The Wildish Boys, A Novel

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CHANCE AND CHOICE: RESPONDING TO UNCERTAINTY

AND

THE WILDISH BOYS: A NOVEL

by

Sherri H. Hoffman

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ABSTRACT

CHANCE AND CHOICE: RESPONDING TO UNCERTAINTY AND
THE WILDISH BOYS: A NOVEL

by

Sherri H. Hoffman

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Under the Supervision of Professor Valerie Laken

The Wildish Boys, a novel is a contemporary realist narrative that follows the Wildish family through the 1970-90s in Bellevue, Washington. Forced out of his generational farmlands of Indiana, Abraham (Pops) applies his farming skills to a job in the U.S. Forest Service in order to support his growing family. In the summer of 1976, a teenage boy, Sawyer Godenot, arrives to claim Pops as his father, which disrupts the familial structure and displaces Lenny Wildish as the oldest brother. While the family struggles within this new order, the area is hit with a crushing economic downturn. Pops becomes unemployed and his alcoholism escalates, and the older boys become involved in the growing Seattle drug culture. The fate of the family is at risk. Within the narrative, dark elements of illicit sex, drugs, and an unfortunate death elevate the stakes and illustrate how single moments of chance and choice reverberate with widespread and often tragic consequences. This is a story that challenges the idea of genetic pre-disposition and self-determination, and against the sweeping changes of the times, it also questions the costs of progress in terms of its impacts to class structures and traditional family values.
To

my beloved husband

and family
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The essence of faith is the knowledge that all flows and that everything must change.
~ Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again

In 1896, French physicist Antoine Henri Bacquerel supposed that uranium salt crystals exposed to sunlight would burn an image onto a photographic plate, but due to inclement weather, he put his entire experiment into a dark closet to save for a sunny day. When he returned to it, he discovered that the crystal had indeed burned an image to the plate—in complete darkness. This accidental discovery became essential to the work of fellow physicist, Marie Curie. Their ongoing studies of radiation earned them both the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1903 (Rich 76). If the sky had been clear that day, would we have remained without treatments for cancer, fission reactors, or nuclear weapons? An untrained eye may have dismissed the anomaly as a defect or a failure. But Bacquerel didn’t, and today our world is shaped in specific, irrevocable ways by that chance event.

Chance discoveries are recognized—even celebrated—in the scientific community as part of the scientific process. Over time, many of these discovery stories tell only of its chance event: Sir Isaac Newton’s apple inspired the laws of gravity; Alexander Fleming’s accidental mold became penicillin; Roentgen’s random green lights were X-rays; Ben Franklin’s kite in the rain harnessed electricity. These reductive stories compress sometimes years of concerted research, which downplay the contexts of cultivated research spaces, choreographed experiments, and collaborative development. Newton’s apocryphal apple fell “as he sat in contemplative mood,” (Stukeley 15). And while Newton’s initial questions, prompted by the chance apple, did
eventually lead to his “Laws of Motion and Universal Gravitation,” the process took more than
21 years and the support of other theorists and mathematicians—Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe,
and Nicolaus Copernicus, to name a few. When asked how he came to his theories, Newton
replied, “By thinking on it continually” (Westfall 105).

Scientific stories of chance focus on a relationship between the chance event and the
choices that surround it. Choices create the conditions conducive to the individual’s ability to
respond to a chance event; the chance event opens up a new set of choices, latent with
opportunities and risks, which, in turn, create new conditions. Every iteration builds on the next,
changing the conditions for the individual. As part of a scientific process, these cycles are the
labour-intensive work during which the discovery is deciphered and assigned meaning.

The relationship between chance and choice is also important in realist literature in
ascribing meaning to pivotal changes in the course of human life. The chance event is a point of
disruption in the narrative plot, which indicates a specific moment of choice for the characters
involved. Similar to the stories of scientific discovery, those disruptions also reveal the
structures, social or material, that support or inhibit agency for these characters. My intent is to
explore the relationship of choice and chance as it appears in several examples of realist fiction
in order to examine several ways in which chance is engaged by fictional narratives and how it
works to create meaning.

Rebecca Harding Davis’s novella, Life in the Iron Mills, published in 1861, includes a
chance encounter between Hugh Wolfe, an iron mill worker, and the wealthy mill owner, Kirby,
and his wealthy peers. Touring the mill as a curiosity, the wealthy men meet Hugh Wolfe, a mill
worker with the mind and skills of an enlightened artist. The events of chance are twofold: first,
the wealthy men happen to see Wolfe’s sculpture during the tour; and second, Wolfe’s
hunchback cousin, Deb, takes advantage of this distraction to pickpocket a check from the mill owner, which she gives to Wolfe. These chance events put Wolfe in a position where he must confront his current conditions. Dr. May, one of Kirby’s wealthy friends, is impressed by the artistry of the sculpture, and he advises Wolfe to act on his potential: “A man may make himself anything he chooses. God has given you stronger powers than many men [...] Make yourself what you will. It is your right” (37). May’s words are offered as benevolent encouragement but instill in Wolfe the idea that the pursuit of this potential is an inherent, God-given right.

This notion of the self-made man is widespread in American literature, where the idea that the chance for success is controlled by hard work underpins the ideal of the American Dream. Jackson Lears addresses the origin of this “contemporary moral cliché” in his book, *Something for Nothing*:

> Despite fresh evidence that hardworking people can easily lose everything [...] the insistence that “you make your own luck”—that you are personally responsible for your own economic fate—remains a keystone of our public [American] life. There is of course a core of truth to this idea: disciplined effort is essential to success at most endeavors. But that does not mean that people necessarily get what they deserve. (Lears 21)

Kirby, the mill owner, is quick to embrace this belief to argue with Dr. May against extending help to Wolfe:

> *Ce n’est pas mon affaire.* […] The Lord will take care of his own; or else they can work out their own salvation. I have heard you call our American system a ladder which any man can scale. Do you doubt it? Or perhaps you want to banish all social ladders, and put us all on a flat table-land,—eh, May? (Davis 34)
Kirby recognizes the structure of class as a system of “ladders,” which implies an opportunity for upward mobility, but he also dismisses any structural barriers or advantages to such movement, placing the onus of responsibility instead on the individual. Further, he relieves himself of any responsibility to assist another in an upward move; to intervene would be to compromise the structure itself and undermine what he perceives is the status deserved of wealthy people like himself.

Wolfe, on the other hand, despairs at what the chance encounter reveals about his wretched entrapment in that same class structure. He can see no “ladder” of mobility. His work ethic has been proven in the endless days of unregulated hours of work, dusk to dawn. “‘Home,—and back to the mill!’ He went on saying this over to himself, as if he would mutter down every pain in his despair” (Davis 41). His endless cycle of hard work has not gained him access to the barest privations, let alone enabled any kind of self-made success. However, Dr. May has inadvertently given him a new perspective on the means to a successful end. When Wolfe asked Dr. May for his help earlier in the day, the good doctor answered, “I have not the money, boy” (37). May’s cronies affirm that money is “the cure for all the world’s diseases” (38). If money is the key to success, then the unexpected stolen check could be Wolfe’s lucky break. He begins to see the money as the means to lift himself out of his current abject conditions in order to pursue personal success. The choice to steal seems to be justified by his God-given right to “make yourself what you will.”

Conflicted by his choices, Wolfe initially heads to the mill office to return the money, but as he hesitates, rethinking his options, he is seen and arrested. Without the education or resources to defend himself, he is charged with theft and sentenced to 15 years, likely the rest of his natural
life. Considering this new set of circumstances, Wolfe makes the ultimate choice to control his fate and kills himself.

Wolfe’s choices are constrained by the series of shifting circumstances set in motion by the chance event and by the limitations of his position within a rigid class system that Kirby generalizes as “all social problems—slavery, caste, white or black” (35). Wolfe’s choices are particularly limited by his social status as the working poor in a system that favors success for those who have already attained it. Dr. May’s and Kirby’s choices are limited by their vague awareness of their dependence on that same structure to remain intact for them to retain their status. While all the men act with similar intent—to keep or achieve success—their individual motivations and scope of available choices prove vastly different.

For the privileged class, the constraints on choice may appear to be more abstract than Wolfe’s more tangible limitations to daily privations of food and shelter. Once the conditions exceed daily survival, choice becomes about movement within the complex balance of established social and material structures. A chance event disrupts the order of these structures in a way that limits choice. In A Hazard of New Fortunes, William Dean Howells creates a chance event in the form of a bullet shot at random into a crowd during a labor protest. The bullet strikes and kills Conrad Dryfoos as he attempts to stop the beating of one of his father’s enemies. His choice to participate in the labor protest is motivated by a conversation he has with the lovely and wealthy Margaret Vance. Dryfoos’s family is wealthy from a natural gas boom, which limits his opportunities by his social status as the “new” rich.

Vance is from established wealth and privilege. However, her choices are limited by the double constraints of gender and class. Davis wrote in her private diaries about the real-world constraints for women of the upper class, including “the curse of an education one cannot use”
“the trouble of an escort,” which author Tillie Olsen explains in her biography of Davis: “No unmarried lady, not even a well-known author with earnings of her own to finance a journey, was free to travel by herself” (Davis 108).

Howells illustrates these compounded limitations for women in his depiction of Margaret Vance, who despairs in her inability to intervene in the labor protest and blames her own wealthy class for perpetuating the very conditions opposed by the laborers. To Dryfoos, she confides, “I have wanted to go and try [to stop the fighting]; but I am a woman, and I mustn’t! I should be afraid of the strikers, but I am afraid of what people would say!” (Howells 273). Both Dryfoos and Vance make choices within their gender roles as assigned by the structure of their privileged class. Inspired by Vance’s passion and with a desire to remain in her favor, Dryfoos chooses to intervene in her place, which sets him up to be shot and killed.

The chance event of Dryfoos’s death changes the conditions to which Vance had originally responded. Further, it doubles her perception of her personal culpability: first, as a member of the collective class in power; and second, as the individual responsible for sending Dryfoos into a situation fraught with uncertainties. The consequence undoes Vance, and she responds with a choice of downward mobility, which completes her undoing, to abandon her wealth and become a nun.

In creating specific social roles of class and gender for their characters, Howells and Davis both identify the restrictions of choice imposed by those roles. However, none of those social constructs control chance. Lears points to this as an equalizing characteristic of chance that identifies human vulnerability across social conditions:

To be sure, much misfortune can be explained empirically, traced to systemic inequalities of wealth and power [...]. Yet loss and pain enter life at all economic levels. Among the
privileged as well as the poor, events can seem opaque, suffering senseless, the universe inscrutable. Life itself still seems dependent on the mysterious power of luck. (Lears 16)

Judith Butler goes further to assert that because chance occurs without structural constraints, it has the power to bring about an awareness of precariousness that would not otherwise occur:

There are times when, in spite of ourselves and quite apart from any intentional act, we are nevertheless solicited by images of distant suffering in ways that compel our concern and move us to act [...] and this means that we are in such moments affronted by something that is beyond our will, not of our making that comes to us from the outside as an imposition but also as an ethical demand. (135)

Butler explains that empathetic awareness of our shared precariousness requires an act that is “committed to the equal value of lives” (150). The literary narratives of both Howells and Davis offer these chance disruptions through which the reader is “affronted” by the distant suffering of others. According to Butler’s formulation of the images operating as an ethical solicitation, such narratives ask for an empathetic consideration of the precariousness of the human condition across social and material or ethical structures.

Howells uses Vance as both witness of suffering and as one suffering to be witnessed as she responds to the laborers and then later experiences her own pain at Dryfoos’s death. As witness, Vance implores Dryfoos to act in her place; as witnessed, she is compelled to act by her choice to become a nun to care for individual human suffering, which she believes is symptomatic of the systems she once opposed directly. In this choice, Vance regains some semblance of control over her life in response to the powerlessness of the chance death. Her care
for others also responds to the call for responsibility that an awareness of precariousness requires.

Davis locates Wolfe near the bottom of the social structures, which constrains his opportunities for choice far more than Vance’s. However, his ultimate choice is motivated by a desire similar to hers. His suicide enables him regain control over his life by ending it.

For the 10-year old narrator of William Maxwell’s *So Long, See You Tomorrow* the death of his mother during the 1918 flu epidemic is his first awareness of the precariousness of human existence against the uncertainties of chance. As a child, his choices to respond are limited by his age, but the effects inextricably alter the conditions and his perception of his life after her death:

I had to find an explanation other than the real one, which was that we were no more immune to misfortune than anybody else, and the idea that kept recurring to me […] was that I had inadvertently walked through a door that I shouldn’t have gone through and couldn’t get back to the place I hadn’t meant to leave. (9)

For a child, the awareness of precariousness is terrifying. The desire to explain away the inexplicable tragedy by taking responsibility for it as a function of something he did in abstraction—to walk through a door—gives him a place of control. If he can posit himself in the act, then he has something for which he can be forgiven. Charles Baxter refers to such an event as a “one-way gate” that is either “an irrevocable action that a character simply cannot go back on; or it may be a wound that cannot be healed” (Baxter 98). Maxwell constructs his narrator to be so undone by his mother’s death that even as an adult in discussing his mother’s death with his therapist, he says “I can’t bear it” (Maxwell 131).

These “one-way gate” types of chance events limit choice simply by the irrevocable circumstances that are created as a consequence. Dryfoos’s random bullet cannot be un-shot.
Wolfe cannot un-hear the discussion about money. Maxwell’s narrator’s mother cannot be un-dead.

However, Maxwell positions the narrative as an attempt to regain autonomy and control by making meaning out of a chance event as a story. As an old man, the narrator is wracked by guilt over a slight to his childhood friend, Cletus Smith. Because he has no way to find Cletus, the narrator determines that he will recreate the circumstances of Cletus’s life in a fictional “memoir:” “The one possibility of my making some connection with [Cletus] seems to lie not in the present but in the past” (Maxwell 56). In response, the narrator recounts a narrative of the life of the Smith family. Cletus is a child when his father, Clarence, is accused of murdering the neighbor, Lloyd Wilson, who has had an affair with Cletus’s mother, Fern Smith. Clarence disappears before he can be arrested and charged with murder and is later found at the bottom of the quarry lake in what appears to be a suicide.

By recounting the destruction of Cletus’s life, the narrator regains control of his own narrative, which spun out of control after his mother’s death. Even though the two stories are not directly aligned, for the narrator, they are related by their inclusion of chance events. Similar to Howells’s character, Margaret Vance, Maxwell’s narrator becomes both witness and witnessed. First, he tells his own story that witnesses his own suffering at the death of his mother; then he tells Cletus’s family story as a testament of their suffering. Both stories are driven by a desire for relief from the “most impactful” chance events: “[...] instead of being stuck there, [Cletus] could go on and by the grace of God lead his own life, undestroyed by what was not his doing” (Maxwell 134). The wish for his friend’s life to be “undestroyed” is an illogical leap; it wills away destruction that cannot be fixed, as if one could return though the one-way gate. It is as if
he can eliminate the chance event by controlling the narrative, which echoes the futility of a child who cannot make his mother un-dead.

The combination of abject powerlessness and the uncertainty of future chance events creates a cycle of risk which, according to Brian Massumi, accumulates over time:

Threat is from the future. It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended. It is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over. We can never be done with it. Even if a clear and present danger materializes in the present, it is still not over. There is always the nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that. The uncertainty of the potential next is never consumed in any given threat. There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger. (53)

Massumi identifies the accumulation of threat as never-ending, emphasizing its “nagging potential” to collect. This potential is addressed by Maxwell as he offers that one of the functions of storytelling is as an act of collection. Maxwell’s narrative recreates the circumstances of chance that have occurred for both Cletus and the narrator, accumulating the details of the threat within the narrative. However, for Maxwell’s narrator, the act of telling the story confronts the threat and releases the characters from the place of powerlessness in which they have been trapped. This release is extended to the author as well. In an interview by John Seabrook in The Paris Review, Maxwell reveals that the story reflects his own chance event:

I meant So Long, See You Tomorrow to be the story of somebody else’s tragedy, but the narrative weight is evenly distributed between the rifle shot on the first page and my mother’s absence. Now I have nothing more to say about the death of my mother, I think, forever. (Seabrook).
After writing his mother’s death into four different books, including *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, the latent threat for Maxwell was consumed in his retelling of that chance event. Not only does Maxwell control the narrator’s story, he controls his own narrative, both figuratively and literally in the doubled context of his writing.

Maxwell’s choice to retell his story of chance may have mitigated the threat of chance, but what of narratives that seem to build perpetual cycles of risk? Richard Ford creates open-ended stories of increasing risk and diminishing choices, most notably in his short story, “Rock Springs.” From the start of the story, narrator Earl Middleton is clearly in the middle of some “bad luck.” With an awareness of the potential consequences of his most recent check fraud, Earl has stolen a car, packed up his daughter and girlfriend, and is on his way to Florida, betting he can outrun an arrest. The next chance event occurs when the stolen car breaks down on the road outside of Rock Springs, Wyoming.

Ford’s characters have a general awareness of the precariousness of their position between their immediate circumstances and what they had hoped to gain by the choices that led them there—good or bad. Earl’s attitude about chance is more in line with what Lears identifies as “stoical resignation,” which embraces the arbitrary nature of chance and also ascribes no connection between merit and reward; Lears summarizes it as an ethic of “so far so good” (58). The broken-down car is another disruption in what Earl considers to be otherwise a good plan:

There was always a gap between my plan and what happened, and I only responded to things as they came along and hoped I wouldn’t get in trouble. I was an offender in the law’s eyes. But I always thought differently, as if I weren’t an offender and had no intention of being one, which was the truth. (Ford 17)
In Earl’s life-as-a-high-stakes-game, these disruptive chance events, which force him to respond “as they come along,” relieve him of responsibility for the plan’s success or failure. Instead, Earl believes his intentions absolve him of responsibility for the conditions that strand him on the side of the road. Further, he frames his desire to give his daughter “a better shake in things” in a way that makes his larger plan seem to be as normal as anybody working hard, according to the rules, to improve their life.

Similar to Maxwell’s narrator, Earl is set up by Ford to manage the uncertainty of chance by being able to construct his own narrative. The difference for Earl is that control of the threat is an impossibility; rather than diffusing the threat, Earl seems to move through each incident in a way that increases uncertainty. He manages the illusion by the force of his cavalier attitude that dismisses his reality as easily as he creates new identities for himself as needed. His hope is that at some point that chance will manifest as good luck aligned with his intentions. Earl is presented as a someone playing for a lucky break on the hope that the odds will eventually favor him.

Lears locates this desire to conjure good luck for a successful outcome as the resistance found in closed or rigid structures: “Better to mix alea with agon—‘chance’ with ‘skill’—like a good poker player, who makes the best of the hands he is dealt. Better to emulate the trickster, to see contingency as a chance for creative improvisation—serious play—rather than to see it as a fatal loss of control” (Lears 15). The social and legal structures that surround Earl are rigid, but he willfully continues to make choices outside of both. He acts the part of the trickster as he responds to each new set of conditions with more lies and deception, despite the fact that his end goal is the assimilation of the ideals of the very system he resists—a regular house and material comforts such as those he sees in the homes of the miner’s wife or inside the cars in the motel parking lot full of domestic objects, “even a cat box with a cat sitting in it staring up at me like I
was the face of the moon. It all looked familiar to me, the very same things I would have in my car if I had a car. Nothing seemed surprising, nothing different” (Ford 26). Earl’s delusion is that he is like anyone else making reasonable choices within established social and ethical structures, rules, and norms.

Ford holds Earl to a standard of consistency, as if any break in his “fake it ‘til you make it” attitude will jinx the opportunity for good luck. Every setback is reframed. When his girlfriend decides to leave him, he tells himself that the difference between him and successful people is “how many troubles like this one you had to face in a lifetime. Through luck or design they had all faced fewer troubles, and by their own characters, they forgot them faster. And that’s what I wanted for me. Fewer troubles, fewer memories of trouble” (Ford 26). Despite stories of hardships—some of them extreme—experienced by the miner’s wife, Earl’s girlfriend, his girlfriend’s ex-husband, his ex-wife, and the cab driver, Earl clings to his constructed narrative that prioritizes his condition. He justifies his choices, which are both risky and illegal, by his intentions, which reflect his desire to attain what he believes is his right to have: less trouble. He seems unaware, perhaps willfully so, of the ongoing failure of his delusional thinking.

Lauren Berlant, in her book *Cruel Optimism*, identifies this willful denial in the pursuit of an unattainable desire as the part of a “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible and toxic.” (24). In other words, positing Earl’s plan within the spiraling cycle of chance-choice conditions to which he is bound emphasizes the improbability of success. Further, the latent threat of being caught accumulates with each new set of ill-conceived choices or potential next event. The “lucky break” fantasy that Ford maintains for Earl is sheer delusion that can only be sustained by a shifting narrative that dismisses any ongoing “trouble.” Berlant explains further:
Cruel optimism is, then, [...] an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call “the good life,” which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it. (Berlant 27)

The notion of success, which Earl can see outside of himself but to which he also feels entitled, is not only increasingly impossible to attain, but also an illusion of attainability. Ford sets up Earl to chase the unattainable, which sends Earl headlong into his own destruction.

One of the protagonists in Valerie Laken’s story, “Separate Kingdoms,” has played the odds in chasing an unattainable success that has resulted in at least a partial self-destruction. Colt and his co-workers regularly disable the safety mechanisms on the sheet metal press at work in order to meet production expectations. Then in one of the repetitive motions—after the thousands of times Colt has brought down the machine successfully—the press severs both of his thumbs.

