

“Really, you do.” Cade took my hand. “I thought about you a lot when I was gone, actually.”

Oh my God. He was holding my hand. His fingers felt softer than I thought they might, less calloused than I’d imagined. In fact, they felt feathery, cottony, like a bird’s wings might. I wanted to squeeze his hand tight to see if I could feel his pulse through my own hand, but instead I relaxed and tried not to swallow my heart, as it seemed to be moving its way down from my chest to the pit of my stomach.
“It’s not too much? You know, a little too overdone?” I squeaked.

“Nah,” he said, squeezing his hand tighter around mine, and I did feel his pulse. I tried to be still, see if I could match his to mine. His felt faster.

We watched as the fire raged, sending sparks every which way into the night. The wood popping, shooting ember specks into the air, reminded me of fireflies crackling, and I felt for just a second that maybe everything was going to be just fine. I mean, Mama and Jasper seemed all right, or at least better than they had been the past few weeks. West was off enjoying herself with Axel, and here I was, holding hands with Cade for the first time ever.

I sat there enjoying it all, until that part of the Lord’s doing that was out to get me finally came to, like it always seemed to.

It was Cassidee May Smith that had to go and ruin everything that night – she’s the one God sent to go and mess it all up for me. Cassidee was the type of girl who just found it natural to go and mess with girls like me. She was the one boys wanted, with her long, straight and pretty hair and her perfect ivory teeth. She was never without a bow in her hair and I’d never seen her wear jeans – she was all skirts and frills, kitten heels and globs of Mary Kay makeup her Mama sold, all day, every day. Everything she said came out long and over-drawn, like she had all the time in this world to speak, and that everyone wanted a front-row seat to listen. That was the case, all right, especially for the boys at school. Cassidee May Smith, with her perfect little life, had always had a crush on Cade, and now, along with Mrs. Perfect Teeth Annie McDaniels, was walking in me and Cade’s direction.
“Hey Cade,” she smiled, pinning Cade in a long hug. She brushed my shoulder as she pulled away, and I could smell her White Rain and Vanilla body spray tingle through my nostrils.

“Oh, hey, Chocolate,” she said, eyeing from my hair to my freshly-painted toenails in one raven-like swoop. “Nice hair-do.”

“Thanks, Cassidee,” I said, willing that she’d get swooped right up by a tornado right then and there. Or at least that she’d just leave me alone and not say another word in my direction.

“You know, Carolina, with all that makeup, you look like somebody I know.”

My stomach sank. Where was West to help me with these girls? If they could just see the beautiful girl I was friends with, maybe they’d just leave me alone.

“I can’t think of who it might be. Annie, who is it? Who does Chocolate look like?”

“Is it Farah Fawcett?” Annie said.

“No,” Cassidee said. “Someone from around here.”

“Oh, I know!” Annie smiled.

“It’s your Mama. You look just like your Mama in that makeup. Cade, guess you’re gonna get lucky tonight then.”

I suddenly hated my new hair, my makeup. They were right – who was I fooling, trying to act like some sort of pretty, normal girl? I was the town slut’s daughter, for Christ’s sake. The apple didn’t fall far from the tree, peas in a pod, birds of a feather. So long as I lived, I’d never be anything but my mother’s daughter. Just like Winnie liked to remind me.
“Cassidee, knock it off,” Cade said. He reached to put his arm around me, but I turned my shoulder to him instead. What the hell was I doing here, anyway? I didn’t belong here. These kids hated me. They hated my Mama. They all knew exactly where I came from. Who was I kidding?

Cassidee and Annie snickered, and I felt their eyes sneer at my dress once again in disapproval before they turned away in simultaneous giggle, off to talk more about me and how stupid I looked trying to fit in there, like I wasn’t Carolina Wells. Like I wasn’t her daughter.

“Carolina, you okay?” Cade said. He reached for my hand once again. Instead of looking soft, it looked hard, like a statue’s hand, the glow of the fire making it look orange and weird. A hand I didn’t know at all. I pulled away. Him. Cade. What did he know? And why was he being so damn nice? What’d he want? I saw Mama’s face then, all of a sudden, and I realized what she’d been saying all along was probably true. Cade was no good, just like all the rest of them. He couldn’t have been. What could he ever want from me besides it? That’s all us Wells girls were good for, after all. He’d get it, take it, and then up and leave me before I even knew it if I let him. And West? It was only a matter of time before she was hanging out with Cassidee and Annie, soon as she realized what crazies I came from. And I’d be alone once again, just biding my time ‘til I could leave Crow forever.