Unlike Earl, Colt is given an acute awareness of his choices, latent with risk, that set up the circumstances for this chance event, and it haunts him. His drug- and pain-induced dreams involve repeating the motion of the press over and over, checking the position of his hands, “from the left thumb to the right, and the press comes down again and again, as it’s done all these years” as if trying to return to that fateful moment in order to take back the consequences (Laken 188). But in Colt’s reality, the moment is irretrievable. He has passed through the “one-way gate” through which there is no return.

The significance of this particular chance-choice relationship is the extent of the consequences. The consequences are definitive. Nothing Colt can do now will undestroy his thumbs. Colt’s only opportunities of choice do not address the finality of the loss but merely
response after the fact. Several lawyers tell him he can file a lawsuit against his company. His boss pressures him to accept a settlement offer, no questions asked about his safety violation. His wife fights with him about getting the most money they can, as he’s lost his entire future earning capacity. Colt’s awareness of his complicity in the conditions of the chance event threatens his existential identity, and he immerses himself in animal shows on the television, becoming increasingly convinced that his loss makes him part of the animal kingdom. Baxter elaborates on the effect of a one-way gate to identity:

A one-way gate is often a definitive action: having performed it, you are the person who did that thing. You are now defined by that action. One feature of the one-way gate actions is that they are often unforgivable, and they are always undoable. The extreme case of something like this is to say that a person who commits a murder is, forever after that, a murderer. (98)

Not only does the one-way-gate limit potential choice after the event, it also alters the ethical or moral identity of the character. Colt lapses into a mimicry of the animals he admires, his language becoming an indecipherable gibberish in response to his wife, his boss, or the soliciting attorney. He begins to see himself as not human, shifting his identity to the extent that his own language becomes alien to him when he tries to communicate with the attorney being chased by Colt’s dogs:

Colt feels a little sorry for the man then and tries to form the strange consonants and vowels that might help the man understand.

“Aiim nahr,” he cries into the darkness and then tries again one last time. “I’m not one of you!” (Laken 199)
The irreversible nature of Colt’s injury compromises his identity, a condition that is compounded by his awareness of his complicity in the chance event by his one-way gate action. The cruelty of Colt’s choice to work with disabled safety equipment is that it was made with an intention of attaining the very ideal of the American Dream: hard work equals success.

This is the same idealized formula mill-worker Hugh Wolfe discovered to be inadequate in the mid-1800s. The difference over time is the development of the institutional structures built to respond to the potential risks, which amortize the consequences of events such as Colt’s “accident” for the manufacturing plant but not for the individual worker. Jason Puskar identifies this as the development of a “chance collectivity,” which he identifies as a particularly American response to uncertainty and the widespread changes of early 20th century America:

From the private risk pools of the nineteenth-century life insurance industry, to models of collective scientific inquiry, to the new public workers’ compensation programs of the 1910s, chance collectives mobilized Americans to join together against the lurking threat of chance. (Puskar 3)

In times of heightened uncertainty, the assessment of individual risk appears as a significant threat. Organized as part of a larger population, individuals may assess the risks against a statistical norm within the group. Chance collectives presents a perception of order and reduced risk.

As early as 1840, Mathematician Adolph Quetelet observed that chance events appear for the individual as random and unexpected occurrences, but within a larger population, such events are reduced to appear as only minor deviations of the norm. “The greater the number of individuals involved, the more do individual peculiarities, whether physical or moral, become
effaced” (Richardson 264). Essentially, by amortizing chance events over a larger population, the perception of risk is reduced.

For Russell Banks’s community of Sam Dent in *The Sweet Hereafter*, the irrevocable chance event occurs when the local school bus crashes into the frozen river, killing most of the town’s children and permanently disabling others. The bus crash becomes the initiating chance event around which the community begins to organize into a chance collectivity. Like Maxwell’s narrator, they cannot make their children undead or their lives undestroyed, but they can come together as a community to alleviate the perception of its impact. The gamble for each individual is that their participation keeps them safely gathered in the center of the risk pool. The accumulation of threat of the next event appears to be reduced by their collective efforts to file the lawsuit against the State of New York and the Town of Sam Dent, Essex County, which diverts attention away from their individual losses.

The lawsuit’s ultimate results limit future choices for the community because it fails to ascribe blame for the chance event to a larger system, and instead, names the bus driver, Dolores Driscoll, as the cause. Under this new set of conditions, the community can only find a state of normalcy and stability in the form of violence to Driscoll’s donated car in the annual demolition derby, which “everyone is watching with great seriousness, as if a matter of terrible importance is being settled before them instead of this dumb small-town demolition derby” (Banks 252). Her neighbors cheer for the car’s destruction, and then unexpectedly shift as Driscoll’s car fends off all attackers, taking up a chant for the old station wagon as it beats the odds and wins the event. Driscoll experiences an awareness of the irrevocable change to the community that has organized them as either part of the larger collective or as individuals in opposition:
It was as if we were citizens of a wholly different town now, as if we were a town of solitaries living in a sweet hereafter and no matter how the people of San Dent treated us, whether they memorialized us or despised us, whether they cheered for our destruction or applauded our victory over adversity, they did it to meet their needs, not ours. Which, since it could be no other way, was exactly as it should be. (Banks 254)

As well as her understanding of the change that isolates them even as they are bound together as a community, Driscoll seems resigned to her new fate. Similar to Ford’s character, Earl, each shift of events strikes her as merely a manifestation of the arbitrary nature of luck. The community is able to assign blame to Driscoll and by extension, her husband. This shifts the responsibility away from the rest of the collective group and the larger social structures shaping their lives. Further, it identifies Driscoll as the deviation from the norm, which keeps the group safely gathered in the larger risk pool of the chance collectivity as a defense against the threat of the next chance event.

These cyclical relationships of chance and choice reveal a desire to impose order upon the uncertainties of the human condition. An awareness of the precarious conditions of existence is reflected in the characters’ responses as they grapple with the various circumstances wrought by chance. Like Driscoll, Earl Middleton experiences a moment of awareness about his place in the larger collective as he stands in the motel parking lot deciding which car to steal next:

What would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? Would you think he was trying to get his head cleared? Would you think he was trying to get ready for a day when trouble would come down on him? Would you think his girlfriend was leaving him?
Would you. Think he had a daughter? Would you think he was anybody like you? (Ford 27)

By giving Earl an awareness of his base needs and desires, Ford aligns him with all of those people he mimics, identifying his needs as no different from anybody facing the collective precariousness of the human condition.

Similarly, Banks sets up Dolores Driscoll to understand the chance collective as she witnesses the way her neighbors first cheer for the destruction of her car in the derby and then, as chance shifts to favor the old car, “the very same people cheered to see it turn and destroy the others” (Banks 254). The awareness of the powerlessness of the individual against chance coupled with the restriction of opportunities limited by the social and material structures becomes a powerful reflection of a collective and precarious human existence. Within this context, the stories of discovery and destruction are the same, rooted in a cycle of chance and choice as bound to uncertainty. The struggle to respond to the vast and often terrifying aspects of uncertainty is what Butler asserts has organized our social structures:

It is not from pervasive love for humanity or a pure desire for peace that we strive to live together. We live together because we have no choice, and though we sometimes rail against that unchosen condition, we remain obligated to struggle to affirm the ultimate value of that unchosen social world, an affirmation that is not quite a choice, a struggle that makes itself known and felt precisely when we exercise freedom in a way that is necessarily committed to the equal value of lives. (150)

What chance has organized by necessity into a social order as a response to uncertainty also provides us with a place to make meaning out of our existence.
The arbitrary nature of chance is also part of the story of *The Wildish Boys*. Narrator Jude Wildish considers chance as it functions in his genetic makeup, which he shares with three brothers and one half-brother, Sawyer Godenot from Indiana. Sawyer’s arrival in Washington is not a chance event; however, the accidental death of Sawyer’s mother has set in motion a series of events that leads Sawyer to find his father. While Sawyer makes certain choices in response to his mother’s death, the rest of the Wildish sons have little or no choice in the way this half-brother becomes a part of their lives; the disruption is the consequence of Sawyer’s consequences. Other chance events occur as the family struggles to survive the recession of the 1970s and other troubles of their own making, including the engagement of drugs and alcohol in an attempt to solve larger stressors. As well, language of luck is integrated as part of Jude’s storytelling, which reflects older ideals of his father’s agrarian family heritage passed down, not genetically, but in a tradition of storytelling.

Each of these realist narratives depicts the complex relationships of chance and choice, which becomes an opportunity to examine how precariousness is witnessed. Perhaps it is also an opportunity for the reader to align their experiences with these fictional characters in their struggle against precarity. With that awareness is the opportunity to become both witness and witnessed, and from that duality of perspectives, the distinctions of our constructed social order—class, race, gender, wealth, and more—lose the power to assign value to our individual lives. The awareness of our precarious position of existence is a place to value each other as individuals, perhaps even to re-evaluate our collective existence within the context of uncertainty.


The Wildish Boys, a novel

by

Sherri H. Hoffman
The mercy of the world is
you don’t know what’s going to happen.

~ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*
Our family story is a bit like the old game we used to play as kids, *Two Truths and a Lie*: what sounds most improbable ends up true. The first truth is that our father grew up on a farm in Indiana back when farming was still a good way of life. He was twenty years old when he married my mother and moved to the Pacific Northwest. Both events were rushed. The official marriage certificate I found stored on microfiche in an Indiana courthouse years later was signed on December 24, 1959, by a Monroe County Clerk, and my parents were in a rooming house in Seattle with all their belongings packed into the back of a pickup truck by New Year’s Day. To say it’s complicated is not quite right, which it seems the real story begins six months before the shotgun wedding in the dead of summer.

It rained in the early hours of Independence Day so that the morning hay mow was put off. Ernest Wildish headed to town, leaving Leonard, his oldest, in charge. The younger boys flew through their regular chores to make the most of this lucky break. An entire day free from the farm work was rare, even on a holiday. Leonard cut them loose and wrapped up the milking alone in the dark. While his brothers finished breakfast, he washed and dressed and afterwards drained the tepid gray bathwater from the clawfoot tub since he was the last one to bathe.

The sun breached the gap between the forest canopy and a lay of thin clouds and a mist rose from the warming earth. The farm truck had been swept and washed for the occasion, and Leonard packed the baseball gear in the space behind the bench seat along with a new set of horseshoes, and then smoked in the threshold of the barn, one foot cocked up on a feed bucket. He wore a bleach-white t-shirt and his good denims, and his wave of blond hair was slicked back. He was tall enough and had a broad back like his father and an easy slouch. The cleft chin
was a family trait, passed on along with a healthy dose of Indiana stubbornness. Leonard would inherit this farm the same way as his father and grandfather before him. For a century, this land had been Wildish, cut and cleared in measured parcels from the dense forest. Leonard had only to prove himself. This year he’d become the sole keeper of the Guernsey herd. In his care, production was up. So far, so good.

He stubbed out his cigarette. At his feet, a black-spotted pup huffed out a half-bark.

“What’d you say, pup?” He liked this one, a male heeler mix with an undocked tail, twelve weeks old. He’d traded for the pup with the Miller’s up the road for a braided rope halter. He liked how the pup watched him with attention, ears up. The black markings around the eyes gave the pup a bandit mask. Leonard stubbed out his cigarette in the damp earth and pocketed the butt.

“Hold,” he said. He put his hand up for the command. Eye on the pup, he slung open the gate to a low wire coop. A half dozen brown-speckled chickens scuttered into the yard to chuck and gabble over a spill of silage. The pup sat forward, ears up, seat firm.

“Good boy.” From the grooming shelf inside the barn, he drew a brown-paper bundle tied with string. The fresh beef knucklebone would keep the pup busy all day. Leonard tossed the bone into an empty front stall.

“What to call you,” he said. “You’re the only dog we got, now old Mack’s gone. The only one. The Lone Ranger.” He announced it as if he was on the radio. The pup waved his undocked tail as he hopped into the stall. Leonard teased him a bit, rolling the knucklebone under his boot. With one last pat on the pup’s head, he buttoned down the barn for the day.

Across the yard, his two middle brothers waited in the truck. They swung their legs off the tailgate. Robert was whistling his favorite Johnny Horton. We fired our guns, but the British
Leonard hollered up to the house. “Jack! Waiting on you.” He started up the truck.

The screen door banged open. Leonard’s youngest brother leapt from the back porch, arms and legs flailing. He tossed his baseball mitt through the open window and hauled open the side door.

Leonard forced a scowl. “About time. I’ve half a mind to leave you.”


The boys in the back swung up the tailgate and settled in with their backs against the cab. Shifting on the column, Leonard dropped the truck into gear.

“Couldn’t nothing make me leave you.”

The morning air smelled like rain. From the road, green barley swelled to the distant fences to break against the deciduous tree line—beech, black ash, and shagbark hickory. By the time they reached town, the low clouds had burned off and the sky was as blue as their mother’s fine china. Leonard pulled up in front of the Dairy Bar and hollered after his brothers as they bailed out the back.

“Meet me at the horseshoe pits. And don’t go starting any trouble.”

Jack whooped and jumped out of the truck into a throng of boys packing bats and mitts.

The Bloomington sidewalks were crowded with folding chairs and blankets. Wooden barricades framed the parade route down Kirkwood and Walnut Avenue. Leonard turned up Morton toward the high school and drove slow. He knew folks along these streets, even the townies and the rock cutters. Some of them lifted a hand at him, recognizing his father’s truck even if they didn’t know him exactly. Some called out. Touched their caps. *Wildish,* they called.
Two of his older cousins held a space at the corner of Birch. They called him *Casanova* and waved for him to come over. They’d always teased him for his blue eyes and the long lashes he got from his mother. Leonard didn’t have time to stop, but he leaned his elbow out the window and lifted a hand as was his nature.

The Phipps truck was parked in front of the school. The tall windows glared with the reflection of the sun. As if from the center of the light, the girls from the cheer squad charged down the steps. They blew kisses to Leonard, calling him by name even though he’d been out of school now for more than a year.

He slowed to match the girl’s pace. From the seam of the dash, he found a match and bit the wooden end.

One of the girls shaded her eyes. “You looking for Darlene? They wanted her over at Boxman’s for pictures.”

Leonard ticked his fingers at her. The quick pink on the girl’s cheeks gave him a rush of satisfaction, and he watched her in the rearview mirror until he was far enough away he couldn’t tell her apart from the others.

Boxman’s was the place to find Bloomington’s regulars even before Jim Banks, Jr. bought into its current franchise of Kentucky Fried Chicken. On everyday mornings, Leonard’s father was there drinking coffee with Jim and the third member of their long-time trifecta, Frank McCloskey. This morning, his father’s new truck was parked in its familiar spot. For more than twenty years, the three men had been arguing everything over coffee and a piece of pie, from the market price of barley and butter to the chances for the Dodgers each year since they left New York. Now that McCloskey was the mayor, their debates included excise taxes and school bonds alongside the baseball scores. It had been a hot debate about how much the new flag with its 50
stars would cost the taxpayers.

Some mornings, Leonard joined the men, but he disliked how his father could get worked up. Ernest had strong opinions on every issue—all of them right. He’d defend his position until he’d blown a gasket. Lately, the men had been rehashing the Leslie Irvin case. The Supreme Court decision to stay Irvin’s execution was a contentious issue, especially since Irvin was still out on the lam after his last prison break. Leonard had never seen the three friends come to blows, but knowing his father, he wouldn’t put it past him. Leonard figured he got enough of that at home. He couldn’t figure how Banks and McCloskey stayed friends with his father after all these years.

In the Boxman’s parking lot, the high school band was forming up its ranks. Students in blue and gold uniforms warmed up their instruments. Leonard spotted Darlene out front by the fried chicken sign. She was sandwiched between the Reynolds twins, posing for a photographer from the Bloomington Post. The twins had been the incumbent blue-ribbon winners for five years running until today. Now they crowded their matching second-place ribbons into the photo from both sides of Darlene. Leonard pulled to the curb across the street from the girls. Darlene shot him a bleak smile.

Down the block, a ruckus broke out in front of the Presbyterian Church. A horse with ribbons braided into its mane and the remnants of a flower wreath around its neck loped through the churchyard gardens. The young rider clinging onto the pommel of the saddle looked like he was crying. A passel of kids chased behind, whooping at the horse. Over their noise of the children, a car horn sounded, throaty and metallic. Leonard edged up in his seat to locate the sound of the heady V-8. From the corner of his rearview mirror, he caught only a glimpse of its blue chrome before it disappeared behind Hook’s drugstore. Darlene’s voice at his window spun
him around.

“Was that Sylvie Godenot?”

“Holy hell, woman.” Leonard’s matchstick fell into his lap.

Darlene squinted down the street. “Where did a girl like that get such a car?” she said.

“Geez, Leonard. Someone walk over your grave? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“You’re the one sneaking up on me. And don’t be talking bad about that girl. She’s family.” He ran his hand up through his hair and down along his jaw.

“I don’t care,” Darlene said. “That girl’s not half as nice as your mama, even if they are sisters. She probably traded something unholy for a car like that.”

Leonard adjusted the side mirror in time to catch the car’s finned taillights as it slipped between the grocery and the *Tru Value*.

“Got your horseshoes warm? Wabash says they have it in for you.”

“I heard it,” Leonard said. Darlene gave him a look. He leaned back, going for casual under her scrutiny.

“Beating out the Reynolds sisters makes you some kind of celebrity. Or the anti-Christ,” he said. It was enough to distract Darlene. She filled him in on more than he needed to know about the earlier bake-off and the smug Reynolds twins.

“In this town, it’s the kind of grudge that could last for generations,” she said. “Passed down to our children and our children’s children. Over apple pie.”

Across the street, the twins were making their case to the photographer for one more shot. Leonard plucked a new matchstick from the dash.

“I could tell them about that secret handful of *Red Hots* you slipped in with those Granny Smiths.” He touched the matchstick to his temple.
Darlene landed her fists on her hips. “Abraham Leonard Wildish. Don’t you threaten me.”

Leonard grinned. He couldn’t help it. Even when she was pretending to be mad, she was pretty. He liked her spunk, even though it was what she used to hold him off for a long while after they’d been going steady. A bit too long, he thought. A cock tease, his buddies called her. He’d had to make his case with persistence and then finally with more than the hint of a promise. The flash of gold on her finger bore the smallest glint of a diamond—all he could afford—and a date set for after her high school graduation. Folks were betting she’d be the valedictorian of her class.

The school band counted down a beat into a semblance of Stars and Stripes Forever.

“Get in,” Leonard said. “Let’s go down to the lake. You and me.” He reached for her, but she dodged. A wisp of her dark hair slid through his fingers.

“They need me back at the house. They’re still working on the table flowers for the Rotary dance. There were piles of baby’s breath everywhere when I left this morning.”

Leonard clicked his tongue, resisting the gathering urge. “Baby’s breath,” he said. “That’s unfortunate.”

Darlene shrugged. “I’ll meet you at the horseshoe pits. The dance should be good. I heard it’s Strawberry McCloud.”

He watched her jog across the street, the bounce of her hair and hips aggravating the ache below his belt. He flipped up the truck visor. A pack of Winstons fell into his lap.

“Goddamn women.” He shook out a cigarette and struck the wooden match.

The truck triggered double bells at the DX Station as Leonard pulled to the pump. The
bay doors were open. A radio played somewhere in the back—*tall, thin Jones; slow-walkin’ Jones; slow-talkin’ Jones*. Dan Miller was elbows deep in the water bin, sleeves rolled up, plying an inner tube with soap bubbles to find a leak.

“How’s it?” Leonard said.

“Fill it your own damned self, you lazy farmer,” Dan said.

“Goddamn. The service here is terrible.” Leonard ground his cigarette under his boot heel. “I’ll speak to your manager.”

“Harley’s busy taking money from those two fools inside.”

Harley Majors was known county-wide for his moonshine and a particular talent at cards. Leonard was too tight to sit in on a regular hand, but today it was Ted Marks and Seth Jackson convinced they could take him. Harley had a knack for giving up enough to keep them going until it was too late.

Dan hauled the tube out, water splashing onto the shop floor. “You catch the parade?”

“Same old.”

“Figured. You heard they named the All-Star pitchers? Drysdale up against Early Wynn.”

“From Cleveland?”

“Chicago. White Sox picked him up last year.”

“He’s that knuckleballer. Drysdale can handle him. I’ll put money on it.”

“Not me,” Dan said. “Find some other sucker.”

Leonard stuck his head into the station and called out *howsit* to the card table. He counted out $3.10 on the candy case for the gas and a soda.

Harley squinted over his cards. “Getcha one of them Salted Nut Rolls to go with it. Heard you got some competition this afternoon.”
“I heard it,” Leonard said. He pulled an orange Nesbitt from the soda dispenser. The bottles shifted with a jingle of glass. He snapped off the lid.

“Keep your head,” Harley said. “They’ll be left trying to get a bead on you long after they’ve been beat.” He laid down his hand. “Full house.”

The double bells sounded up front. Dan gave a shout from the bay. Harley made to get up, and Leonard waved him off.

The Pontiac was a winged dream, powder blue with chrome trim on every curve that constricted something in Leonard’s chest. At the wheel was Sylvie Godenot.

She tipped her head, her blonde hair pulled into a short ponytail.

“Why, Leonard Wildish. Look at you. Surely, you don’t work here.” As if it was an insult.

Leonard resisted a closer look at the car. Or her. “Maybe I do.” He turned to start the pump and collided with Dan who’d come from behind. They jerked away from each other. Inside the car, Sylvie laughed.

Dan’s cheeks splotched red. “Fill her up, ma’am?”

“Don’t ma’am me, Daniel Miller.” She swung open the door and held her hand out to Leonard.


From the doorway of the station, Ted and Seth craned their necks. Harley whistled.

“Don’t mind him,” Leonard said. “He’s harmless.”