“Carolina?” Cade said, grabbing for my shoulder. But I was already running before he could hold me there, past the group of laughing kids, past the fire, right past West, and then walked as slowly as I could down Tumbleweed Road, right back home,
right to the place where I guess I was supposed to belong forever, or at least until it was
time to escape.

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Mama’s car wasn’t in the driveway when I got to the house, and neither was
Jasper’s big air conditioning truck, so I figured I was clear. Just like they were supposed
to be, they were out, celebrating Jasper’s big promotion from maintenance man to
manager of maintenance men – a big jump in the air conditioning world, or so Jasper had
told me, anyway. Since they weren’t home, I let myself in the front door instead of
hopping through my bedroom window.

The door creaked long and loud as I opened it, and I hoped Johnny and Austin
wouldn’t wake from the noise. As I tiptoed through the dark living room, a deep throat
cleared, long and loud, sending me to jump straight clear into the air.

“Carolina,” the throat said, low and raspy. It was Jasper.

“Oh – hey, Jasper!” I said, my heart pounding hard, bumping right out of my
chest. I could hardly make out his rounded silhouette, but I could see him propped up in
the easy chair. Then, I noticed the orange glow of a lit cigarette cut through the darkness.
I thought it pretty damn strange, him just sitting there in the dark alone. Had he been up
waiting for me? Had he known the whole time I’d been gone?

“Where you been, girl?”

I thought, and quick. “Just out walking. Had to help Mr. Collins up at the store
with some stocking. Where’s Mama?”

“You been out with a boy? You been out partying at those dunes?” he said,
exhaling hard, pushing out wafts of smoke from that cigarette into the dark air.
“No sir. Where’d you say Mama was?”

“Don’t you worry none about your Mama. She’s the one gotta worry about you, darlin’ Now, you gonna answer? You been out with one of them boys? You been hanging around somebody’s backseat?”

“I said no. Sir.” I stood there in front of the door, motionless, wondering how he knew where I’d been. I really wanted the light on, and I wanted to be away from Jasper. I’d never been in this dark a room with him, let alone in the middle of the night with him asking me questions. Why was he home without Mama?

“I know you’re lying,” he said. “But don’t you worry none. You just promise me this. You don’t wind up in the backseat of one of those boys’ pick-up trucks, and I won’t tell your Mama a thing ‘bout you sneaking out like you did. You need to keep yourself away from those boys, darling.”

Even through the dark, I could sense him smiling wide, pleased by my discomfort and his knowing where I’d been. I imagined those yellow teeth poking out from his lips, and I shuddered. I felt cold, suddenly, even though it was clear above 90 degrees outside. A cool sweat trickled from the ridge of my forehead to my eyebrows. How in the Lord’s name had he known where I’d been? What I’d wanted to do with Cade?

“You got that?” he said, interrupting my thoughts. “You keep your ass away from those little boys, especially that little Cade friend of yours. ‘Less you want to be pregnant before you even start high school, ruin those little dreams you got.”
I felt a thick vein in my forehead rise, right by the crown of my head, and it began
to thump so hard I swore I could hear it. Cade? How did Jasper know about Cade? How
did he know I was with him? My stomach churned.

And where was Mama? For the first time in a long time, I wanted her there to hear
Jasper talking to me – talking about her – like that, like she was some kind of story you
found on a warning label – “Don’t let your life become this.” I wanted to kick him, tell
him to get out of our house for good. His time here had run too long.

Instead, “Yes, sir” fell from my mouth, and I started back to my room, hands in
front of me in the dark air as feelers for walls and random pilings of laundry on the floor.
As I walked, Jasper stood from the chair he was sitting in and crepted forward toward
me, grasped my shoulders and turned me around. His fingers felt huge and heavy, like
each appendage was a sledgehammer on my body. I felt suddenly like a glass figurine,
one of those delicate, glowing things that Miss Zell displayed from her windows at
Christmastime each year. He was going to break me, and I felt it.

“Hey,” he whispered, his lukewarm breath, sweet with the smell of flowery
whiskey I’d grown to know so well. Even in the dark, I could see the shimmer of his eyes
piercing hard into mine, like a raccoon’s looks when it’s stuck in headlights on the road.
“This will be our secret. I won’t tell your Mama a thing about your sneaking out, playing
around with those little boys.” He stuck his thumb beneath my chin and rubbed it in slow
circles. His other arm wrapped behind my head, and his palm wedged flat against the
back of my head. His palm was sweaty and moistened my neck. My body swayed with
his as he steadied himself in the air. The taste of hot vomit swelled in my throat, and my
heart pounded so loud I could hear it over the bullfrogs screaming outside the front window.