Her gaze was cool. “Ah, but are you?” She shook off his grip and tap-tapped in her heels into the station. “I’m parched,” she said. “What have you got to drink around here?”
The boys stared openmouthed at Leonard. At the car. After Sylvie.

“Knock it off,” Leonard said.

Dan finished the windshield and glammed the chrome with a clean rag. “Holy hell,” he said in a loud whisper. “Look at this car. Isn’t her dad just a cutter at the quarry. Isn’t she your mom’s sister?”

“Godenot’s the super,” Ted said.

Seth pointed to Leonard over the hood of the car. “Hold on,” he said. “Your mom’s sister? What does that make you?”

“A pervert,” Ted said.

“Holy Jesus, Joseph, and Mary,” Dan said.

Ted stuck his head inside the window and took in an exaggerated sniff. “I gotta get me some of this.”

Leonard yanked Ted up by the shirt collar and tossed him back. “Knock it off,” he hissed. “Bunch of pinheads.”

Ted backed away, both hands up. “Whaddya call her? Do you call her ‘Aunt Sylvie?’”

He snorted.

“Asshole,” Leonard said.

Sylvie pushed between the boys in the doorway. Her purse was slung over one shoulder, and she had a couple of Mallo-bars and a bottle of Coca Cola.

“Daniel Miller, nice to see you again.” She got in behind the wheel and tugged her skirt down. “Leonard,” she said, “ride with me.”

He glanced at his truck parked in the second bay. The way she said his name thrilled him with anxiety.
She waved an impatient hand. “Come on. The boys will watch out for your old truck.”

Harley came out from the back. He slipped a pint into a small paper bag and handed it through the window. “Don’t forget this, miss.”

“Come on, Leonard. Allez! Allez!”

Leonard ignored a crude gesture from Ted and tried to look casual as he crossed around to the passenger side. He slid into the cool leather bench seat. As the car pulled out of the drive, Leonard raised a single middle finger out the window.

The forest closed over the road to the lake, as familiar to Leonard as his own farm. Old growth spilled from irregular shale ravines, and the dense understory sheltered stair-step springs and karst falls. Leonard filled his notebooks with drawings and dated bird sightings. From the limestone streambeds, he collected fossils of seashells and tropical plants. Whole leaves, flowers, and seed heads were between the pages of Leonard’s set of secondhand encyclopedias that detailed the geography of this primeval seam between the Norman Uplands and the Mitchell Plain.

Sylvie’s car swept through the curves. Leonard leaned back and squinted into the sunlight as it flashed through the trees.

“Nice car,” he said.

She tipped her chin. “Birthday present.”

“Helluva birthday. Darlene bet it cost you.” He caught her side glance.

“Cost me what?”

Leonard looked hard at the road.

“That Phipps girl? You’re still seeing her?”
He stammered a bit, as if caught in a lie. “Sure. I guess we’re going to get married.”

“Such passion,” she said. Her scorn was not lost on Leonard. He scowled at a star that glinted in the windshield, a chip in the glass from some earlier rock thrown from the road. They passed a pickup with the bed full of kids. Leonard and Sylvie both returned the driver’s wave. Cars were perched along the road at picnic spots and overlooks. The road crossed an inlet stream on a narrow bridge and swung around to the far side of the lake.

Sylvie put her hand out, not quite touching his arm. Between them, her sweater was folded alongside her purse, a soft barrier on the smooth bench seat.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” she said.

He shook her off. Her confidence unnerved him, and he felt like a child, challenged and reprimanded at the same time. They’d grown up together, less than a year apart in age, and even when they were kids, she always knew how to get the best of him. Once at a family campout when they were both twelve or thirteen, they sneaked away from the adults, and she’d stripped off her shirt behind some bushes. He was stunned. Before he could figure out what to do, she ran away, taunting him in the dark. Calling his name with that same scorn.

The car dipped through a curve. Leonard caught her hand. She glanced at him, surprised, and pulled away to hold the wheel with both hands. A sign flashed by for the last picnic area. Sylvie squinted at the road.

“Papa gave me the car to keep me at Notre Dame,” she said. “It’s a bald-face bribe.”

Leonard couldn’t help but grin. “No shit?”

Her father had a laundry list of reasons she should stay at Notre Dame, right or wrong. She wanted to go to Michigan for the journalism program. They’d argued.

“Enter the bribe,” she said. “Charon’s obol.”
Leonard didn’t know what she meant. “The quarry must be doing all right by Grandpop.”

“When’s the last time you went to see him?”

“Been awhile. Christmas.”

She tucked a stray piece of hair behind one ear. Her father might never forgive Ernest Wildish for having eloped with Sylvie’s oldest sister. Genevieve had been sixteen, barely able to speak English when she was “seduced” by Ernest Wildish. So the story went. She didn’t know much about the world, and certainly nothing about the reputation of the Wildish clan—casual Presbyterians and Indiana hooligans. Albert Godenot threatened to disown every one of his remaining daughters for their sister’s disgrace. His tirade was long and fierce, and before he was done, his pregnant wife, Sabine—now inconsolable—had gone into early labor. That very afternoon, the youngest and final Godenot sister was born: Sylvie Thérèse.

“I should stop over to the quarry sometime,” Leonard said.

Sylvie shrugged.

He side-eyed her. The knit top clung to her shape. The car was warm, and he draped one arm out the window, pressing his hand against the force of air as it rushed past. She was saying something about the last time she’d come to the lake with her sisters. The sun was high, and the road shimmered with wet sluices that vanished as the car slipped over the hot asphalt.

A small dirt lane barely visible from the road doubled back to the right toward the lake. Sylvie braked hard and made the turn, kicking up a spume of dust. A slow quarter mile through a bowery of hickory, the dry gravel track disappeared into the tall grass of a hillock overlooking the lake. Rows of whitecaps chased to the far side of a small bay.

A single walnut tree thick with age dominated the meadow. Sylvie eased the car into its shade and cut the engine. A backdraft of dust caught them, but before it could settle, the wind
scattered the grit over the tall grass.

Sylvie drew the brown paper bag from under her seat and produced the unmarked pint from the DX station. She took a drink and handed it to Leonard. The whiskey stung the back of his throat. He hoped it would ease his anxiety.

“We used to camp here. Didn’t you? With Pépère and Mémé?” she said. Her French was fluent, but she spoke English without an accent, unlike Leonard’s mother. For Leonard, there were only two similarities between the sisters—the articulate nose and the arching brows.

Sylvie’s skin was so white it seemed blue. He imagined touching the translucent hollow that cupped the base of her throat like an inverted brooch.

“Light me a cigarette, will you?” she said.

He wished he’d grabbed his own pack of Winstons. In the glove box, he found a blue and gold box of French cigarettes—Caporal Extra Fine. The tobacco was sweet and fruity. She took a cigarette in her thumb and forefinger and let him hold a match for her, breathing in a fine crackle. She watched him over the flame, and Leonard could feel his pulse behind his eyes. They passed the pint between them.

“I’m not going back,” she said.

“Home?” Leonard’s fantasies slipped away with the blue smoke she blew out the window.

“But the car?”

She tipped her head back, smoke curling over her lips. “Didn’t you ever want to get away from here? I’ll sell it when I get to Michigan. It’s my ticket out.”

He could only stare, mouth open. She drew herself up, furious and defiant. And to
Leonard, magnificent. He swept her purse and sweater to the floor.

She came easy to him at first but turned her head as he moved to kiss her. “Leonard!” She pushed back from his chest. “Come with me.”

He might have nodded. Lightheaded with whiskey and the rush of momentum, he brushed the curve of her breast. Her thigh slid alongside his. With the taste of her sweet tobacco in his mouth, he fumbled under her top with the clasps at her back. She hummed, as if giving up a secret note, and after a minute, reached back to guide his fingers. With a twist, the thick lace cups fell away.

Leonard thumped his head against the roof getting out of his shirt. She loosed his belt.

“Goddamn, woman” he said. “Let me pull my boots.” He got out of one boot without toppling to the floor. It was all they needed.

Afterwards they panted in the heat. Sweat pooled on their skin. He could feel her pulse against his chest.

She pushed him off her. “Let’s swim.” Out the door, she stepped out of her skirt bunched at her waist.

The draft of air was a relief. Leonard crouched across the bench seat on his hands and knees. The backs of his legs had cramped up, and he rolled his feet to ease the pain. As the muscles relaxed, he pulled off his other boot and his pants. He could hear her calling him from the lake. Feeling along the floor, he found the bottle of whiskey. The pint bottle was less than half full. Taking the bottle with him, he walked barefoot to the shore.

The cold water stung his limbs. At the foot of the walnut tree, Sylvie had spread a blanket. Her skin was stark against the wool tartan and mottled by the shifting shadows of the branches overhead. Across the meadow, a Leafwing flashed its double-sided wings, orange and
brown. Leonard watched the butterfly weave and bob over the grass as if dodging a predator. The lake smacked on the shore, and cloud shadows rolled over the ground like waves driven by tides of earth. Leonard tried to gauge the time, but then Sylvie pulled him down to her and kissed him with a full mouth.

A flutter in his ear woke him. A persistent whisper—his name.

“Leonard. Wake up, mon chou.”

The endearment shocked him awake—his mother’s words in Sylvie’s voice. He sat up fast, his chest clench so he could barely catch his breath. His clothes were piled near the empty pint bottle and a handful of cigarette butts. He fumbled into his shirt, cursing.

Sylvie was fully dressed. She tugged at the blanket under him. “It’s late,” she said. “But we can still make the fireworks.”

The sun was low, a red tick sinking into the tops of the trees. A vee of ducks coasted overhead, calling to each other as they slid onto the lake. Orange sky puddled into the riffles. From the north, a breeze shuffled the iron tang of limestone, old growth, and tilled earth. Leonard stood naked from the waist down, shriveled and shivering before the retreating scut of the sun. He raised one hand to the sky, stricken with clarity. On the lake, the ducks paddled out and away on the water, their clamor returning as an echo in the falling dark.
BOOK I: Factoria, Washington

Chapter 1

1976

At the bottom of Lake Washington near where I was born, an ancient grove of Douglas fir stands fully upright in the mud, bark and branches intact after hundreds of years in the deep. They say a seismic shift along the fault over Mercer Island severed the forest mass and deposited it whole, as if it had been planted in the mud and preserved through the volcanic disruptions and floods that formed the Puget Sound. On the surface, the lake reflects the sky and the lights of the city, and along the shoreline, the dipping Tertiary siltstone and sandstone is layered with ash.

Our parents bought their first house with what money was left from Pops’ dairy profits from the farm. Ma insisted on a decent place for my brother to be born into, which she determined was the modest split-level on a dirt lane in Factoria on the east side of the lake. Ma figured it was right. The high school baseball field butted up against the back yard, and she could look down from the front porch over a horse pasture to the Mercer slough. The Olympic and the Cascade ranges held the horizons to the east and west, and to the south, Mt. Rainier. My brother, Leonard Ernst Wildish, Jr. was born May 15, 1960 and named after two generations of Wildish men—the eldest son of an eldest son.

Those days Pops pumped gas at the Esso station. Nights he guarded mattresses in a warehouse down in Renton. Two years later, David was born. By then Pops had built a reputation on the seasonal fire lines for the U.S. Forest Service. Over a few years, he worked his way up the ranks to be outfitted with a uniform and the gray-green truck marked by service insignia and the stern face of Smokey the Bear. Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires.
I was born into the middle of the family order, but I was conceived—so they tell me—
during the great Columbus Day Storm when the tallest hemlock in our yard blew over. Pops’
Smokey Bear truck was pinned in the old garage by the tree, and everyone was stuck indoors
with the power knocked out. Across Lake Washington, the Seattle World’s Fair was shut down
by winds that threatened the Space Needle. Ma’s version of the story always included the part
about how one man died up in North Bend when a tree fell on him, and how lucky it was Pops
forgot his coffee Thermos that morning, so he’d come back into the house minutes before our
hemlock took out the garage. Ten more seconds, and he’d have been killed just like that, she’d
always say. Lenny and David were too young to remember the storm, but by the next day when
Pops got the truck out, I was my own spark of life—a whirl of cells splitting and doubling, well
on my way to being born.

By July, Ma received me herself since the fire season has started and Pops was serving as
the captain out on the Snohomish fire line. She christened me with two names, one from the
Bible, and one for my paternal great-grandfather: Jude Henry Wildish. Pops was less than
pleased with her choices. Name my son after a scribe and a sonofabitch, he said. But the fire
season had been longer than expected, and by the time he got back, it was too late. I was already
Jude. Five years later, Michael arrived to become the last of us.

Perhaps after they got through those first hard years, Ma and Pops figured they’d made it.
Their lives had become ordinary as if they were like anyone else living in Factoria. Most times,
Pops had work, and Ma did her best to raise us up on a budget. Every once in a while, she’d cater
some pies for an event for some extra cash, but that was her only job outside the home when I
was a kid. She took us to church with some regularity, although Pops fought with her against any
of us taking First Communion. The schools were close by and so were the rivers and lakes. If it
wasn’t raining—and sometimes when it was—our most consistent Sunday rituals were baseball or fishing. Lenny says Pops went out on a couple of real benders, but if he did, I didn’t remember it. And once the police showed up with Lenny’s smashed bicycle to say he’d been taken to Overlake General Hospital, very much alive after being hit by a car. A broken collarbone kept him from fishing for a couple weeks. But none of those things made us different. We were still like regular people.

To be fair, even the best pitcher shows leading indicators. Maybe we saw the signs and called them wrong. Or missed them altogether. I was in 7th grade when the American League announced its new franchise team would be coming to Seattle, and we celebrated along with everyone in our town. Lenny took odds on who’d get pulled for the team even though it would be more than a year before their first game. Lenny lost most of those bets, but statistically, so did the Mariners. They were losers out of the gate, sixth in the West at 64-98, only one game over the Oakland Athletics at the bottom of the league. Nothing like our favorite Dodgers. How could we know the Mariners would never go to the World Series? Not in forty years and counting. *Can’t win for losing,* Pops would say.

In the meantime, the 1976 season started. Everyone went crazy out of the gate for the Mets’ first baseman, Dave Kingman. That first week, he hit a 550-foot homerun that plunked a house outside Wrigley Field. A month later, he’d score three homeruns against the Dodgers with a shutout win for the Mets. It was early. We were still optimistic.

With three weeks until the end of school, there hadn’t been any rain in 52 days. It was a new record. One Friday, I stayed late after class to clean the science lab for extra credit. Not that I needed it. 7th grade had been good to me, and there was a girl I liked, Joanna Brown. Even without the girl, school was a place that made sense to me, especially in the science lab. There
was order to the straight rows of glass beakers, chromed gas heads, and Bunsen burners along the black countertops that made our workspaces. My teacher, Mr. Harris was new, and he’d been excited for our experiments all year. Even the dumb ones, like the nail-battery electromagnet most of us learned in grade school. Mr. Harris would be my 8th grade biology teacher, and as I scrubbed down the science tables that day, he explained about white-eyed flies and red-eyed flies and began to tell me the story of Watson and Crick, the Nobel Prize winners who discovered the structure of DNA from an x-ray. He drew on the blackboard—spirals of gene markers and cross-hatched ladders with implications straight out of my favorite sci-fi books. I was almost disappointed to have to wait all summer for biology class.

As I walked home, I tried to figure how David and Lenny could have brown eyes like Ma, when Michael’s were blue like Pops, and mine were a muddy greenish-brown. I threw a stick into the pasture and flushed up a fleet of grasshoppers, their wings clacking like shuffled cards over the gold-headed grass. It was a warm enough day to almost start to believe in summer again.

I side-armed a rock at the neighbor’s cat and then checked to see if anyone had seen me. Ma had a rule about cats that belonged to the neighbors. At the house, Ma was baking, which meant she was thinking. I’d watched her make hundreds of pies. With flour on her hands and in her hair, she’d roll and tuck and finish each crust to perfection without ever checking a cookbook or recipe card. And if you could see her eyes, it was as if she was somewhere else. Somewhere peaceful and perhaps even sacred. To disturb her was to interrupt a prayer.

I tried to slip down the hall, but she called after me. Could I find the dog? She hadn’t seen him all day, and the scraps in his bowl were attracting ants.
She wiped her face with the backside of her wrist, her fingers sticky with dough. “It’s not normal,” she said. “See if you can rustle him up somewhere.”

I checked the usual places—garage, orchard, horse pastures. Even the high school baseball field, but that was a long shot. I was starting to think Lenny must have skipped school again and taken the dog for company, except that didn’t fit with the sense of dread I tried to push away when Ma first asked me to find him. I stalled a bit more, hoping David or Lenny would show up. Finally, I crawled under the back porch and found him there. Ranger was dead.

He looked peaceful enough, curled over his paws in the dug-out hollow, tailings of ancient ash dug out from the hole. He could have been asleep between the cement footings that bore the weight of our house. Overhead, sunlight through the porch boards flickered in the cloud of dust I’d kicked up.

I didn’t know what to do. One of his paws was stretched out as if an offer to shake. I touched the paw, stroked it once, and covered it with my hands. He’d been dead for long enough that his limbs were cold but no longer stiff. The dust and something in my chest made it hard to breathe, and I couldn’t remember whether it was this morning or the night before when I’d seen him last. His speckled head was smooth. I traced the shape of the bandit mask around his eyes and down the stripe of his freckled muzzle, more silver than white. I guess he was old, even for a heeler. Through his short fur, the pink and black speckle of his skin stretched over the jut of ribs and hip bones, and the undocked tail curled over his haunches, like the tip of a new fern. With my fingers, I stroked the lay of his coat. The cool metal tags on his collar rang against each other. The city registration tag was up to date, and the metal cutout shape like a bone was engraved in my father’s own hand: The Lone Ranger.
Michael and David tramped up the stairs and over my head. A fine cloud of dust shook down into the light that cut between the treads. Michael hollered for Ma. David told him *pipe down*. My throat swelled with a new sadness. How would I tell them? Or worse, how would any of us tell Pops? It was great and terrible news to have to keep, even for a few minutes, but I stayed under the porch and held it in, as if it was too much to give up right away. Ranger was one of us. But he’d been Pops’ dog before any of us was born. The dust settled on my face, and I could feel the scrape of grit when I wiped at it with the back of my hand.

A couple weeks ago down in the slough, Michael thought we’d lost Ranger. We’d been hunting for the first tadpoles, and it was getting dark. Lenny and David had to drag Michael away. He cried all the way home to find Ranger waiting for us on the front porch, grinning his toothy dog grin as pleased as if he’d beat us in some great race.

As I crawled out from under the porch, the sense of dread remained. I thought how maybe we would never been the same. Ma gave me a clean sheet, and David helped me wrap Ranger’s body. The crawlspace was too small space for the both of us to move around, but we managed to get the sheet under Ranger without disrupting his sleeping pose. David crawled out backwards with the swaddled body between us. It seemed weightless. Ranger wasn’t a large dog, but he’d always been a substantial force. Or perhaps it was because he’d been bigger than us when we were babies, and that presence of size had never gone away.

We emerged coated in ash as if we were ghosts with Ranger, and it was the living who were out of place. In the garage, we cleared the fly-tying gear off the workbench—bird feathers, otter pelt, colored thread, and wire—and lay Ranger out.

“What now?”

“Bury him, I guess,” David said.
“What? Now?”

“No, you doof.” He threw a shadow punch, opening his fist at the last minute over my shoulder to shake me, not unkindly. As close to a hug as he would ever get. “Tomorrow.”

I stopped at the back door, not ready to go in. David must have felt the same. He slumped into one of the Adirondack chairs. Shadows had taken the yard, and the last sunlight was bouncing in the tops of the tallest trees. A bird tucked in the hemlock made a slow roosting chirp. Over the lake, the quarter moon was a transparent whitewash in the space between daylight and dark. Time seemed out of kilter. It could have been yesterday and Ranger could trip up the stairs to lick my face. I thought I heard the click of his nails on the porch boards and pressed my back hard into the cold wood of the chair, feeling with my body for an anchor to keep my next breath from tumbling out of me too fast to pull the rest of me with it.

It was full dark when Ma called us in. She tapped the back of my hand, her warm fingers a shock, as if my hand had never been touched before. I couldn’t answer, only nodded and followed David in to the kitchen smelled of chicken and biscuits. We tried to eat even though it was late. It would make Ma feel better if we did. Lenny still wasn’t home and the school had called to say he’d been absent, which meant he’d skipped. Ma said his fishing gear was gone, so I guessed he’d hitched to the Snohomish.

Later that night in the top bunk that had always been my bed, I tried to read to fend off the sadness that hit me if I closed my eyes. Below me on the bottom bunk, Michael had cried himself to sleep, and he stirred and sniffled. Ma was in the kitchen after midnight. By the smell of it, I guessed she was making cookies. Oatmeal raisin.

Long after Ma went to bed, I finished the fifth of the Barsoom books. I’d read the series before, but it had been a couple years, and I hadn’t remembered the part about the Helium
princess, Tara, and her power over Martians and men. I wondered if that was a real thing, and if Ma had ever had such a power. Or if it would happen to Jo. The thought triggered a different flutter in my stomach.

Outside, an early robin began its urgent song before the dawn, calling up the sun. The weak morning light gave shape to the shadows of my room. Michael was tangled in his blankets on the bottom bunk below me. Against the far wall, the darkest shadow became the metal Army surplus desk with its heavy metal drawers and the pull-out shelf for a typewriter. Stacks of books. Model cars and boxes of baseball cards. The early air was cool with the smell of dry earth. I rolled into my blankets to cut a chill and the sudden reminder that Ranger was gone.