“It’s all right, Jasper. I know you won’t tell Mama. I’m gonna get on to bed now.”

I took a long step backward, releasing his thumb from under my chin. I felt him reach for me again, but I bolted down the hallway to my room before he could grasp hold again. My bedroom door clicked loudly as I locked it, and I prayed he couldn’t find a way to follow me through the door. I slid down against the door, praying my weight could keep him out if he tried to follow me in. Even though Jasper hadn’t so much as touched my face and back, it was with those big, dirty hands, those hands that had been touching my Mama. I felt disgusting, tainted, like I’d been poisoned. I’d had the chance for Cade’s smell on me to linger for one last moment before it went and got tarnished by Jasper’s weird words in my ears and hot, sticky breath on my neck.

I sat quiet, my back against the door. My tank top stuck to the wood, plastered on tight with the stickiness that had spread while Jasper had touched me, lied to me. I knew what Jasper said about Cade was wrong. Cade was not another backseat boy, that type of boy I had long feared would keep me in Crow forever. He was my friend, and he didn’t just want that one thing from me – the thing all the other boys wanted – I was sure of it. Cade was different. I wanted him just as much as he wanted me.

For the next little while, I heard nothing from Jasper, not even a scuffle down the hall after me. I didn’t hear Mama come in, either, and I wondered again where she might be that night without him, and why he wasn’t out looking for her. I mean, she’d been by his side every day since she’d met him at the Jiffy just a month or so before. I imagined for a second that she was out secretly meeting with my Daddy, planning a life together
once more, planning how they were going to tell me that they’d found each other again and were going to get back together for good.

I left one small lamp of my room on, and I sat cross-legged on my bedroom floor for a long while, staring into the fogged and greasy body-length mirror attached to the wall with rusted orange screws. I began to stare, half-asleep, half listening for Jasper to try and come barging through my door.

As I examined myself, I realized that Maybelline had painted, rouged, highlighted and plucked me into someone who might pass as a girl, nah, maybe even a woman. I stared at the calligraphical wave of my thin, arched eyebrows, where bushy caterpillar puffs of dark hair had once grown wild. Watched the way gold streaks now rivered through the murkiness of my strawberry hair and glared when I flipped it in the mirror’s direction. Realized how steely gray, how gunmetal cold my eyes really were.

If Daddy was here, he wouldn’t do this to me. He wouldn’t scare me in the living room, grip my shoulders like Jasper had. My Daddy wouldn’t ask me those questions, like I’d gone and done something bad with a boy when I really hadn’t. I thought then of my father, tried to remember his eyes and what color they may have been. I wondered if he’d be proud of Maybelline’s transformation of me; perhaps if he were around, he’d pull me into his arms and tell me that I’d blossomed, that I’d finally made my way, the way I’d want my Daddy to see the bittersweet appearance of beauty in his child. I stared more, wishing he were there to tell me I was beautiful.
Chapter Fourteen

I woke up the next morning, the morning after Jasper had held me close in the living room, curled into a tiny ball on my floor, right by the mirror I’d been staring in to all night. I didn’t want to leave the room. Didn’t want to face Cade. Mama. Jasper, especially.

“Well, now, look at you,” Jasper said to me when I got so hungry that I came out and slid into my chair for breakfast. He stared at the hair I’d just been admiring, and I suddenly felt like ripping it all out. I wished then that it were a week day so he wasn’t there to see me.

Johnny and Austin stopped poking at their grits and stared, wide-eyed, like their sister’d been replaced with an alien. “Ain’t you just sparkling,” Johnny said through a giggle.

“You look perty, Carolina,” Austin said.

“You just wait til your Mama gets home and sees you,” Jasper said. I didn’t know what he meant by that, that Mama’d be happy or angry or what, so I just tried my best to go and ignore him like I’d gotten so good at doing lately. I mean, it was just some highlights, a little makeup, a little less hair on my face. I couldn’t imagine she’d be mad at me, her being a hairdresser and all herself, but the way Mama’d been acting lately, I couldn’t predict much at all.

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West came to find me after Jasper had left for work. I didn’t want to even be around her, but I went anyway. What else did I have to do? And after we reached the creek side, I told her about what Jasper had done to me the night before. They way he’d touched me, talked at my neck with his hot, liquor-stinking breath. “He was just so freaking weird,” I said.

“Good Lord, Carolina – that’s just plain re-vol-ting,” she said, sitting sprawled beneath a tree on the creek and drawing each syllable out for miles. “I was worried sick about you after you went running off last night. I even went by your house around ten and knocked right on the front door. Went right up to it, didn’t even care if your Mama was gonna come out and scream at me for being there.”