Michael refused to get dressed. Silent in his chair, he held his place at the table in his pajamas, refusing his favorite waffles Ma had made special. None of us ate much of anything. Lenny still wasn’t home, and the rest of us spent the morning in the slough without him, looking for a suitable spot to bury Ranger. We collected smooth stones as we followed narrow game trails through the dense underbrush. Late that afternoon, we buried Ranger on a hillock under some fire willow that overlooked the lake. A stone cairn marked the grave. David wedged Ranger’s chewed-up tennis ball into one of the crevices. I secured the worn leather collar around the top, pocketing the silver tags to keep for Pops.

Michael hiccupped. The sun tilted to the West but felt both ordinary and out of place at the same time. I stripped the dry leaves off a willow branch and scattered them in a confetti sprinkle over the earth. None of us could think of what to say, so we stood and listened to the murmur of wind and water and the distant traffic on the bridge away from us. After a while, David collected the shovel and the pickaxe he’d used to break up the soil.
A pair of buffleheads called off the water, and then there was Lenny. He was trying hard to light a cigarette in the wind with a match that burned down to his fingers so that he flipped it away. The burnt matchstick fell on the cairn of stones.

“I saw you fools from a mile away?” he said. “You all skulking through the swamp.”

I glared but couldn’t answer. Lenny dug in his shirt pocket for another match, spilling sticks of gum and silver wrappers onto the ground. He lost his balance, tipped sideways, as if spun on an invisible axis. Caught himself at the last moment.

“You’re drunk,” David said.

“You’re observant,” Lenny said. Lit his cigarette.

David hoisted the pickaxe to his shoulder. “Ranger died, and we buried him.”

Lenny flinched as if he’d been punched in the mouth. He made the shape of words, but no sound came out. His cigarette fell out of his fingers. He looked from David to me to Michael, who had started to cry again. Lenny’s mouth opened and shut, a fish out of water. He bent to examine the cairn of rocks. He touched the worn leather collar. The yellow tennis ball, and then he dug his fingers into the rocks for the ball and held it to his chest. His voice came out as a raspy whisper. “Why didn’t you tell me? You should have. Told me.”

David look square through his glasses. “I guess I just did.”

Lenny peered hard at the tennis ball. He tipped forward.

I grabbed at him, trying to break his fall. I was nearly as tall as him, but he was thick and broad-shouldered, and his weight staggered me. I was on my knees when David lifted Lenny away.

“Take that side,” David said. He hiked his shoulder under one of Lenny’s arms. Lenny smelled like Pops—cigarettes and whiskey. We carried him up to the house. He hung on our
backs. He seemed dazed by it all, and most of what was coming out of his mouth was a slurred gibberish mixed with profanity. I wanted to make sense of it, but I couldn’t figure it out. He seemed to cycle between nobody told me to nobody gives a shit.

At the foot of the porch stairs, David had enough. He shook off Lenny’s weight. “How would we know where to find you?” he said. Perhaps he meant to be stern, but I heard the break in his voice.

Lenny stayed sat at the bottom of the porch stairs into the dark. Even Ma’s sternest tone couldn’t bring him in. She finally took him a blanket. He lit each new cigarette off the butt of the last one. He didn’t cry, but I watched him from the window. As it got colder, his body shook as if in the aftershock of something he could not escape. Something that could tear him apart.
Chapter 2

The dry streak racked up records for the evening weatherman. We sweated and groused our way through the weeks after school ended. Pops arrived home from Ohanapecosh, and for three days, he was either fighting with Ma or drinking. Then he packed up the truck and headed out for White Pass and the start of fire season. After that Ma was extra short with us over every little thing. Our chores were never done on time. We slept in too long and stayed up too late. Played the television too loud. At the bottom of our road, a thin heat haze gathered every day over the dry swampland, and up from the house, the sentinel row of big-leaf maples dropped yellow, heat-speckled leaves as if it was already fall.

One afternoon, a taxi showed up at the end of our driveway. I was up front at the window, trying to gauge whether the clouds riding against the Cascades to the north meant real rain or another round of dry lightning. The air was tinny with heat. The taxi turned down our lane, slowed and stopped at the end of our driveway, engine puttering as if it was lost.

I called for Ma, and she hollered back. *Inside voices inside the house.* I wondered later if she’d expected what happened next, or if it was a surprised her as much as it was to us boys.

Michael sidled up to me in the window. “Who is it? Someone to visit?”

A kid got out of the cab and looked up at the house. He looked like he was someone I should know. I raised my hand. Standing in the driveway, he raised his in return. It was Sawyer, though we didn’t know it yet. He was tall and long-limbed, dressed up for church a day late. Dark-blond hair waved across his forehead, and in the center of his chin, a prominent dent. Same as Pops.

The trunk popped open, and Sawyer lugged a suitcase out of the back. A red tie flapped from his back pocket like a tongue. None of us had wide, red ties. We had narrow, black Wildish
ties that didn’t spill out of back pockets like un-kept secrets. We didn’t have red ties and we
didn’t get visitors. Not in a yellow cab. Not dropped off at the end of our driveway as if they
belonged to us.

Michael was hollering for Ma, but she was already at the window, drying dishwater from
her hands. Surprises made her anxious. Sometimes Pops got dropped off late at night, too drunk
to remember where he’d parked his truck. Or maybe he wouldn’t come home at all. But the
yellow cab and the kid with a suitcase and a red tie was not anything that made sense.

Ma went outside, twisting the kitchen towel in her hands into a thin knot. The kid offered
his hand to her, which made him look older, and she shook it like they’d struck a deal. The cab
driver leaned over the frame of his door. He was fat, a cigarette stuck to his bottom lip. I didn’t
like the way he looked at Ma. At her legs and other parts of her. Ma was pretty, but maybe boys
always think that about their mothers. Michael used to say he was going to grow up and marry
her when he was little, maybe in the first grade, too young to know much. Ma would smile but
never correct him. She was like that. She was small, barely taller than David and me, with long
dark hair pinned up unless she was going to church and dark eyes that could turn in a hot minute
to show she meant business, even though most times she let us do as we pleased. I figured she
saw everything and, for whatever reason, forgave most of it.

The driver handed Ma a large manila envelope. Talking around his cigarette, he pointed
at the kid and then over his shoulder toward some place that was not our plain, split-level house
in Factoria. Some place not even in the state of Washington.

David leaned over my shoulder. “What’s he saying?”

I shrugged.
“Pussies,” Lenny said. He slapped David in the back of his head, still surly from this morning when he crashed David’s soapbox racer at the bottom of the hill. “Bunch of girls,” he said. “Hiding behind the curtains.”

Lenny went right out on the porch, kicked one foot up on the rail, playing it cool. As if having a cab in our yard was any old thing. We crowded in behind—me and David, even Michael.

The cab sputtered, a thin blue line of smoke seeping out of the tailpipe. Her words were drowned out by the engine, but she was talking fast, and Sawyer nodded “yes” to almost everything, his feet shifting one foot to the other. His shoes were shined-up leather like the ones Father Andrews wore on Sundays. The suitcase looked brand new, leaning a bit in the driveway.

Ma came up the porch steps talking to herself and pushed through us as if we weren’t there. She said our father’s whole name, quiet as a prayer. Or a curse. “Abraham Leonard Wildish.” When she said it again, we knew Pops was in big trouble when he got home. Three times was death.

She came back out with a handful of cash for the driver. The look on her face was nothing I could figure out. The five of us followed her into the house all the way to the kitchen and stood around blinking while she sorted through the stack of papers out of the manila envelope.

“Sawyer Albert Godenot,” she said at last, her words low and slow and spooky. First Pops got the holy-shit-trouble full name, now this kid.

“Al-ber.” He said it soft like music, as if the “t” at the end didn’t exist. “Sawyer Albert. Yes, ma’am.” He was hunched in the doorway next to Michael, looking like he might make a break for it, folding and re-folding the red tie.
“After your grandfather,” Ma said. She went back to the papers, spreading them on out on the table. She waved in a vague circle to indicate all of us. “There’s Lenny and David.” She pointed at Michael. “Jude,” she said. “And the baby, Michael.”

“I’m Jude,” I said. “That’s Michael.”

“I’m not a baby.”

Ma talked into the papers. “That’s right.”

Michael crooked his head back and stared. He was young enough it wasn’t rude. “Are you on a visit?” he said. “Our Grandma Phipps comes to visit. She flies in a plane here. Did you come in a plane? How far did you ride in that taxi?”

“It’s pretty far from the airport.”

“But where did you come from? Where are you going? Do you like the Dodgers? Are they your favorite team? Because they’re my favorite team. Who’s your favorite player?”

Sawyer’s brows came together, and he scowled into the red tie.

David tugged Michael’s shirtsleeve until he fell back a step. “Give him some air, you goober.”

Michael leaned into David and whispered too loud to do any good. “But who is he?”

Lenny caught Michael in a headlock. “Maybe it’s none of your beeswax, you Goober.” Lenny grabbed him in a headlock and rubbed a noogie into his head. Michael squealed.

“That’s it,” Ma said. She swept the papers into a single stack and headed for the table. “You boys go outside. All of you,” she said. “I don’t need your ruckus while I sort this out.”

Sawyer jammed the tie under the handle of his shiny suitcase. He ran one hand through his hair and snugged a blue Dodgers cap down on his forehead. We trooped out to the porch, Michael so close behind Sawyer that he stepped on the backs of his shoes, talking a blue streak,
telling him our names again. Were we so many? Lenny was easy—the oldest, stocky and dark like Ma, and sometimes mean. David came next, thin and smart, two grades ahead of me in school, glasses sliding around on his nose so he was always pushing them up with one finger—his middle finger if he caught you watching. If anyone asked, he’d say he was going to be something when he grew up, and we figured he would.

Then me. The invisible brother. If anyone got left at the store, church, or a rest-stop on one of our car trips, it was me. Pay attention, they’d tell me, as if it was my fault they left without me. I was thirteen that summer—plenty of years for them to remember to include me in a head count.

Michael was last, everyone’s darling. Last week for his eighth birthday, we’d had cake in the middle of the day, and then we took him fishing. Lenny says Michael was an “accident,” and I guess he was. My earliest memory is of him is in the hospital. Born too early, he was the tiniest baby I’d ever seen, sprawled out inside the clear plastic incubator as if he was a robin chick fallen from its nest. For more than a month, he stayed in the incubator under bright lights, wires taped to his scrawny legs and arms, his head shaved clean between white circles of gauze taped over his eyes and over the rows of sutures in his head. His translucent yellow skin made him look like a golden baby. By the time we got to take him home, the color of his skin had faded to a blue alabaster, and his hair eventually grew back as a shock of blond so fine he looked bald until he was nearly three years old. It was another year before he started to talk, and then he stuttered. The neighborhood kids called him retard. We called him Henry for a while after the big-headed kid in the Sunday comics, even though Ma said she wished we wouldn’t.
The air coming off the lake smelled like metal and lifted the leftover birthday streamers on the porch, fluttering the paper ends. Michael caught a streamer and yanked it from its taped spot so that it fell around his shoulders. He looked sideways at Sawyer.

“Do you like dogs? We had a dog, Ranger. He only had six teeth.”

“Is he an old dog?”

“Sure. He died. You wan-na do something?”

Sawyer ducked his head. He rolled his fingers over the brim of his hat. I wanted to say something, but Lenny began to pick on Michael, mimicking his stutter.

“You wan-na-na do something?” Lenny said. He flipped open his pocketknife and scraped under his fingernails with the big blade. It was a new bone-handled Queen Stockman he said he’d stolen from a Boy Scout, which could be true. Michael could talk about streak about going into Boy Scouts, something none of us had done before, if only for his own three-blade pocketknife with a bone handle.

Lenny wiped the flat against the leg of his Toughskins. “Let’s play a game. Twenty Questions.” He nudged Michael with the toe of his Chuck Taylors. “Close the door.”

It was Lenny’s rules, and no one got to play except Sawyer. Lenny shot questions at him so fast, he barely had time to answer.

“Sixteen.”

“11th grade.”

“Bloomington, Indiana.”

“Godenot. Yes, like your Grandma Wildish. My mother Sylvie is her youngest sister.”

David leaned in from the railing. “That means his ma is our Great-Aunt Sylvie,” he said. Lenny waved him off and continued his interrogation. Sawyer kept up.
“No. My mother didn’t send me. She died,” Sawyer said. “May fourteenth. A drunk driver hit her car.”

He said it straight up, as if he was doing multiplication tables or reading from a book. Or maybe he’d had to say it so many times, it came out that way every time now. I couldn’t help but admire him for talking about his dead mother to a bunch of kids he didn’t know. He looked Lenny square in the eye with each answer as if nothing could scare him.

The clouds had turned purple, and raindrops the size of quarters began to spatter against the dry ground like split shot. Stirred by the storm or by what we knew or thought we knew about Sawyer, we ran into the rain. Ma had warned us a thousand times to stay away from the runoff drains, what with the recent news story about the two girls caught in the flood surge on the White River, their bodies found six miles downstream in Commencement Bay. Of course, we headed straight away to the runoff drains. Lenny took us out fast so we had to run to keep up, even Sawyer in those slick leather shoes.

Our clothes soaked through and the gutters filled with foamy brown water. We raced stick boats down from the shallow culvert off Coal Creek. The series of switchbacks began at the top of the hill at St Madeleine’s. On a good day from the church, you could see the rounded disk of the Space Needle and the boxy tops of the Seattle skyscrapers across the lake, but today a flat gray hid the skyline. Heat-stroked cedars, firs, and alders spilled to the lakeshore, green cut with yellow and the occasional orange-bark of a madrone.

In a lull between races, Lenny produced a pack of cigarettes and held one out to Sawyer.

“Smoke?”

“Naw,” Sawyer said.

Lenny lit one and flipped the matchstick away. It skittered across Sawyer’s shirtsleeve.
“Watch that,” Lenny said. “You don’t get burned.”

Sawyer shrugged without stepping back, even when Lenny seemed to sway too close to him. I wanted to warn him, Sawyer, but didn’t know how to intercede without becoming Lenny’s next target. Lenny outweighed him, but there was something about Sawyer, a strength poised underneath like the balance of a hammer pulled back.

Lenny breathed out blue smoke nearly into Sawyer’s face. I flinched with anticipation, but Lenny stepped to the side. Sawyer turned with Lenny to stay squared up, a strange sad smile on his face. It made me nervous.

We headed up the hill, and I fell in beside him. He had an easy stride that I tried to match.

“Dodgers, huh?” I said.

Sawyer looked sideways at me.

I pointed to his hat. “You ever been to a game?”

“Naw,” he said.

“Yeah. Me, either.”

He smiled with less sadness, and it made me like him.

“They got beat on Friday. Mets,” I said.

“Tom Seaver pitched. Three-run walk-off took the win.”


I nodded.

“That dirty guy.”

“Dirty guy,” I said, feeling Sawyer’s words in my mouth. “Wish I’d seen it.”
Sawyer nodded. “Someday. We’ll go.”

I wanted to laugh out loud at this new kind of joy for something ahead of us. Sawyer pressed his balled-up fist into my shoulder, a friendly jab, and I might have grinned the rest of the way up the hill to where Lenny was announcing the final race. *Championship of the World. Winner take all.* We launched our stick boats and then ran downhill to lie on the sidewalk above the gutter sluiced with rain, lined up with our feet stretched out behind us on the cement, jostling for space above the drainage grates to see the winners. Below us, the water rushed and foamed. Michael cheered. We all did. Lenny called the heat, naming us as our boats passed.

“Michael takes first,” he said. “But the water is unpredictably rough. There’s David, caught in an eddy. And Sawyer, *our bastard cousin…*”

With one hand, Sawyer reached over and smashed Lenny’s head straight down into the curb. Lenny shot up in a rage, lip split. He lunged. They rolled into a berm of dirt and tree litter, dry fir needles spinning off them like fireworks. Lenny got in a few good punches before Sawyer pinned him with an arm across his neck. Lenny stopped swinging.

Overhead, the branches of a big fir flailed in the bucking wind. Sawyer stared into the tree, into the flowing branches that rushed with the sound of water. He leaned down close to Lenny and said something into his ear, something none of the rest of us could hear, and, just like that, let go. Stood up.

Lenny lay wheezing in the dirt, arms limp, blood threading his cheek. He touched his fingers to his lip. Checked the stain.

“Mother-fucker,” he said.

The trees rushed with the sound of a rockslide. Sawyer offered a hand and Lenny allowed himself to be pulled up as the storm fell on us with what Pops called “bucket rain.” Soaked with
wet and a sense of awe for something new and profound that we couldn’t yet name, we broke for home in a futile attempt to outrun what was already upon us.

As we reached the top of our road, Lenny stripped off his shirt to hold it to his mouth. Sawyer’s wet Sunday shirt was streaked with mud, the thin white fabric stuck to his chest and a startling definition of muscles none of us had, not even Lenny. He walked alongside Lenny, his head tipped as if they were talking, rain dripping off the bill of his blue cap and Lenny’s balled-up shirt.

In the kitchen, the table was spread with letters and some printed certificates. Ma sat with a cup of coffee held to her lips as if she was deciding whether to take a sip or only to take in its aroma. She started in about tracking mud on her clean floors but got one look at Lenny’s busted face and swore—our mother who had once washed out Lenny’s mouth with soap for calling David a fart.

“Goddamn it, Lenny,” she said. “What did you do this time?”

No one would tell her straight what happened, so she gave up and shifted into cleanup mode. Ice on Lenny’s face. Not one more step with those muddy shoes, mister. Clean towels. Jeans in the laundry. Ma phoned Dr. Hunsaker, our pediatrician, to find out what to do for Lenny.

By evening, Lenny’s mouth had stopped bleeding. The torn lip swelled up around the gash where his front teeth had gone clear through, and a purple bruise spread down his chin. Everyone had dry clothes, and we ate hamburger soup and bread in silence. Afterwards, no one argued about whose job it was to wash or dry. Even Sawyer pitched in. The only sounds were the clicking of the clean plates on each other and running water in the sink and outside in the rain gutters.
Ma organized sleeping arrangements. Michael and I already shared the smallest bedroom, enough room for our bunk bed and desk. We set up a camping cot in the other bedroom between Lenny’s and David’s twin beds. Ma said it only made sense. She wouldn’t look at Sawyer directly, and I guessed it wasn’t just Lenny’s split lip that kept her behind her closed bedroom door after we were all in bed, the murmur of her voice on the telephone going on long into the night. I remember knowing it couldn’t be Pops she was talking to since he’d been chasing the fire at Sugarloaf Peak that put him out of radio range.

That’s the beauty of being invisible. If I knew anything about the order of things, I knew how in the end it was my job to pay attention. I was only invisible until someone needed to know something specific. Where Michael left his shoes. Whether there was baseball practice this week or next. Whose turn it was to take out the garbage or get the paper. I was the finder of lost things—baseball cleats, binoculars, algebra book, pocketknife, lucky rabbit’s foot. The stuff of our lives made pictures in my head, imprinted sounds and smells. Pops’ silver Ford key ring. Ma’s apple pies on the cooling rack. The muffler clang that was the difference between Pops coming home at dawn or the milkman. I was the keeper of our tides, marking the push and pull of us against each other and against forces larger and unchangeable, like time and gravity. Or fate.
Chapter 3

The days went by mostly dry and clear. We were all anxious for Pops to come home, especially Lenny and Sawyer. It made me wonder what they were afraid would happen. I figured it had to do with Sawyer being from Indiana, same as Pops. It was a place we only knew from stories. Pops and Ma had been kids there, before they got married and came here. It’s where our Grandma Phipps lived by herself, although none of us boys had been there. Something didn’t add up, and whatever it was, Lenny was a mess. *Like a cat on Dog Mountain*, as Pops would say. The more anxious Lenny was, the more Sawyer’s story turned inside my head. I decided that whatever Sawyer was or wasn’t didn’t really matter to me except as the first part of the mystery. And how much it mattered to Lenny was the second part.

In the meantime, David and I took Sawyer around. We hiked into the dry swamp where we named the various plants and trees for him—Fire willow, Black cottonwood, Straight-barked cedars, alder. Our secret paths led to the private nests of the Pileated woodpeckers, Towhees, and a shy pair of Short-eared owls. Out on the slough, Barn swallows dive-bombed us on a footbridge, and flats of Bufflehead sea ducks flushed into Lake Washington from the reeds. Everything we knew about reading this place, we’d learned from Pops. How to identify the trees and flowers. Find the nests. Pops had been bringing us out here since we could remember, to hunt salamanders, track the shy blacktail deer, identify clutches of speckled eggs, or sweep the waterways for schools of native fingerling trout or tadpoles.

The more we explained to Sawyer, showing him our world, the more we came to understand how much we knew and, for me, how it had come from our father. Without Pops, we
wouldn’t have had anything to show Sawyer, and I wanted to be able to tell Pops what we’dlearned. It felt as if we’d passed some kind of a test.

One morning we biked down to the Mercer Slough, ditched the bicycles by the tunnel, and hiked to the Wilburton trestle where the Burlington Northern tracks rose up through a thick stand of fir. The wooden trestle was a wall of black bones, heavy cross-beams angled across the front. As the tracks gained elevation over our heads, the brush at its footings became impassable. We broke a trail up to Richards Creek where a new road punched through the base of the trestle, thick cement blocks forming a tunnel. Lenny stood next to the pilings under the dark beams, tracks and ties overhead. Said we should climb to the top. As if that’s what he’d meant for us to do all along. I said I would if we all went. Sawyer didn’t object. David eyed the top, calculated a trajectory, and we started on the far side by the creek, out of sight from the road.

The beams were wide and splintery and turned our hands black with creosote. Michael climbed the first tier and turned around, afraid of heights. No amount of encouragement or cat-calls could get him back on the beams. He stood at the bottom, shading his eyes with both hands.