“I wasn’t back yet,” I said, remembering the slow, long walk I’d started after I’d gotten far enough from the party to stop running the night before. “And Jasper didn’t answer the door?”

“Naw, I don’t think he was even there yet. No one was home. No lights on, nothing at all.”

“Where was he, then? He wasn’t with my Mama. She hasn’t even come home yet from wherever she was. And he was home when I got there finally.”

“I don’t know,” West said. “I sure as hell don’t know where that man goes. Didn’t you say he told you to stay away from Cade?”

My stomach sunk. “Yeah.”

“Well,” West said, her voice lowering. “Maybe he was out at the pits, watching you guys earlier. Maybe he saw you leave. Maybe he beat you home.”

“No, he wouldn’t do –
“He might,” she said, her thin eyebrows jetting high on to her forehead.

I thought about this for the rest of the day as West and I swam in the creek, this idea that Jasper may have actually followed me out to the pits the night before and had watched me with Cade. The thought of it made my hair raise, even those tiny ones you can hardly see stood clear straight up in the air, like I had permanent goosebumps. It made sense in that I wasn’t sure how else he had known I’d been with Cade out there, but then again, what other boy would I be around? None of them wanted to be around me. They wanted the pretty girls, the girls with naturally tan skin that didn’t turn red in the sun. The girls with straight, shining hair, the kind that blinded you in the sun. Boys wanted girls without pimples. Girls with smooth legs. Who else but Cade would ever want someone like me, an ugly old girl with a poor family, and a crazy Mama? Surely no one else would come sit around my house with the roaches and the grime and the oranges. Add to that the yelling and screaming and the men coming in and out of the house, in and out of our lives. Of course there’d be no one interested in a girl whose Mama had been with half the men in town at some point in her life, a girl whose Mama was worn and weathered, and somehow looked a million years older than any other woman in this town, maybe on earth, even though she’s just in her forties. Even if someone did like me, the apple doesn’t fall from the tree, any other boy’s father would tell him. Then, he’d be done with me, gone off in his truck, skidding down Tumbleweed Road with dust tracks swirling behind him as he went off to find a church-going, normal kind of girl. It wasn’t fair.

Jasper, just like I thought, was acting all creepy about our little “secret.” He started winking his big red eyes at me and smiling wide in my direction when I left the
room, like he was telling me “Don’t you worry, I won’t say a word to your Mama.”

Despite all of Jasper’s little gestures, I was still terrified he’d tell Mama when she got home where I’d been that night with Cade. I still couldn’t figure out how he’d known in the first place, and I almost didn’t want to know whether he’d been out spying on me or not. The thought of him watching me without my knowing it made my skin crawl, like a thousand little roaches, all with Jasper’s stone-cool face, were crawling all over me, trying hard to get inside and really bug me.

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After heat lightning crackled through the sky and stopped West and I from swimming, I changed to dry clothes and crossed Tumbleweed Road to Miss Zell’s to help her fold her night dresses.

As we worked, I told her about my anger, my brimming hate for Mama’s newest man. Miss Zell just listened, nodded her head. Later, we sat on her screened front porch over a pitcher of cold sweet tea, and it just all came out. I told her I’d never felt so hurt before about my Daddy, but then, just like that, I was. I told her how much I’d begun to hate Mama for it, how she was just plain selfish and how it was her fault that I didn’t have a Daddy around to do things with. I didn’t have a Daddy to protect me. And because of it all, because one half of the piece was missing, I was starting to feel like I didn’t even know myself.

Miss Zell was quiet for a while, like she didn’t know what to say, or maybe because she had a whole lot to say and didn’t know where to start. I couldn’t tell in the least, and I watched her stare out past me to my house for a while. For a minute, I thought she might try to call my Mama over to talk it all through. I hoped she wouldn’t, and she
didn’t. Instead, she prayed. Raised her palms to the sky and mumbled out to St. Anthony, said long chains of mutterings with words like forgiveness, redemption, love. I just watched, looking past her to Tumblweed Road, watching the ripple of heat waves dance on the horizon. The horizon, so close, seemed to call toward me from down the road, its smooth line within grasp. Yet I sat there, watching Miss Zell pray for me, for my thoughts, wondering how I’d ever get there, how I’d ever believe in all those things like she wanted me to, how I’d ever lift my heavy feet and make it down to road where I needed to go. I wasn’t sure, really, how I’d ever believe past Tumbleweed Road, how I’d ever see past anything but what I’d been given there in Crow.

Draft of novel manuscript ends here – to be continued…