“What if a train comes?” Michael said.

“Get out of the way of falling bodies,” Lenny said.

“No, really.” When he was tired of worrying, he began to dig around in the underbrush, Horsetail rush, thistle, and Fireweed. A stand of maple saplings bordered the new road, blackberries twining toward the creek. Michael sang to himself, nursery rhymes or some TV jingle, his sing-song lifting through the layers of beams as we climbed.

I stopped to pick a splinter out of my palm, Sawyer behind me.

“It’s got to be a hundred feet to the top,” I said.

David corrected me. “102 feet up. 975 feet long.”
Lenny was almost two levels above us. “Come on, girls,” he said. “You can see the lake from here.”

Bands of clouds slid along the sky. From the top of the trestle, a bright sliver of Lake Washington glinted on one side, and beyond the tree-lined crest of Mercer Island, the blue tips of the Olympics. I was sweating through my shirt, but David looked as cool as if he’d strolled the city park. He gave Sawyer what he called the lay of the land.

“So you can get your bearings,” David said. Lake Sammamish was there, to the east. Issaquah. Squak Mountain. He pointed, there and there. Snoqualmie Falls way up in the Cascades that way. Of course, to the west was Lake Washington, Mount Constance, and the double peaks of The Brothers, where Pops said it rained more than anywhere in the lower forty-eight.

“And there.” David pointed. “Mercer Island.”

“Why Mercer?” Sawyer asked.

“Who cares?” Lenny shrugged.

“Ignore him,” David said. He explained the history of the Mercer family that came from Virginia and got rich buying up the land. “When they decided to ‘civilize’ the area, they shipped in a bunch of women from the East to be teachers and stuff. And marry them off to the locals. The Mercer Girls, they called them.”

“Where do you hear this shit?” Lenny said.

“Who cares,” I mimicked Lenny, knowing he was too far away to punch me at the moment. “There’s a show on TV, Here Come the Brides,” I said. “That’s the Mercer Girls. Ma told me.”
Sawyer squinted at the blue peaks of the Olympics. He was like that. Ask a question and then let the conversation go on without him, as if he wasn’t a part of it anymore. Maybe that was from his mother. She’d been a journalist. Sawyer told me she wrote articles for *Time Magazine*. I thought it strange how every thought I had about Sawyer circled back to his dead mother. I tried to think how it would feel to not have any parents. Ma’s parents had both died at different times during the year I was in second grade, but I was too little to tell how she felt. She didn’t seem any different except that she started baking late at night. Uncle Jack once told me about his brother who died in Vietnam. That was the year an earthquake cracked the streets of Seattle. Jack was at the farm when the official notice came that PFC Robert Wildish had been killed in battle. The day after the funeral, Jack joined the Marines and shipped out to take his brother’s place. *Seemed like the right thing to do*, Jack said. *Was it?* I asked him much later. Jack said he couldn’t say for sure. *You do the best with what you got. But in the end, how does anyone really know?*

We walked along the topmost beams of the trestle to the bridge that crossed the road alongside the creek. The structure of the trestle shored up the sides, leaving nothing but empty space between the bridge and the ground below. Lenny kept going, walking out on the railroad ties between the suspended rails. The rest of us stopped at the edge. To the west, Bellevue was a spread of trees rippled with the shadows of clouds. An occasional squared off point of a roof or jut of chimney broke through the canopy as if punching through to the surface.

“What’s it like where you come from? Indiana.”

Sawyer was quiet for so long I thought he hadn’t heard me. He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair.

“If there was a high spot in Indiana, I guess it would look a lot like this,” he said.

“Without the mountains.” He swept his hat in the direction of the Olympics. “Or so much water.
As my plane landed, I thought maybe Seattle was on the ocean. There’s so much water all around. Although we have Lake Monroe, and that’s pretty big.” He looked hard in the direction of Lake Washington as if he could see through the trees to compare.

“Where I’m from,” he said, “the earth opens down. Not up. There’s canyons that fall away into nothing. Limestone caves and hidden springs. Rivers that disappear under the rocks in one place and reappear miles away, twice as big.”

Up ahead, Lenny hollered something that sounded like he was taunting us. He stepped up on the steel rail on one side and spit. I held my breath hoping the interruption wouldn’t stop Sawyer.

“There’s old rock quarries filled with water so deep the water’s black because light doesn’t hit the bottom. My uncles used to tease me and my cousins and say there were hidden cities down there in the center of the earth. Said they had other families and other children down there. Better children than any of us, they’d say. They all worked there, my uncles and some of my cousins. They’d tell us stories of ghosts in the quarries. Just to scare us. Ghosts of the dead. Rock cutters and haulers. Said you could hear ‘em crying at the bottom late at night. In the dark.”

The back of my neck pricked as if touched by an unexpected breeze. “Whoa,” I said.

Sawyer shrugged. “They probably tell that to all little kids. It keeps them away from the quarries. Scares them safe. When my grandpa was a cutter a long time ago, some kids from town got lost in the quarry and died. That part’s true.”

“What the fuck is he doing,” David said. Lenny was still on the steel rail but now he was standing on his hands. He was still yelling, but most of his words were lost in the space between us.

“He’s going to kill himself,” David said.
I couldn’t answer. Lenny’s legs folded above his head toward the drop. Sawyer took a step out on the bridge. He looked the kind of sick you get from riding the tilt-o-wheel too many times. His fists clenched and unclenched.

“Somebody’s got to go out there,” he said.

David’s face was red. He hollered at upside-down Lenny. “Idiot! Fool! Get back here!”

Sawyer stepped to the next railroad tie. The space between the ties was a big gap, maybe a foot and a half. Enough to make for big steps.

“I’ll go,” I said.

The first three ties seemed like a mile, and then the next three, and then I lost count. The buzzing in my chest made my breathing fast as if I was running.

Lenny had turned and was trying to walk away on his hands along the left side rail. I looked away, down past my feet, and the buzzing flew up into my head. Both hands shot out sideways for balance as if something had shifted below my feet.

Sawyer’s voice came from right behind me, closer than I expected. “Keep your eyes on the beams. Don’t look at the ground.”

From behind us, David started yelling again. I risked a look at Lenny. He’d come off his hands and the rail, but now he was walking backwards on the ties, reaching for the next step blind. I could hear him more clearly. Calling us names. Cursing.

“One more,” Sawyer said behind me. “One more step.”

It became a rhythm. One big step at a time. My legs felt numb and heavy.

David’s yelling changed pitch. “Goddamn it, Lenny!”

I froze. Looked up. Lenny was gone.
The cry that roiled up in me came out as nothing but a constricted gasp. David was in full rant I couldn’t decipher. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t look down.

“Jude!” Sawyer shouted from behind me. “He didn’t fall.”

“What?”

“Lenny. He didn’t fall. He just got to the end of the bridge and took off.”

David was beyond livid. I could tell even from the middle of the bridge, which was as far as we’d gotten. I matched Sawyer’s slow, long steps as we made our way back. *One more step.*

David was quiet as we hiked along the top of the trestle to the point where we’d climbed up.

Michael let out a *whoop* when he spotted us. “Look what I found!” He held a clenched fist up to us, as if we could see what he had from a hundred feet up. He circled his other hand around his mouth—a hand megaphone. “It’s a spike.”

David gave him the thumbs up.

Michael hollered through his hand. “I found it myself.”

Michael talked non-stop all the way back to our bikes. He may not have even realized Lenny wasn’t with us. It was straight up hot by the time we got back to the house, and our skin and clothes were stuck with creosote. We collapsed into the shade on the porch stairs. David turned on the hose, and we passed it around until everyone got a drink.

“Wanna see my spike?” Michael said.

Sawyer waved him over. He turned the railroad nail in his long fingers that made me look at my own hands. “That’s some treasure.”

Michael nodded. His eyes were round and serious. “Sure,” he said. “It’s real treasure. I’m going to give it to Pops.”
“Good idea,” Sawyer said. He was sitting below me on the stairs, and he turned as if he had something else to say, but then Mrs. Tillson pulled up in front of our house to drop off Ma, and Sawyer just snuggled his cap down on his forehead.

Ma had groceries in Mrs. Tillson’s car, and we lugged the groceries in to the kitchen for her. Michael said something about Lenny, and she chewed us out for leaving him out there.

“What makes you boys think it’s okay to ditch your brother? What’s the rule about the buddy system? Always hike with a buddy.”

We repeated it with her. All of us except David who looked like he’d swallowed something hot. Ma didn’t notice. She took cans of corn and tomatoes and evaporated milk out of the paper bags. She folded each bag and then started on the next. Flour, apples, boxes of cornflakes, instant potatoes. Michael was stacking the canned goods into a pyramid on the table, and instead of reprimanding him like she always did, she picked the cans off the top of his tower as fast as he put them up and transferred them into the pantry.

“I swear, if Lenny’s out there hurt or lost. I would think I raised you boys to be less selfish.”

The screen door smacked behind David, and from the yard came a wordless howl. It didn’t stop Ma’s frenetic work, but it did end her tirade. Sawyer and I escaped to the TV room and hid out for the afternoon, and I fell asleep watching a double episode of *Creature Feature*. The moment to talk about what happened didn’t come back, as if it had been swept out of reach by the current of the day. By the time Lenny showed up, uninjured and unapologetic, none of us had anything to say, not even Ma.
Chapter 4

Pops pulled up late on a Friday afternoon. We would have gone out to meet him except Ma said for everyone to stay inside. The Smokey Bear truck was still popping and sighing in the driveway from the long drive, and Ma went out to Pops.

Pops dropped the tailgate, and Ma talked while he unloaded his gear. She followed him around, talking all the while as he dragged a tarp out of the truck bed. He nodded, and she kept on until something she said pulled him up short, and he came around the back of the truck, looked straight up to the kitchen. We were pressed to the windows, Lenny peering sideways through the curtains. Michael yelped and ducked out of sight, but Sawyer held his place in the window, standing there clear as day.

Pops took off his cap, rubbed his hand through the thick wave of hair. He said something to Ma that left her standing in her shoes as if she’d been slapped. He dropped his rucksack on the porch and came right into the kitchen with his work boots on.

“Well, I’ll be goddamned,” he said. “You’re Sawyer.”

“Yes, sir.” Sawyer stood straight, feet square, and put out his hand. Pops looked surprised, but he shook it, his thick hand wrapping all around Sawyer’s smaller one.

“Your ma is Sylvie Godenot?”

“Yes, sir.”

Pops cleared his throat with a rumble like loose gravel. “I’m sorry to hear about the accident. I hadn’t heard. Sorry.” He winced, brows together, his mouth folding into creases almost to his chin. “I’m sorry she’s gone.”

Sawyer looked at the floor, shoulders slipping. “Thank you, sir.”
Lenny circled to the side, keen on every word. If Pops saw him, he didn’t seem to notice. He looked across the kitchen at me, and another crumpled wince crossed his face. “You don’t have to call me sir,” he said.

“My Aunt Charlotte said to.”

“That old biddy.” Pops tipped his face to the ceiling, squinting. He was so intent, Michael and David looked up to see what was there.

“Did she tell you about your father?” Pops said.

Sawyer’s chin lifted. He stood straight.

Lenny froze.

“No, sir,” Sawyer said. He looked at Pops’ shoes. At his belt buckle, standard Forest Service issue. *Only You*, it said. He took a breath. “My mother told me. She said it was you.”

Pops seemed to nod, a slight rise and fall of his chin. He turned slow on his heel. Took two steps across the kitchen. Smoothed a hand through his hair and down his jaw like he always did when it was something big. The creases in his forehead made him look older. Or lost. Sawyer didn’t move, eyes wide, staring into a single spot on the floor. Looked up at Pops.

“That’s right,” Pops said. His gravelled voice cracked so he had to say it again. “That’s right,” he said. “I am.”

Sawyer slouched with relief, held breath and words coming out in a rush. “That’s why I wanted to come,” he said. “Why I wanted to see you. See if you were my father. My mother said you were. I wanted to meet you, sir. I mean. If it’s okay.”

Lenny slid deeper into the window cubby, a shadow over his eyes and the silver scar healing in his lip.
David’s baseball fell with a *thunk* and rolled under the table. “Wait. What?” he said. He said it again, and we all stared at Pops.

Not even on a good day did we think we had another brother in the world. Now here was Sawyer, real enough to poke with a stick, made out of our same stuff.

“Pops is your pops,” I said. “Same as us.”

Lenny edged out of the kitchen.

“Whoa.” Michael said. “Whoa, man! Does that mean he gets to live here? He should live here.” His voice squeaked. “He doesn’t even have a mom anymore.”

I socked him in the shoulder. “Shut up. You knucklehead.”

Michael rubbed his shoulder, but the smile on his face was like Christmas. “Pops is our same Pops. You could live with us, Sawyer!” He began to dance a crazy circle around the kitchen, chanting. “Sawyer’s going to live here!”

That night after supper had been cleared away, Pops sat at the table and drank his way to the bottom of a brand new bottle of Jack Daniels. Ma had retreated to the master bedroom long before dinner, so we were on our own to figure out what to do. We worked around Pops to clear the table and wash and dry the dishes. One by one, we crept back to the kitchen to watch him drink. It was a risky move, but I guess we were all trying to figure a way through what came next. David held a place closest to the door for a quick exit. At some point, someone turned off the overhead lights, and the shadows skewed our faces from the light in the hallway. Pops held the familiar square bottle lightly in one hand, and in the other, a teacup with a broken handle.

“We were kids together,” Pops said. “Me and Sylvie.”
Pops took another drink. “It’s not what you think,” he said. The edges of his words were soft. “She was just a girl. Maybe like any other girl. We grew up. Then she went off to college. I remember her pretty blue car. White and powder-blue. She gave it up to go to college. Sold it. Sold the car. Broke her father’s heart.”

He mumbled under his breath, a mix of garbled nonsense, and waved the square bottle as if it had become part of his hand. I sat directly across the table from him and waited for him to tell the rest of the story. There was always more. It came in a brief window that we had come to know existed somewhere around the middle of the bottle. That was the moment we might hear what was closer to the truth than any sober speech. He pushed back from the table so hard his cup nearly rolled onto its broken handle.

“What happened was just a thing that couldn’t be helped,” he said. “It just happened. Sometimes things happen. I didn’t know she was, you know.” He couldn’t say the word. In a household of boys, pregnancy was not something we’d ever talked about. Not out loud. “She kept it a secret. Until I guess the secret couldn’t be kept. After that, all hell broke loose.”

He waved the teacup out across the kitchen. “Grand-père Godenot wanted me run out of town on a rail. Me and your ma, we were already figuring on getting married.” He glanced at her dark shape in the doorway. “I didn’t know Lenny was already on his way. Only your Ma knew then.” He waved the bottle in the direction of Ma’s dark shape in the hallway. No one knew how long she’d been standing there.

“That’s enough for tonight, Leonard,” she said. “You boys get on to bed.”

Pops bent his head over the teacup as if examining its broken handle. His head shook with some internal tremor. I thought he was laughing. I’d never seen him cry. I wanted to say something. Wanted him to stop.
Ma shuffled her arms around Michael and herded him toward our bedroom. Sawyer said goodnight to her and thanked her, as he would thank her every night he slept under her roof for the rest of his life. She returned a stiff nod.

I stalled at the sink, rinsing and re-rinsing my water glass in the dark. Ma kissed my forehead and pushed my hair out of my eyes. Her fingers were cool and dry.

“You need a haircut,” she said. “Starting to look like a hippie.”

I turned into her arms and hugged her around her neck. She smelled of Heaven Scent powder, laundry soap, and homemade bread.

I whispered into her shoulder. “What about Pops?”

She shook me off sharp enough I thought I’d made her mad. “He’ll be nothing but your Pops. Same as ever,” she said. “Now get off to bed. Lights off. No reading.” She took up the wet dishtowels from the drainer and didn’t look back as she left the kitchen. Down the hall, her bedroom door banged shut.

I held my eyes wide so I wouldn’t cry.

“Good-night, Pops,” I said.

“I was foolish,” he said. He’d stopped shaking and was hunched over the table. He spun the broken teacup in his thick fingers and placed it ever so gently in front of him on the tabletop, as if the cup was something valuable and un-chipped.

I tried to say it again, but my words barely came out. “Good-night, Pops.” I was close enough to have touched his shoulder.

He looked at me, through me. The grief on his face crushed his features. I wondered what he’d lost that meant so much to him. What he’d lost that wasn’t us.

“Never you mind,” he said, suddenly fierce.
I fled to my room.

In the dark, I lay awake on the top bunk and cried as quiet as I could where no one could see. For my father’s sadness and my mother’s anger. For Sawyer’s dead mother. For what was about to happen to us. It felt as if we were trapped in something started long before any of us were born, maybe before Pops, as real as the Smokey Bear truck in the driveway or Sawyer’s fancy suitcase laid open under the cot in the other bedroom.

A single, thin line of light shone under the door of our parents’ bedroom. From the kitchen, there was a shuffle of boots, scrape of a chair leg on the wood floor, and the tiny bell sound of glass touching glass as Pops poured himself another drink.
Chapter 5

On the eighth day, Pops would say, God made the Pacific Northwest, and then He went fishing. Ma called it straight up blasphemy and a poor excuse to go fishing whenever he wanted. “Funny,” Pops said. “That’s what God’s wife says, too.”

The next morning, he was giddy as he shook us awake. “Get up,” he said. “Fish ain’t going to catch themselves.”

Blearily with sleep, we packed our gear and blankets to the truck in the dark. Sawyer and Lenny had rolled a carpet scrap into the truck bed, and we rode with our backs against the wheel wells, our knobby knees crisscrossed over the middle space like bent saplings. Michael rolled himself in his blankets next to the gear bag. Ma handed us sharp cheese and bread through the slider window from the cab of the truck.

“Eat up,” she said. “You know what happened to those boys who went off fishing without any breakfast.”

All of us knew, except Sawyer. “They died,” we said in chorus.

She gave us a thermos of coffee, and we passed it around with a no-backwash rule. By the time we got to Fall City, the rain had cleared. First light edged over the Cascades, frost-tipped firs dissolving into the expanse of gray.

Michael looked out of his blanket roll. “Gotta pee,” he shouted through the slider. “Can we stop at the fish farm?”

Instead of Ma, Pops answered back. “Ten more minutes.”

Michael and David both groaned. It was always ten more minutes, no matter if it was ten or fifty, and they should have known better. They’d been scheming about feeding the fish at the
hatchery. Michael loved the fingerling salmon. When he was little, he’d cry until Ma would let him stand at one end of the long holding tanks to watch them feed. The mechanical metal arm would glide on its tracks over the tanks of fish and spray food pellets into the water. The little fish rose in droves, peppering the surface of the water like a hard rain.

Those days, we were easily entertained. And cheaply—that was the point. The Boeing layoffs set this whole place back. A bunch of our friends moved away from the neighborhood during those years when everyone was out of work. They say there was a billboard on the way out of town that said, *Will the last one leaving Seattle please turn off the lights?*

Pops had got on with the fire crews during the worst of the Entiat Burn, and lucky for us, the Forest Service kept him on by moving him back and forth across the state. It was easy to guess what it meant to have Sawyer added to the mix. If Ma and Pops weren’t fighting about money, it was everything else. I’d seen Ma up late at night with her columned notebook, recalculating costs, splitting figures, and rewriting her budgets. Re-thinking everything. She couldn’t afford another child. A lot of times lately, we ate pancakes for supper.

The summer may have been easier for me and Michael—we liked Sawyer. Not that David didn’t, but he had no tolerance for Lenny after that afternoon on the Wilburton trestle, and I guess Sawyer had second-guessed his decision to find his father. More than once. If you asked him if it had been a good bet, he might have said no at any point during that first year.

Lenny kicked my leg. “Tied some new Black Ghosts, if you want one. And a couple Bucktails for David.” Lenny could tie a lead-body streamer in his sleep, feathers back to back, that could tease any lunker to rise.

“Split wings?” Sawyer said.

Lenny nodded.
“Is this a salmon run?” Sawyer said.

“Not yet. Cutthroat mostly. Some rainbows. Good-sized trout below the falls.” He flexed his arms, laced his fingers behind his head. “At spring run, I caught a 26-pound steelhead. Me and Pops.”

I brushed Lenny’s boot print off my pants, deflecting his fish story. “What’d you fish back home?”


A brown moth flew up from one of the tackle kits, flitting up and over Lenny’s elbow. Lenny snatched it out of the air, his fist coming down hard on Michael, who started to cry.

“You don’t have to do that,” Michael said.

Lenny brushed the front of his shirt. “You don’t have to be such a baby.”

Through the slider, Ma’s brows were pressed together on her forehead. “Boys,” she said.

“Play that number factors game. David, you start.”

“Factors,” David said. “They’re called factors.”

She brightened. “Play the number factors game.”

“No one wants to play factors with David, Ma,” Lenny said.

She turned her face away from the slider, but her words floated back to us. “I think you could beat him if you practiced.”

Lenny hated when she did that. Threw it out there like something he should want. Besides, all of us knew better than to go up against David if there were numbers involved.

Somehow, math was easy for David. Spin the wheel, and the answers fell off the shelf for him.
Even Ma was quick to tell the story of him at five years old calling out *Yahtzee* scores.

“He always loved the numbers,” she’d say “Hollering out the totals. Almost before the dice stopped rolling. Once he figured it out, he was never wrong.”

Of course, he was wrong sometimes. But Ma remembered our childhoods the way she wanted. Always *glad* this and *silver-lining* that. If we could have lived on her will, we’d have been richer, smarter, happier, and, for Pops, drier.

Sawyer was leaning his head on his jacket, but I could see his eyes from under his baseball cap.

“You good at math?” I said.

He shrugged. “Not really.”

“Me, either. But David is.” I nodded as if to confirm it. “He always wins that game. The factors game. Anything with math.”

Sawyer’s left eyebrow went up. Only the one. He didn’t even squint his right eye doing it. “Hey,” I said. I raised my left eyebrow. Pointed to it so he would notice.

Lenny gave a snort. “That’s just stellar.” He air-punched Sawyer’s arm, not swinging close enough to land it. “You should have seen this dipshit practicing in front of the mirror. All Spock and shit.”

“Spock is cool,” Sawyer said. He said it straight, but I could see him try not to smile, and it felt as if we had a secret between us.

The truck jounced over another set of washboards, the back end skidding out on the curve, and just as Michael looked like he might puke, Pops pulled off the road. We hauled gear to an open space above the river and set up a tarp for Ma. Michael and David took off downstream towards the falls. Lenny drank down the last of the coffee and pretended not to
watch Pops as he examined Sawyer’s kit. Sawyer traded him two silver-tinsel streamers for one of Lenny’s Mickey Finns and a brown dace.

Pops pointed his fly rod over our heads. “Let’s go. You two take this stretch. I’ll take Jude.”

The river cut a double riffle in front of a black rock bank. We crossed a gravel spit and splashed through the smaller rivulets. The hollow sound of running water filled the space, damping our voices. Lenny climbed the rock in the middle of the river as big as a bus that looked as if it had fallen from the sky.

Pops eased his pack onto one shoulder and lit a cigarette. First casts were part of his ritual. At the end of the day, he’d give us his assessment around the campfire. I put down my kit. Sawyer had reached the edge of the bank, and I called him back. He skidded down the bank on his heels.

“Watch this.” I pointed to Lenny because I knew he couldn’t hear me over the water. I wondered who’d taught Sawyer to fish and if Pops would judge his cast.

Lenny’s line glinted silver in the morning sun. His arcing roll-cast barely touched the surface—once, twice—water rings spinning out from the center. Then he dropped his fly upstream into a whorl of foam. Balanced as a dancer, he turned on one foot. The leader swung past him. He played his line out and let the marabou ride the current before he worked it back through the deep pool, tickling the tip.

The story was that Lenny fished before he walked. Crawled to the river while still in diapers and made his first roll-cast. The way Pops tells it, fishing was in Lenny like piss and blood. As if it was the best part of him.

Pops finished his cigarette and pocketed the butt. “More river where this came from.”
Sawyer waded over a shallow bar of gravel to the other bank, and his blue cap bobbed into the thick brush up the river. Downstream Pops and I stopped at the place where a jut of basalt split the river and the current had hollowed the bank into a swirling hole. Pops signaled me. He shouted. “Let’s see what you got.”

A nervous sweat bloomed down my back. I’d rigged up my favorite Black Ghost, white wings with a yellow eye, and my first cast set in below the hole under a broken log. The current bowed the line, and I tried to bounce the tip like Pops had taught me, working the fly through the pool until it hovered at my feet. After my third cast, the snap of underbrush behind me meant Pops had finished his critique. I let out a breath.

By late morning, the sun had lifted above the river in an even spread of light. I practiced my clumsy bow-cast and played the deep hole with no luck. I had a few tentative brush backs, but then nothing.

I debated whether I should believe Lenny’s wing-tuck claim. He was often full of shit, but not when it came to fishing. Plus I had nothing to lose. Holding my lead, I spit on my fingers and greased the wings of the Black Ghost, curling them under the hook.

Turning upstream, I rolled a cast and twitched the rod as it rode the current down. It slid through an eddy, zigged over a shallow, zagged near a mossy log, hovered inside a thin bead of sunlight. Disappeared.

If I hadn’t known better, I’d have thought it was the regular pull of the river. Line taut under my fingers, I brought up the drag slow. Without warning, the tip popped, throwing me back, line loose. Unbalanced by the sudden slack, I almost fell in.

The stretch of water in front of me my feet was translucent over a bed of brown pebbles.
A gray shadow flicked inside a foamy swirl. It rose, darker, wavering through the clear water until it burst into a shower of luminous beads of light, flinging skyward in the shape of a fish. Head flexed, mouth open, it curled against the blue-green river shine with the pink side-speckle of a Dolly Varden.

Joy clenched my gut. Or terror. My line was too light for this fish. I raced to take up the slack as the fish shot past me, running downstream. The current foamed over a row of boulders, and as my line sped away, I gauged the depth. Jumped.

The cold hit me chest-high. My feet skidded away. I flailed my pole up over my head. In the space of one breath, the current had spun me around a log jam. Rocks and debris rolled under my boots, kicking up clouds of muddy silt. Each time I felt myself falling forward, the force of the water swept my numbed legs under my body. Over my head, my hands seemed work apart from the rest of me. Cranked the reel. Pressed the rod upwards. Kept my line.

The river swept toward another wide bend, and the main current deepened to a black ribbon. On the far side, the head of a fallen alder bowed into its dark center as a tangle of gray branches. The Dolly Varden would be lost if it made it in there. I needed to land and was running out of runway.

Backpedaling in the loose grit, I planted my boots and fought the current. My right heel struck something solid, and I dug in. Strained backwards. The tip of my pole bent almost double. I knew to lean in, chase the line onto the reel, but my choices were limited. Risk being pushed into the deep bend and the sunken tree. Or hold my line.

At once, the tip of my pole sprang back, bobbing like a willow wand. The broken line flexed in a languid, serpentine curl on the surface. I’d lost my leader. And the fish.

If Lenny was a fly-fishing prodigy, I was its imbecile. Cursing another lost fish story, I
slogged upstream. The cold ached into my bones. Outside of bears or blood, there was no excuse on God’s green earth to interrupt Pops’ fishing, so I figured I was on my own.

I climbed up the bank. Gray silt clung to my wet clothes, and only I’d gone a couple hundred yards when the shivering took over my body. In a clear spot of grass and hard dirt was a ring of blackened rocks. I tossed out a bunch of burned Rainier beer cans, scouted up some dry moss, and dug the waxed matches out of my kit. The moss burned fast and smokeless and I fed the flames slowly so as not to suffocate the fire. The pit was in full sun, but I couldn’t stop shivering. Fingers numb, I worked the swollen bootlaces loose and turned my boots up on sticks. Peeled off my wet clothes and fed the fire, grateful for the cache of dry branches left by the last fishing party at this spot—a sportsman’s courtesy.

The brush behind me cracked with movement, and I started up, shivering in my bare feet and boxers. Sawyer broke through a brake of horsetail and Sitka willow. He startled and checked a grin. I saved him the question. “Chasing a fish,” I said.

He circled the fire and looked over the bank. “Must have been some fish.”

I wanted to figure him out. He was smarter than he let on.

“Dolly Varden,” I said. “Some people call them. . .”

“Bull trout,” he finished for me. “Beautiful. I wish I’d seen it.”

He seemed sincere.

“Seen Lenny?” I said.

“He ditched me faster than a wet cat.” He shrugged. “It’s alright. I don’t think he likes me very much.”

“You did smash his face in,” I said, regretting my words even as they fell out.

“Fair enough,” he said. He looked a bit like Michael just then—eyes wide, maybe too
trusting. But smart all the same. He’d taken on Lenny up front, betting they each could level a punch as easy as pull it. I popped the inner stalk of a seeded grass head, squeaking it out of its coarse hull. The tender end was sweet and meaty in my teeth, and I stripped it clean.

“Lenny’s got a mean streak,” I said. “But maybe you guessed it.”

The fire capturing his gaze. “When I was eight, my mother went to Paris on assignment. It was her big break, to write about the riots in Paris from the spring before. She thought she might be gone for six months, and I begged her not to leave me. I think my grand-père finally pressured her. I remember them fighting. And she took me with her. For me, it meant going to private Catholic school. Now there’s some mean kids. I didn’t get beat up, but maybe that would have been better.”

I was probably staring, and he ducked his head. “Sorry. That was more than you wanted to hear.”

“No,” I said. “No, no.” I patted down the air with one hand, aware of my skinny white legs and shabby boxers. “I’ve never been anywhere. Spokane. But just that one time. God,” I said.

He winced. “I didn’t mean it like that,” he said. Something about the furrow in his brow and the crumpled forehead made him look sad. Like Pops, only softer. Younger. I wondered if he would ever look like himself. Or if it the way I looked at him that always made him part of someone else.

“This place is so damn beautiful,” Sawyer said. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Not in Paris. Or Indiana. Or other places. You’ll see. Someday you’ll go wherever you want.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said. He sat in the grass next to me, examined my fly rod leaned up on the
rocks, and opened his gear to tie a new leader for me. I pressed him, not too hard, and he told me a story about his school in Paris where the kids fished for eels off the canal bridges by his school. We split a chunk of bread and an apple and lay in the grass near the fire, looking up through the firs that made a horseshoe above us in the sky. The treetops swayed so that it felt as if the earth was rolling under us as if we were on the ocean.

“Tell me something else about Paris,” I said.

“Tell me something about Pops.”

“Pops? Like what?”

“Anything. I only know what my mother told me.”

“What’d she tell you?”

He squinted at the trees overhead. “Little things. Like he kept a notebook and wrote down all the names of the birds he’d seen.”

“He still does that,” I said.

“How he gave all the cows in his dairy herd their own names. My mother said they were a special kind of cow. Brown Guernseys, she called them, brought in from France by my grandfather. A gift, she told me.”

I couldn’t imagine Pops with a herd of cows, let alone cows all the way from France. I’d never had to think about what I knew about him, and it gave me a strange feeling to hear something new from this boy I barely knew. He looked so much like Pops but didn’t know anything about him except for things like cows from a life that no longer belonged to Pops. I couldn’t think what else to tell Sawyer.

“He’s a good fisherman.”

Of course.
“Sometimes he drinks too much.”

From obvious to obvious.

I closed my eyes to let the river sounds fill my mind. I pictured Pops smiling.

“He loves Johnny Cash. Knows all the words to every song. I hear him singing when he’s doesn’t think anyone’s listening. *Now I taught the weeping willow how to cry, cry, cry.*”

The sun was warm on my face, and images of Pops flitted under my eyelids. “On Sunday mornings when I was really little,” I said, “he would get up early and make breakfast. I’d be dreaming of maple syrup and bacon and then wake up and the smell would be real. Ma would come out and say, ‘What you burning in my kitchen, Wildish?’ and he’d grab her and hug her. He’d always say, ‘I’m burning for you, Mrs. Wildish.’ And sometimes when she’s making pies, he’ll come up behind her and pat her on the bum. Right there in the kitchen.”

Sawyer laughed, and I opened my eyes, embarrassed by my own story.

“We each know something different about him. I only know what my mother told me.”

“Yeah.”

He gave me a crooked smile. “My grand-père Godenot was the quarry boss at one of the biggest limestone quarries. Managed all the rock cutters. Your Grandpa Wildish was a farmer.”

“Pops said in the summer when it was hot, him and his brothers would all sleep out on the porch. Three in the bed. Two up and one down,” I said.

“You don’t want to be the one down, I guess. With a face full of feet. For sure.”

“All except for Uncle Jack. He was the youngest, and Grandma Wildish wouldn’t let him sleep on the porch. She said he was too little.”

“Jack Wildish,” he said.

A raven glided into the top of a fir tree near the riverbank. It settled into the sway and
slow-rattled a call. *Graack.*

“Jack is in the Marines. He comes to see us when he’s on leave. Last year, he stayed for a long time after he came over with the orphan plane. It was *Operation Baby Lift.* They brought a whole plane of orphans out of Vietnam. Jack was on the plane and helped get those kids out. That’s where I met my best friend, Jo. Well, not really. I knew her before. But then her family adopted one of the orphans, Rosemary.”

“See? I didn’t know that story,” Sawyer said. “Jack was always just my cousin. Before.”

The crossing of family lines was hard to follow. Depending on the direction, it looked like Sawyer could be my brother and my cousin. It was hard to figure.

Sawyer grinned around a long grass head he’d stuck in his teeth. “Your best friend is a girl?”

A strangle prickling heat pressed up my neck and into my face, as if I’d just been called out to fight. I sat up quick, baffled by a conflicting desire for Sawyer to like me and something new that made me blab on past good sense and manners. “So what? You don’t know her.”

The seed-grass fell out of Sawyer’s open mouth. “Good Lord,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Don’t get your back all up.”

I drew my knees up to my chest, the defensive rush still buzzing in my ears. Brushed dirt from the backs of my legs.

Sawyer lay back on the grass, looked up into the sky and the raven where it bobbed on the end of the fir branch.

“Sorry, man,” I said. “It’s just that. I mean, Lenny gives me crap about it all the time.”

Sawyer rolled onto his feet and put a hand out to pull me up.

“I’m not Lenny,” he said.
By the time Pops came up the river, the shadows stretched over the clear spot of grass where my pants were spread out to dry. Sawyer and I had split up and were fishing from the bank, me in my boxers and boots. Pops needed nothing more than a look at the cone of hot ash in the rock pit and my boxers and boots to get the gist of my dunking. He rubbed his chin to keep a smile from taking over as I gave up the details.

“Bull trout are fighters,” he said. “Especially a big one.” He tapped a thick finger to his temple. “You want to catch one, you got to think like the fish. By God.”

With his hatchet, Pops split more cedar from the dry snag, restocked the cache, and wrapped a second stack in twine with a handle twisted into the trailing ends. He took two good-sized rainbows off his clip and cleaned them next to the stream, taking care not to spill the entrails into the water. Sawyer had caught one, an adequate cutthroat with solid pink flesh. Pops weighed it in his hand, grunted.

“Let’s go find Ma.”

Pops didn’t wait for me, and I followed Sawyer down the narrow path. Sawyer had gone quiet, and I felt like I should apologize for something.

Kicking along behind Sawyer on the trail, I turned my blunders over in my head. Sawyer had stuck by me most of the day, but I couldn’t help but wonder what that meant.

I caught up to him. “I can tell you more stuff. But it might be stupid.”

He looked back but didn’t stop. We crossed as small rise and dropped into the shade of some hemlock.

“Mostly I don’t know what I’m talking about,” I said. “Mostly I’m just a big nerd. Jo says I am. I think she would like you.”
I kept up, talking to his back. Told him about my friend from Little League, Brett Marshall. And more about Jo. And the science teacher who drew DNA strands on the board.

The canyon cooled as the sun dropped. I could smell the campfire, and up ahead, Michael was singing the free-wheeling Ford commercial. Sawyer stopped in the trail.

“I think I might like your friends,” he said. He shifted his kit to the other shoulder.

Everything I needed to say spun in my head. I took a breath.

“I wish you’d seen that Dolly Varden,” I said.

He nodded, as if that called it even.

In a clearing ringed with cedar, Ma tended the fire. Foil-wrapped potatoes nestled in a row of bright coals. Michael poked a stick into the flames and snatched it back as the tip flared white.

“Lenny caught his limit and went back out,” Ma said. She handed a string of fish to Pops.

“David caught one.”

Pops shooed Michael away from the fire and spitted the fish on green willows. He seasoned them with a mix from his tackle kit. In minutes, the fish began to sputter over the fire. My stomach flipped and growled.


Michael lugged a picnic basket down from the truck. “You should have come with us,” he said. “We hiked all the way to the bottom of the falls.”

Pops snorted. “Your brother was busy gallivanting around in the woods in his underwear.”

“Thanks, Pops.” Now I was obliged to tell them about the lost fish—another fishing
bungle at my expense.

“Actually,” Sawyer said, “he hooked a big Dolly Varden.”

David and Michael both swiveled around.

“Yup,” Sawyer said. “I was fishing off this log, hunkered into the cutbank. This big fish goes hauling downstream past me. Sure as shit.” He floated his hand out in front of him for effect. “Then here comes Jude. Pole bent. Line buckled down. Riding the wake of that big ol’ bull trout. They went up and around the curve in the river. That was the last I saw of them until I caught up with Jude. He was downstream a good piece. Soaked to the bone.” No one said anything. Sawyer gazed, contemplative, into the fire. “That fish must have plumb run out of river.”

Pops’ laugh echoed in the trees and over the sound of the river. He slapped me on the back. “Sweet Jesus, son. You’ve got your own fish story.”

Heat that was not the campfire flushed my face, and I stuttered through the questions from David and Michael, uncomfortable in the unexpected attention. Ma even planted a kiss on the top of my head. From across the fire, Sawyer looked pleased and gave me a slow nod.

Lenny came in after we were already full of trout and potatoes and roasted marshmallows. Pops had retrieved his whiskey from the truck, unlaced his boots and was leaned up against one of the big cedars, drinking from the bottle.

Lenny had two decent trout in his creel, cleaned and dressed.

“Funniest thing,” he said, “I drop this muddler in a hole down by the lower spring. You know the one? I jig it back. Something big comes off the bottom and shakes my little muddler. *Bloop.* Spits it out.”

David ignored him from the far side of the fire. Michael squatted on the edge of a log and
sucked on his fingers sticky with marshmallows. Ma was humming to herself as she re-packed the gear bags. Pops caught her hand as she went by and pulled her into his lap. She pushed back at first, but Pops lay his open hand on her cheek and held it there, soft as a butterfly, and she slipped in to rest against his chest. Pops said something into her hair, and she didn’t smile, but her eyes went soft.

Sawyer watched Pops. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. I couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened to all of us if Pops had stayed in Indiana. Maybe I wouldn’t even be here. Maybe his mother wouldn’t have been killed. It was too much to think about.

Lenny kept on with his story as he roasted a fish over the fire. “It came off the bottom so hard I missed the set. Gone. Goddamn fish was so goddamn big.”

“Leonard Ernst Wildish. We do not curse,” Ma said.

Pops had his arms around her waist, and he had a wide, easy smile that creased the corners of his eyes. He turned as if he might kiss Ma, but as she lifted her face, he tapped the end of her nose with one finger. Then with both hands under her bottom, he hefted her to her feet. Her dark hair swung wild about her face, and she shook it back, cheeks flushed.

“Come on, boys,” Pops said. He shouldered the biggest gear bag. “Pack up, and we’ll stop at the Triple-X for root beer.”

Michael cheered and danced around underfoot while we hauled our stuff to the truck, everyone except Lenny, who finished roasting his fish in silence.
Chapter 6

Issaquah was the intersection of nothing and nothing. When Grandma Phipps came from Indiana to visit, she would take us out there to the candy store, Boehm’s Chocolates. The shop was built to look like a Swiss chalet, complete with Saint Bernards in the yard as big as horses. Grandma Phipps would buy us real black licorice and chocolate truffles that melted in your fingers. Down the road was Triple XXX Rootbeer—hot dogs, greasy fries, home-brewed root beer, and girls on roller skates to take your order.

It was dark by the time Pops dropped us out of the canyon at North Bend. The drive-in parking lot was packed with people and rows of vintage show cars. Pops eased the Smokey Bear truck through the crowd and into one of the ordering stalls. Lenny dropped the tailgate.

“Cool,” Michael said.

“Stay close,” Ma called. She ordered root beers from a skinny-legged girl on skates. The girl’s hair was pulled up into a single flippy ponytail. Pops came around to the back, picking his teeth with a straw He leaned on the tailgate where we were swinging our legs.

Strings of yellow bulbs lighted the parking lot. Show cars were lined up on both sides of the giant neon sign—a barrel marked with Xs. At the head of the line, long-bodied Packard seemed to glow under the lights. There was a Cadillac with outrageous fins, a cherry-red Corvette, and a blue-and-white ‘55 Chevy. At the far end, the lights shined off a GTO.

“Your Grandpa Wildish had an old Model T truck,” Pops said. “Probably stuck in a cow shed somewhere.”

“Check out the Goat,” I said. The GTO was a dark purple with a chrome cat-eye grill and a double scoop on the hood.

“Of course you’d pick that one,” Pops said. “Looks like a 1967. You got champagne taste
on a beer budget, boy.”

Michael’s eyes were wide. “There’s a goat?”

Lenny hopped off the tailgate. With both hands, he slicked his hair back. “Doofus.” He elbowed Sawyer. “Let’s go check it out.”

Sawyer looked at Pops, who gave him a half-nod.

“Take Jude,” Pops said. But I shook him off, stinging from his slight.

Sawyer’s Dodgers cap blended into the crowd of heads, hats, and bodies. Men in golf shirts and slacks stood with crossed arms alongside the cars. Women with hair so big and crisp it to reflect a sparkle of lights. Girls with feathered hair circled the cars in tight packs. They all seemed to match in their shorts or white jeans and bright shirts tied over their midriffs. They wore red lipstick, bright bandannas, and thick, cloppy sandals. Boys followed the girls, their movement so casual as to appear accidental. Most of them wore flared jeans or cut-off shorts with brand names and silver stitching. They were not like us.

David and I swung our fishing boots off the tailgate. We both wore plaid button-downs and Toughskins denims worn thin and stained with grass and river mud. Michael’s ankles gapped at the bottom of his jeans, but he was still young enough that it was cute. His hand-me-down sneakers were ragged with holes, and the soles flapped at the heels like rubber mouths.

The brewed root beer had an edge, clean and bittersweet. We sipped it slow to make it last. Bluesy rock music filtered out from the restaurant juke box. David gave me the scoop on my new teachers for first day of school since he’d be starting 9th grade at the high school this year, leaving me alone at the junior high. Michael fell asleep on the gear bags.

Up front, Pops sat behind the wheel with a whiskey bottle between his legs. Ma checked us through the slider and then closed it. We could hear the thrum of their voices but not their
words through the glass. Ma was leaning on the window, her hair pulled back into a messy twist. The neon sign sent purple shadows across her cheekbones, and I couldn’t remember when I’d seen her wear lipstick or if she’d ever tied bandanas into her hair.

Across the parking lot, the GTO glittered under the lights, its soft top smooth as water. David looked sideways at me. “That’s the one.”

I shrugged.

“I’ll get my own someday,” David said.

I peered at him, but his face was straight as if he meant it exactly. Plus David wasn’t too likely to kid around.

“One of those?” Something tightened in my chest that felt like fear. “You and whose money?”

David shook the ice down in his cup and looked over the edge at me. He shrugged.

Sawyer’s blue cap surfaced in the crowd before I picked out Lenny walking with a brown-haired girl. She had pink lipstick and the shortest shorts I’d ever seen. Sawyer was a few steps behind them, his gait awkward and, by the set in his jaw, irritated. At the edge of the crowd near the butter-colored Packard, Lenny stopped, talking to the girl. Sawyer ducked around them, and came straight to the truck.

The slider window banged open. “Everyone present and accounted for?”

“Not Lenny,” I said.

“Get him,” Pops said. “We’re leaving.”

The truck started up with a shudder. I hollered and waved. Lenny didn’t look. He slipped something right into the front pocket of the girl’s shorts with his fingers. He leaned in close, near the flutter of her hair. And as he strutted to the truck, he was as cool as any of those other boys
and their lipstick-girls.

“All in,” he called.

Pops gunned the engine out of Issaquah. The glittering lights of the drive-in slipped away, and the night folded over us.
Chapter 7

School started, and suddenly we were at the center of every rumor. Lenny and Sawyer in the same grade had become a scandal, and it seemed like everyone had something to say about our family. Lenny didn’t help matters by making up a whole series of different explanations for our new brother. By the time I heard them as they cycled down to the Junior High, they were fantastic stories with elaborate details. None of it was true. I was glad for my friendship with Jo because a bunch of my friends from the year before seemed to think I was the new pariah. Jo didn’t seem phased by the drama.

Ma must have been getting more of the same—or worse—from her friends in the neighborhood. She and Pops were barely speaking, especially after she intercepted a phone call from a strange woman. David told me it was someone up near Spokane near the fire lines from earlier this summer. He’d heard Ma telling her sister Eva on the phone one night after Pops had gone out drinking again. For Ma, the thought of another woman could’ve only doubled down on the problem, and Lenny’s exaggerated stories weren’t doing anything to help stop any new rumors.

Then one Sunday, Lenny got us kicked out of church. Father Andrews was flailing at the pulpit with the story of Jacob and Esau. He’d just gotten to the part where Esau trades away his birthright when Lenny called out from our spot near the front of the chapel.

“Amen,” Lenny said, and he sounded like he meant it.

Ma shot him an anxious look. Lately anything with him was a craps shoot. It seemed like every day, Lenny spun further away.

Next to Michael, Sawyer looked at me sideways, trying not to laugh.

David scowled. “Don’t encourage him.”
From the end of pew, Lenny whispered in his best Monty Python. “Look brother, I’ve made you a lovely bowl of goat stew.”

I stared. We all did. Michael scrunched his nose. “Goat stew. Eeew,” he said.

Ma’s glare was murder. She swatted the back of Michael’s head and shushed the rest of us. The look on Michael’s face was so wounded that even David sucked back a laugh, which made Sawyer gasp. I held my breath to keep it together.

Lenny hissed from the end of the pew, and we turned our heads in a single motion. He was wide-eyed with innocence, doing an impression that made him Roger the Shrubber. Straight up. “A spot of tea with your stew?”

We snorted with compressed laughter. Michael pressed both hands to his mouth, keeping an eye on Ma to duck another head swat. Sawyer and David bent forward, shaking with the effort to call back their noise, gasping through their hands.

Ma’s loud whispers were a stream of threats. She grabbed Michael and hauled him in against her, a headlock that would either silence or smother him. It spawned another wave of suppressed hysteria. Sawyer held the end of his tie over his eyes.

But Lenny had us and he knew it. He shifted his character, milking his audience. He flipped his wrist and lilted a heavy Julia Child. “It’s all the rage in your premier goatherd circles. Birthright stew. Of course I’ll give you the recipe.”

Any defenses we had left collapsed before Lenny’s superior assault. We fell into each other, helpless in the second row. To our mother’s horror, we were a spectacle before Father Andrews and the entire congregation of St. Madeleine’s.

Ma rose up. “Not in God’s house!” she said. Launching herself to the end of the pew, she grabbed Lenny by the scruff. She forced us ahead of her into the aisle—Lenny, me, Sawyer,
David, and Michael.

Nothing could be more humiliating for Ma than a family ruckus during service. She was livid. The white lace collar of her dress was skewed against her neck, and her eyes were pinned with fury. She waved off Mrs. Burbidge who stood to help with a swipe of her hand held out like a stop sign. We burst through the foyer and out the double doors. Ma released Lenny. Her mouth opened and shut with no sound, and she stomped back into the church.

The autumn sun was thin and clear, glinting off the stained glass of St. Madeleine’s. At the top of the stairway to the street, Lenny seemed to shake off the whole thing.

David waved us down the brick steps. “Come on. I’m guessing she’s going to be awhile.”

Michael looked like he might cry. I tucked in my shirt where it had pulled out. “Weeks, maybe,” I said.

Sawyer wiped his face in the elbow of his dress shirt. “Good Lord. She may never forgive us.”

The road was stuck with early pre-frost leaves, heat-stroked yellows and browns. Michael and I kicked a rock between us. At the bottom of the hill, we crossed the street at the high school. On the west side below the horse pasture, brown rushes and sedge grew taller than our heads. A red-winged blackbird shrilled from the sway of a bristled cattail. Another answered.

Lenny intercepted the rock as I kicked it to Michael, spinning it off into the ditch.

“Jerk,” Michael said.

“Crybaby.”

“Jerk face.”

“Bed wetter.”

“Double jerk face.” Michael started to cry.
“Seriously?” Sawyer said.

Lenny blocked David so that we all pulled up in the middle of the lane. He wouldn’t look at Michael. “What?”

David took Michael by the hand and went around Lenny. He’d had to share a room with Lenny since they were babies, and he’d put up with a lot. But not unnecessary meanness.

“Use your head,” David said.

“Your head,” Lenny said.

David didn’t even turn around. “That’s all you got?”

Lenny jammed his hands into his pockets and turned back toward the school yard.

“Good riddance,” I said after him, but not loud enough to draw an ambush around the corner. Spooked, I sprinted past David and Michael and ran the rest of the way to the house.

In the driveway, the Smokey Bear truck was packed for Pops’ next trip to Snoqualmie Station. He’d be gone for a month.

Inside the new Sony was on. The color television was another ongoing argument after Pops bought it on credit. Now the little TV sat in the center of a crocheted doily on top of the wide, black-and-white RCA console that Ma swore up and down had better sound. On top of the stack of televisions, a pair of rabbit ears wrapped in tinfoil stretched up to the ceiling.

The new Seahawks team trailed the San Francisco 49ers in the third quarter. Pops watched from the edge of the davenport, shirt open over a white t-shirt, can of Oly in his hand. He never had anything good to say about Seattle’s newest expansion team since it was first announced. In front of him, the Sunday paper was spread out on the coffee table. He stared at the small screen, entranced by the flurry of motion, eyes squinty, bottom lip curled out like Michael learning to read.
“Pops.” I breathed out hard. “You seen Lenny?”

“This Jim Zorn,” he said. “Thinks he’s something. Thinks he’s something else.” He jabbed a thick index finger at the screen. “But you’re no Johnny Unitas.” I made the words with him. “Greatest quarterback. Won the Greatest Game Ever Played.”

The Hawks punted. The ball bounced into the end zone. Pops shook his beer at the television, flinging a spatter of foam across the newspaper. “Can’t compete with the big boys, can you?”

The kitchen was dark and warm with the smell of pot roast in the oven. Cereal bowls were stacked in the sink, and on the table was an open bottle of milk.

Pops hollered. “Oh-ho! You Seahawk bastards.”

I put the milk in the refrigerator. There was ham on a plate covered with plastic next to the Wonder Bread. I made a quick sandwich.

Down the hall, the bedroom doors were closed. “The lady?” I said in my best Vincent Price. “Or the tiger?”

I opened the door to my bedroom. My blankets hung over the end where I’d kicked them off in the night, pajama tops and bottoms stuck in the rails like fallen bodies. Michael’s bunk was stripped to the rubber mattress cover after another wet morning. Of all the days for Lenny to tease him. Like he should talk—I’d heard Ma say Lenny didn’t wake up dry until he was almost nine. With my elbow, I flipped a Sherlock Holmes closed on the desk to make a book plate for my sandwich and searched around for a shirt that wasn’t too crumpled. Smelled it.

Down the hall, Pops let loose another stream of profanity. I should have warned him Ma was coming home early from church. I sucked mustard off my fingers. Outside, someone was bouncing a ball against the garage.
With a single shove, I popped out the window screen and jumped down over the sill. Sawyer was sitting on the upturned canoe in the back yard. He’d already changed out of his church clothes. He threw a blue racquetball hard across the yard and caught it on the bounce. In the stand of alder over the fence, a pair of pointy-headed Steller’s jays scolded him.

“You talk to Pops?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I don’t think he heard me.” David and Michael came around the garage as the ball hit the wall and the birds sounded off again. The wind shifted and the leaves, green and underbelly white, sounded like rain.

“Want to go up to Flat Rock?” I said.

“Maybe.”

Lenny stuck his head out the window.

Sawyer gave him a sideways look. “You’re an asshole.”

“So they say,” Lenny said.

Ma was still not home, which made it easier to grab our bikes and go. We rode up the forest road, and Lenny raced Sawyer for the lead. They pumped hard side-to-side. Lenny up. Sawyer down. On an outside corner, Lenny made a gutsy pass, and then I lost them as they sprinted for the cutoff.

At the top of the hill, I was winded and hot. David and Michael stuck their bikes in the brush, and I stashed mine behind a tree away from the others. I’d just rebuilt my gear shift and didn’t want one of their bikes tossed against it. Sawyer and Lenny were waiting at the trailhead. With a stick, Lenny scratched something in the dirt and laughed. Sawyer eyed him suspiciously. It was often like that. As if they were both drawn and repelled by each other, turning on the same
axis from opposite ends.

The trail cut away from the road, over a rocky berm and through a clearing of tall grass. Lenny sang Beatles’ songs, cheerful as if the morning had never happened. It made me nervous, like a bad idea, and the more he sang *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* and *Eleanor Rigby*, the more it bothered me. Lenny was a slick fish.

We tramped up the gully and crossed Coal Creek below a corrugated metal culvert. Flat Rock was over the next ridge. The trail was a wide curve of trampled dirt. Moss hung in brown swags from the alders and big-leaf maples. Higher up, the creek slung a curtain of silver over a cement bunker. A pair of wood ducks glided on the pond above the dam.

Sawyer skipped a rock on the pond.

“Me! Me,” Michael said. He scrambled around for a flat stone. His first throw made a solid *plunk*, rings threading from the solitary hit. The ducks made squeezebox laughter.

“Here, squirt,” Sawyer said. He molded Michael’s fingers around a rock. Their arms moved together, wound up, released. The stone slooped into the pond.

“Did your dad teach you how to skip rocks?” Michael said.

Lenny snorted. “Who’d that be, retard?”

“Don’t call me a retard, retard,” Michael said. He scrunched up his face as if that helped him think. “Your dad. I mean Pops.”

Sawyer spun another stone out over the pond. Three taps.

“Was it your mom? Or someone?” Michael said.


“Straight through to China,” I said.
Sawyer brushed his hands together. “It’s okay.”

Michael’s ears were red. “It was an accident.”

Another accident. A dropped dish. Or a drunk driver. Sawyer’s mother hovered under the surface of everything, rising to trip us up no matter what we did—fish, hike in the woods, skip rocks. The upper branches of fir soughed with wind that didn’t reach us on the forest floor.

“So what’s our Ma?” Michael said.

Lenny unearthed a sword fern and stripped its leaves. “Nothing, dork. She’s the evil stepmother.”

Michael looked stricken.

“Don’t be a dick,” Sawyer said.

Lenny threw the stripped willow stick as far as he could into a hump of ferns and yellow Oregon grape. “Enough namby-pamby,” he said, drawing a leather chamois bundle from his jacket. “Let’s shoot something.”

None of us knew Lenny had a gun. He drew it out of the soft leather, a blue-black gleam, and it took my breath. It was not the .38 that Pops kept in the rolltop desk when it was not holstered on his shoulder. This was the stock paint gun from the truck that Pops used for marking trees. It had stacked double barrels and a thick loading chamber. The U.S. Forest Service insignia was embedded in the cross-hatched grip and the imprint read Nel-Spot 707.

Lenny polished the barrel, pulling it out of Michael’s reach. “It’s a CO2 pistol. These gas cartridges fire it.” Lenny’s hands glided through the motions of the gun. “Paint pellets in here. Load the chamber.” He cocked the hammer. “Rock and roll.”

David rolled one of the rubber paintballs in his fingers. His mouth twitched to one side like it does when he’s being skeptical. “How come you have it?”
Lenny leveled the gun chest high. “I borrowed it,” he said. He wrapped the leather chamois around the paint gun and tucked it into the front of his jacket. He fingered the silver scar on his bottom lip. I caught David’s eye. He was keen to the same thing that fluttered in my stomach—the gun was a lure. A common muddy wobbler.

Dry leaves drifted the trail. We crossed a spring and a meadow of tall grass and fescue. The lupine and columbine had already gone to seed. A straggle of late Indian paintbrush bloomed in spots of open sunlight. A series of switchbacks funneled us into a gully thick with hairy cicely and bracken. From the top of the steep gully, an enormous hemlock had been knocked down over the trail. The fallen trunk was twice as tall as any of us, even Sawyer. A faint path looped away from the main trail to loop around the end of the enormous twisted root ball, where it had been torn from the hillside.

The space gaped with hairy tree roots. In the lead, Lenny hesitated. A cloud passed overhead. Slips of sunlight turned shadow on the hill and slid along the ground under bracken and Oregon grape.

Michael pushed to the front. “Blocking the road,” he said. He dived into the narrow gap behind the roots. Sawyer and David followed.

I waited behind Lenny. He was breathing hard as if he couldn’t catch his breath. The forest quiet settled on us. A pair of gray camp robbers—Whiskey Jacks—called from a red cedar. Near Lenny’s foot, a black millipede scuttled over a leaf, and I flipped it with a stick.

“Check it out!” I said.

Lenny swung around, fist drawn back. It was so fast, didn’t duck or even bring my hands up. Mid-swing, his look shifted, startled, and the punch, pulled at the last second, grazed my
cheek. We were close, both of us breathing hard. His face was damp with sweat.

“Lenny,” I said.

He gave me a wide grin as if I’d just told him the greatest joke. He began to cough with the familiar dry whistle that was his asthma, and his hand came down on my shoulder as if for balance. He checked the trail in both directions, coughing.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“You shouldn’t go sneaking around behind me, little brother.”

He hunched forward, wheezing. His eyes were bright with a look I didn’t know. I reached up but didn’t touch his back.

David had told me there were times when he’d wake up swinging as if he’d been fighting off something in his sleep. If he slept at all. There were strings of nights he’d be up all night watching TV or tying flies at the kitchen table. None of us would know what to call his manic turns at the time, and years later when there was a name for it and medication, it was too late.

Lenny fished an inhaler out of his shirt pocket and sucked in a couple of blasts.

“You alright?” I said.

He gave me another sloppy grin that was unsettling. His voice was high and thin. “I didn’t see you there.”

I started to ask him what happened, but he turned and stepped into the cavity behind the root ball.

The whole thing had only lasted a couple minutes, but it felt like something big. I was unnerved by the look on his face in that brief moment. It was as if he was somewhere else. I was suddenly afraid for Lenny as he slipped into the shadow of the fallen tree to become a shadow himself.
“Wait,” I said.

The gap behind the tree roots was deep, a cavern torn out of the gully wall. Stalactites of living roots hung down from the roof, and the air was pungent with earth and rotting wood. Silt and unseen crawling things fell on my face and pricked my bare skin. I squeezed through the gap after Lenny.

The cool air was a relief. The shallow trail broke up the hill. I caught up to Lenny where the trail dissolved into a flat of gravel and disappeared.

Up ahead, David taunted us. “Step it up, kids. We’re not getting any younger.”

We circled a patch of firebush and came over the final rise.

Flat Rock jutted out from the basalt cliffs above. An alder had fallen a couple winters before and remained wedged in a crevice on the face of the rock. Its bark had been stripped by weather and heat, exposing its yellow skin of bared wood. We used the tree to climb to the top of the rock. I was the last one up. Sawyer leaned over the edge and spit.

“You afraid of heights?” Lenny said.

“We thought you got lost,” Sawyer said.

“Did you see the coyote?” David said.

Lenny shook a cigarette from a red Marlboro box. “Coyote.” He squinted at me as he lit the cigarette.

Michael scooted on his butt near the drop to push a pile of loose rocks over the edge. The scattered sound echoed in the space below. “You got lost,” he said, sniggering. “Hey.

Where’d you get the cigarettes?”

“None of your beeswax, runt.”

Lenny clenched the cigarette in his lips and drew a chamois from his shirt. With a
magician’s flourish, he folded back the leather corners. He turned the gun side to side. “Who wants to go first?” he said.

He was performing, and there was no trace of the uncertain look I had seen earlier. The cigarette perched on his lip was cool. I tried to shake off how he’d nearly hit me, but I had no idea what had stopped him. Or what would happen the next time.

Michael raised his hand. “Can I try?”

“Watch,” Lenny said. The first shot cracked like a dry branch. A red paint smack appeared across the meadow below on the startled white bark of an alder. David squinted at the marked tree.

Michael whooped. “Do it again!” After every shot, he cheered. “Again! Again!”

Sawyer hung his legs off the edge of the rock. “Pops is going to whip us all. But good.”

Lenny scratched his chin. “No way.”

We took turns naming the next target and shooting paintballs. Lenny even gave Michael a turn.

Later as the afternoon light began to fade, we lay side-by-side along the top edge of Flat Rock and talked up to the sky.

“You should’ve seen that coyote.”

“It was big. Big as Ranger.”

“Lying’s sin,” Lenny said.

“You’re lying.”

“Pants on fire.”

“You’re on fire!” Michael was riled. He scrambled to get up, slipping too close to the edge.
I rolled to my knees and grabbed the back of his shirt. “Careful, squirt.”

He didn’t miss a beat. “David’s not on fire. Jude’s not on fire. And Sawyer”

“I’m on fire?” Sawyer said.

“Lenny,” Michael said.

“Sawyer’s worse than on fire,” Lenny said. “He’s a perversion.”

“What the hell?” David stood up fast.

“What’s a version?” Michael said.

Lenny remained spread out on the rock. He squinted at the sky. Sawyer was up on one knee, tensed, waiting to see what Lenny was going to dish out. It hadn’t been more than three months since he’d bested Lenny at the runoff drain. Unless Lenny had a new angle. The paint gun might not kill anyone, but it felt like a threat.

David was next to Lenny. His voice was calm, almost sing-song. “Sawyer’s just like any of us.”

“He’s a freak,” Lenny said.

Sawyer stood, slow and intentional.

David rolled to his feet and stood at the edge of the rock. Squared up to face Lenny.

“Get up,” he said.

Lenny looked down his legs with surprise at David.

David offered his hand. It was a direct challenge. My mouth was dust.

With one finger, David pushed up his glasses on his nose. “Get up,” he said.

Lenny took his hand.

David pulled him up. They stood toe to toe. They were too close to the edge.

“None of us gets to pick our motherfucking parents,” David said. His words were quiet
but tight with something new and unrelenting. “That makes us all freaks. You and me.”

His fist swung upward and opened up into fingers spread wide before Lenny’s stunned face.

“Freaks,” David said.

And perhaps in the most dangerous move that anyone could make, David turned his back on Lenny. I sucked in my breath.

David’s words echoed over the drop. “It doesn’t matter how we got here,” he said. “Only how we get out.”

Lenny seemed struck. He didn’t move as David turned to take the paint gun. Or as David stepped down off the edge of the rock to the dead tree branch and left us all standing there.

We stared at the empty space David had left, astonished. Just like that, he had revealed us to ourselves. Made us all the same. Years later, after Lenny was lost to us, I came to understand the risk David had taken, calling on his best instincts in the moment. He was like a base coach sending the runner, knowing it could either position the score or set up the double play that would end the inning.

Lenny snorted and shook his head. He seemed dazed. He stalked to the back side of Flat Rock against the looming cliff face. The rest of us took our turn climbing to the ground and then headed down the trail after David. From the tree line on the other side of the meadow, I looked back. Lenny was still up top, smoking another stolen cigarette.

It started to get cold as soon as the sun dropped below the tree line. Lenny had caught up to us in the lower meadow when Michael spotted the coyote again.

It was narrow-limbed and bony with yellow, matted fur. From behind some rocks across
the clearing, it charged, stiff-legged, then retreated into the shadow.

David clamped a hand over Michael’s mouth. “Stop hollering.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

Sawyer’s peered hard into the growing dark. “Something’s not right,” he said.

Lenny snatched the gun from David. “Give me that.”

“Don’t shoot it,” I said.

Lenny waved the gun over his head. “Come on, you mangy beast. Come on!”

He fired. The impact knocked the coyote sideways. Teeth bared, it staggered in the open grass.

Sawyer squinted. “Jude,” he said. It was a command, his voice low and urgent. “David. It’s mad. The coyote.” He grabbed Michael by the shoulder. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Lenny fired another paintball. The shot in the hollow of the coyote’s chest knocked it back on its haunches. It scrambled for its feet and launched across the meadow toward us.

Michael screamed like a girl.

David yelled for Lenny.

Terror was what we had in the moment. We sprinted over the berm of gravel on the ridge and skidded into the gully of fir and alder. Out from behind the giant root ball, we burst like a covey of flushed quail with the rabid coyote close behind, and it was a sure thing—we were losing ground.

Lenny fired paintballs over his shoulder. Sawyer side-armed rocks at the coyote. We swept ankle-deep through the fallen leaves with the sound of rushing water.

“Out of ammo!” The panic and the running had kicked up his asthma, and Lenny was wheezing hard.
Michael tripped. Lenny caught him and called for Sawyer. “Take him,” he said. Sawyer swung Michael onto his back like a rucksack, and we kept on. It was darker in the lower forest, and we lost the path. Lenny waved us down a game trail.

“Shortcut,” he called.

We plunged straight down the hillside, sliding on our feet and bottoms. Our frantic descent broke branches and crushed brush. Lenny’s asthmatic wheeze became a barking cough.

At the bottom of the hill, we could see the flat black asphalt and yellow lines of the road through the last perimeter of trees. A truck whizzed past.

Distance and space were hard to judge in the shifting light. We were somewhere above the trailhead where we’d started. Lenny kept lookout behind us in the deepening dark. The rustle of underbrush was the wind or the settling of leaves. Or something else.

On the gravel shoulder of the road, Sawyer held up his arm. “Car,” he said. Michael clung to his back with his skinny arms wrapped tight around Sawyer’s neck.

A station wagon blurred by.

“Now,” Sawyer said. “Run.”

The pavement echoed with the slap of our shoes. Another car honked at us going up the hill. David tore his bicycle from the pile. Sawyer and Lenny hauled out the others. I dragged mine from behind the alder.

“Easy.” David nosed onto the road. A white pickup truck climbed the hill toward us. Its diesel engine ticked with speed as it passed us. As it disappeared around the uphill curve, there came a scream of tires on the pavement and the primal cry of a dying animal.

I whirled. “Michael!”

“He’s here,” Sawyer said.
We had two choices: flee or find out what happened. Doors slammed, and the voices of men came to us. Lenny turned his bike up the hill. Breathless with fear, we edged around the bend in the road. Lenny was straddled over his bike up near the nose of the big truck. It was skidded a bit to the side, its nose in the shoulder. Its headlights shone into the forest, lighting the trees white as ghosts. Sawyer reared up on his pedals and pumped hard towards the wreck. We all did.

Under the nose of the chromed fender, the coyote was a crumpled pile of fur. Its legs were collapsed under the heap, and its head twisted too far to one side. Yellow canines gaped into emptiness where the lower jawbone had been torn away. One eye was fixed upward, and a thin line of blood trailed along the top of the destroyed muzzle.

One of the men lit a flare that hissed like a Roman candle. He tossed it into the middle of the road. His buddy set a second flare in the lane behind the truck. A couple cars crept by slow enough to rubberneck.

The driver was short and fat-bellied. He poked his sharp-toed boot at the ruined body of the coyote.

“Never seen anything like it,” he said. He stared down at the body. “You boys ever seen something like that?”

The matted yellow fur of the coyote was splotched with red paint.

“No, sir,” Lenny said.

It was full dark by the time we pedaled into the yard. The Smokey Bear truck was still in the driveway, but the house was dark, front and back. Pops would miss a day of work to still be here, and now we had something new to fear.
We put our bikes in the garage in silence except for Lenny’s hollow cough. I took the extra time to lock my bike.

Michael ran into the house, calling for Ma. The screen door slapped behind him. Sawyer trailed David up the stairs. There was a movement on the dark corner of the porch, and I could make out the shape of Pops on the swing. His voice stopped us on the stairs.

“You boys have a good time?” He crushed a beer can against the rail.

We made a collective mumble. Lenny coughed.

Michael stuck his head out the door. “I can’t find Ma.”

“Our Ma went to Bingo,” Pops said. “She’ll be home soon.” In the dark, there was a snap-fizz that meant he’d opened another beer. It was safer for us that he was only drinking beer, although we didn’t know how long he’d been waiting.

“Our Ma told me about your day in church,” he said.

Michael climbed into Pops’ lap. “What are we going to eat? What about Wonderful World of Disney? It’s ‘Charlie the Lonesome Cougar.’” He was whiney and hungry.

“Easy,” Pops said. He stroked the top of Michael’s head and told him to put on the TV.

“Our Ma left dinner in the oven. Jude will bring you a plate. Isn’t that right.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Pops drank down his beer in a couple swallows. “Well get on inside. Rustle up something to eat,” he said. “Everyone’s got school tomorrow.”

David and Sawyer slipped into the dark kitchen. I followed Lenny up the steps.

“Son,” Pops said.

Lenny hesitated on the top stair.

Pops spit over the back rail. The chains of the swing squeaked with movement. “You got
something doesn’t belong to you?”

Lenny drew the bundle of the paint gun from inside his sweatshirt. Pops took the gun.

The swing was still. Lenny waited.

Pops spit again. “In my day,” he said, “this kind of a stunt would’ve earned me a good whipping.”

Lenny gazed into the dark corner. “Yes, sir.”

I backed down one step. It felt as if I’d blundered into a private conversation.

“Do what you have to do,” Lenny said. His words were raspy, and he coughed once.

Pops lit a cigarette, and his face appeared in the light of the flame for an instant. Inside the house, the sound of the TV was muffled, but the kitchen was dark. I could see the crossbar on the window halfway up, so I figured David and Sawyer were listening.

“Seems like that’s all we’re ever doing,” Pops said. His boot came down sharp on the heel. The sound made me jump. “Jude,” Pops said. “Go help your brother. Lenny and I have business to take care of.”

I stood inside the screen door in the dark. Lenny led the way to the garage. Pops paused part way across the yard. He called back to the house that let us know he knew we were watching. “You boys be good for your Ma while I’m gone,” he said.

Sawyer and I waited in the kitchen. We could hear the crack of Pops’ belt from there. Then there was nothing we could hear. After a while, Pops came out and went straight to the truck and drove away. It would be another hour before Lenny came in, and he went straight to the shower without a word to anyone.
Chapter 8

Lenny would stay up days in a row, and then there’d be a week when he wouldn’t get out of bed. It was during one of his sleeping cycles in October that the rains began in earnest. It had been the longest dry stretch we could remember. A couple weeks before, there’d been a handful of small storms, but they were insignificant *spit-baths*, as Pops would say. It was after 2 a.m. when he first *ticks* of rain hit the metal awning outside my bedroom window. I’d been reading, and the noise pulled me out of my book. On his bunk below, Michael turned in his sleep. The spatter turned torrent. I kicked off my sheets and slid the window all the way back.

The electric tang of rain and the metallic dirt of the window screen pricked the back of my tongue as if I could taste the storm. The dark seemed to tremble with the weight of the returning moisture. It was a good sound, but the drumming on the awning made it hard to hear the Smokey Bear truck. Pops was supposed to be back from White Pass tonight, and I’d been keeping half an ear out for him. If I turned off my reading light before his truck got to the end of the driveway, he’d never see it.

Too late. Pops’ boot-step hit in the main threshold. I leaped for the lamp switch. The bedroom door swung open. His dark shape was backlit in the doorway, and I could smell his whiskey and sweat.

“Can’t fool your old man, Jude. I see you reading.” He shifted on his feet. Leaned to the side. “What’s it keeps you up so late?”

My eyes strained in the lost light. “Heinlein,” I said, stammering at being caught.

“Heinlein. *Starship Troopers.*”

“Heinlein. Heinlein,” he said. A rare bit of lightning flashed in the storm, and Pops was a still life with his head resting against the door jamb with his eyes closed, as if a sleepwalking jag
had landed him there. The sounds of rain tapped the roof and then fell back to a soft patter.

“Pops?”

His boots scuffed down the hallway and the door was left open. I slid off my bunk, stepping on one of Michael’s sneakers. “Dammit.”

“Nickel,” Michael said in the dark. Five-cents-a-swear was the new rule from Ma, who said profanity proved a lack of intelligence. The nickel had always been her preference. When we were little, she used to tell us, *If I had a nickel for every one of you, I’d have four nickels.* But that was before Sawyer, and I hadn’t heard her say it since.

I peered down the hall. The door to the master bedroom was undisturbed, and I could hear Pops moving in the kitchen. Something heavy dropped. Whiskey bottle. Pops swore. I eased the bedroom door closed.

Michael rolled into his blankets. “Pops probably owes the jar a million nickels.”

“You’re supposed to be asleep,” I said. A breeze had kicked. I closed the window, but not all the way.

“Jude,” Michael whispered.

I pulled my blankets up. Michael was quiet, but I knew he was still awake. His breathing was too soft.

“What?” I said.

“Read to me. Just for a minute.”

I fished out my flashlight and backed up to the start of the chapter where I’d left off.

“*When we had done all that a mud foot can do in flat country, we moved into some rough mountains to do still rougher things...’’*"
David collected the morning milk off the porch before breakfast and came in to report that the Smokey Bear truck was nose-down in the yard with one wheel stuck in the runoff ditch. Pops must have skidded on the hill in the new rain, which explained why I didn’t hear him in the driveway the night before. The mangled mailbox lay in the wet grass busted off its post. Pops was nowhere to be found—not asleep or passed out.

I left Ma and Sawyer to figure out if they could move the truck. On the kitchen table next to Michael’s Scooby-Doo lunchbox was a set of Boys Life magazines dated 1950. The pages were creased from many readings, and the mailing labels were addressed to Abraham Wildish on North Benson Road, Bloomington, Indiana. Flipping through the top issue, I couldn’t figure why Pops would have left out a stack of old magazines when I caught a familiar name—Robert A. Heinlein. The story was called “Farmer in the Sky.” Each issue carried a piece of it to the end. I swept the magazines up from the table and stuck them between my school books.

At the sideboard, David was slicing bread for toast. “What you got?”

“Some stuff for school,” I said. I didn’t know what it was I had, but I didn’t want to share until I’d figured it out. For the moment, it was my own mystery. “You going to the homecoming game this week?”

David brought a stack of fresh-buttered toast and a bowl of blackberry jam to the table. He slid the toast in my direction and opened the newspaper. “I’ll go to watch Sawyer.”

Somehow Ma’s “No Football” rule didn’t apply to Sawyer, which I considered all kinds of unfair since she’d only ever let me play baseball. She said I’d get hurt or worse on the football field. It was true Sawyer was a natural at the sport—he’d tried out late and played every game so far. Either Ma was convinced that he wouldn’t get hurt, or she didn’t care if he did. I tried not to think about it like that, but it was hard not to notice how she treated him differently. It wasn’t
calculated enough to be malicious, just different. As if she’d run out of room.

A blob of jam dropped on the cover of my math book. I wiped it with my finger. David made a face.

“Lenny slept through another school day again,” he said.

“He told me he quit.”

“Of course he did.” David parsed the scores and passed me the sports section. I watched as he examined the business page with its columns of charts and numbers. He was scoring a different kind of game that I couldn’t figure. He pushed his glasses up on his nose as he sipped at a cup of black coffee. He would be 16 next month, and I knew he was already shopping for a car. It made me feel left behind. But it was more than the car and his interest in the stock market. He seemed driven by something else. My latest bicycle obsession was easy to see, but I couldn’t figure David’s.

Michael and Sawyer came in from poking around the truck. Michael was making him explain the newest football play, which Sawyer illustrated on the table with the salt and pepper shakers, the milk bottle, and a couple of spoons. He shifted them around with the call, and then ran the pepper shaker into the end zone.

“That’s why you’re the best,” Michael said.

“Maybe,” Sawyer said. “Or maybe it’s just good luck. Now go get ready for school.”

I pointed the jam spoon at David. “You going to the dance after the game?” I said. “And does everyone have to dress up? Since it’s Halloween.”

“No and no,” David said. He glanced at the kitchen clock and called for Michael. “Let’s not be late today.”
Jo caught up with me in the hallway outside of science class. “The Man Who Fell to Earth” was playing at the Sunset Drive-in. Her older brother, Robbie was taking his latest girlfriend, Rose.

“It’s Bowie,” she said. “We could ride with them. Or walk up the hill.” The back of the drive-in abutted a steep rise where we often sat for free to watch the movies. As long as there were enough cars along the back row, the sound would carry up the hillside.

“Right on. David wanted to see that,” I said.

Jo shrugged. “David, too, then. And Sawyer? He’s nice.”

“Then we’re stuck with Lenny. Hell, we could get him either way.”

“That’s a nickel,” Jo said. She held out her hand.

“What are you? Psychic?”

She laughed, and I couldn’t pretend to be mad. “Your mom told my mom at Bingo on Sunday,” she said.

“Your mom should stop talking to my mom.”

Jo looked at me sideways the way she did when she knew she had one up on me. “My mom said your mom won big. You better watch out. If she’s moving up in the world, she’ll start charging you a quarter.”

“A quarter? Besides, ‘hell’ is a place. Like New Jersey.”

“Have you ever been to New Jersey?”

“Have you ever been to hell?”

“Mrs. Tisher’s Earth Science class. 7th grade,” she said.

I nodded. “I hear that.” The second bell rang over our heads, and I had one minute to get to my classroom on the next floor. Taking the stairs two at a time, I hollered back at Jo. “Hey!
What’d she win? My Ma?”

Jo waved from the bottom of the stairwell.

Mr. Everly was teaching sentence diagrams in English class, but I’d already learned it from David last year. In the back row, I fit one of Pops’ magazines inside my English book and started the Heinlein story. I was several pages in when my book was ripped from my hands, hit by the black stapler that usually sat inert on Mr. Everly’s desk. Staples sprayed across my books and the front of my shirt. I shook my head, and glittering stapler shrapnel fell from my hair. On the floor, the black stapler yawned open. A crack ran down the middle of the black plastic top. At first, I couldn’t make sense of the broken stapler. From the next row over, Brett Marshall hissed to get my attention. He tipped his head to the front of the classroom.

At the board, Mr. Everly glared, one hand on his hip. “I said, would you care to explain to the class why you should not have to participate in our assignment today, Mr. Wildish?”

The girls up front giggled. Those were the girls Lenny called “The Barbies”—Cheryl Longley, Cynthia Woodson, Jeanette Harmer, and Bonnie Russell. To me, they looked alike with their feathered hair, black around their eyes, and tight velour sweaters and white pants. Lenny said they were stupid girls, and if they weren’t stupid, then they were stupid for pretending to be stupid.

Mr. Everly tapped a piece of chalk on his desktop. “We’re waiting,” he said.


“On the board?” I said out loud.

Mr. Everly rolled his eyes and made a face at the Barbies, which sent them into another round of giggles. “Yes, on the board. Preferably today.”
I’d solved the complex diagram in my head before I got there and wrote it straight out.

When I was done, I held the chalk out to him. Let it go before he’d grabbed it. The chalk hit the floor, bounced, and broke in half.

A red flush crept up Everly’s neck. He spit his words through clenched teeth. “You Wildish trash,” he said.

It felt like a punch. I’d heard it in the halls. Never from a teacher. I met his fierce gaze.

“You threw a stapler at me.”

“You were reading in my class.” He looked away.

“Reading?” I said. A titter swept through the Barbies and into the rest of the class. With calculated timing, I raised my left eyebrow. “I was reading in an English class?”

He yarded me by my shirt collar toward the door. The class erupted into a mix of laughter and a taunt. Reading in English. Mr. Everly ordered it to stop. He would not tolerate insubordination. As we hit the hall, headed to the principal’s office, someone who sounded like Brett Marshal shouted after us. Is that a simple subordinate? More laughter.

The lunch table in the back corner opposite the milk coolers had become our regular spot. Jo was already there.

“Check this out,” I said. The flier announced tryouts for the school play, Ten Little Indians.

“They’re calling this spaghetti,” Jo said. She poked at the noodles with her fork.

“Amanda Benson gave it to me. Said I should think about trying out.” I pointed my milk straw at her tray. “I’ll eat it. You want my salad?”

“Seriously?” The orange noodles slid onto my tray in a single glob. She poked a plastic
straw into the blue and white box of milk on her tray. “Amanda Benson just wants to jump your bones.”

“The hell she does,” I said, pleased by her look, but she didn’t call me for a nickel. “Hey, you said my mom won? What’d she win?”

“Amanda Benson always goes for the bad boys. In Bingo, dufus,” she said. She twirled a strand of dark hair around one of her fingers. “So you going to do it? It’s a good book. Agatha Christie.” she said.

I made a face. “Bingo. How much?”

“How should I know? Big, my mom said.”

I slid the flier across the table. “You do it. You’re the dramatic one.”

“That’s not what I heard,” she said.

Brett Marshall waved from the lunch line. I raised a hand back at him.

“Is this a private party?” Brett said. He sat next to Jo before either of us could answer. “I grabbed these for you, man. You should have seen Everly when he came back.” He slid my books and the *Boys’ Life* magazines over the table. Crammed a wad of noodles into his mouth. “He went crazy. He figured you had a *Playboy* or something, and he wasn’t going to let any of us go to lunch until we handed it over. But then he did.”

“It’s illegal to keep students from eating lunch,” Jo said. She picked up the *Boys’ Life*.

I pointed my fork at the Heinlein story listed on the cover. “Check it out,” I said.

“What’d Collier say?” Brett said.

I shrugged. Turns out Mr. Collier was a big fan of Heinlein, and we ended up debating whether the human body could physiologically adapt to swallow its own tongue. “Nothing,” I said.
Jo looked up from the magazine. “Wait,” she said. “You got sent to Collier’s office? What for?”

“You should have seen your boy,” Brett said. He retold the story. Staples and all.

“No wonder Amanda wants you,” Jo said.

I shrugged, a strange awkward heat rising into my face. Brett swabbed the remaining orange sauce in his tray with a square white roll. “I thought Everly was going to bust a blood vessel in his face. You know how he gets all red? He looked like he was going to bust a vessel.

Gotta go,” he said.

Jo was looking at me from across the table, and for the first time since I’d known her, it made me nervous. I tried to play it off and picked up my books and tray. Jo handed the magazine back to me.

“I have to do some stuff before class.” I stammered as if I was Michael. “I’ll catch you later?”

She looked surprised, opened her mouth as if she was going to say something.

Across the lunchroom, the Barbies were huddled at their table. None of them looked up.

Mrs. Whitmore, the school secretary directed traffic in the doorway, making way for second lunch. “Good afternoon, Jude,” she said. “I hope we don’t need to see you again today.”

Startled, I struggled to answer.

Mrs. Whitmore blinked her goldfish eyes. “Hurry along. There are people behind you.”

The hallway filled with the normal scuttle, but the back of my neck pricked with heat and a new shame. It was more than the trouble with Mr. Everly or the incessant rumors about my family. It was Jo’s face at my dismissive flip. It was firm line that set her lips and, in her cheek, the smallest contraction that flicked below one eye like a flinch.
The Smokey Bear truck was still stuck in the front yard, and Pops was asleep in front of the news. Ma wasn’t home and neither was Lenny, so I made grilled cheese for supper. Before we were done eating, a strange car pulled up in the driveway with Ma in the passenger side. She sat out front in the car for a long time talking with the driver. None of us could see who it was. By the time she came in, we were doing the dishes. David poured her a cup of coffee, but she was in a hurry to get away from us. She did a head count—all present but Lenny—and closed herself in her room. Even after we’d cleared and washed dishes, her coffee cup remained untouched at the end of the sideboard.

It was 9:00 pm when called over to Jo’s. Her mother said she’d gone to the movies with her brother. My stomach felt sick. I lay awake for a long time until it began to rain, and the staccato on the metal awning closed over the day.
Chapter 9

The day after Halloween, Ma announced that she was pregnant. She announced it at the dinner table, almost like an afterthought. It caught us all off guard, but Pops most of all. I knew it was bad when he didn’t say a word. Only wiped a napkin through his mustache and left to table without finishing his meatloaf. He walked straight out to the truck and fired up. The engine banged with a new rattle since the wreck. Pops gunned it to the stop sign at the top of the hill, spun the wheels in the gravel, and didn’t stop.

The rest of us were not too sharp after staying up most of the night before and then getting up and going to school. Lenny had skipped, but no one knew exactly where he’d gone. Not even Sawyer.

Michael was the only one of us who seemed excited. “Like with a baby?” he asked.

“Pregnant with a baby,” Ma said.

“Is there another kind?” Lenny said, trying to be funny.

Ma gave him a look, and then she excused herself.

David glared at Lenny.

Ma stood at the sink with her back to us. Her thin spine made a soft ridge under the fine weave of her sweater, and I wondered how she could even be having another baby. Maybe this would make her leave Pops. Maybe it was part of a plan to leave us all.

Michael began his own stream of questions, but Sawyer waved him off.

“Give her a minute, champ.”

David got up and put an arm around her at the sink. I was surprised to see how tall he’d gotten since school started. Ma had only to tip her head to rest it against his shoulder. He said
something to her, and although she moved her head as if to answer, she made no sound. After a few minutes, David released her. Ma touched his cheek with one hand before going to her room.

It was hard to know whether we should be happy or sad.

I realized then that the only person I wanted to tell was Jo. I’d been avoiding her for a couple of weeks. I’d tried to convince myself that I hadn’t done anything wrong. It wasn’t like we were dating. Now when I needed her, my stubbornness felt petty and stupid. It also surprised me to realize that I thought I needed her.

These days, it was dark by 4:30 pm. I caught myself walking to the rhythm of the playground game: don’t step on a crack or you’ll break your mother’s back. It conjured up a menacing image, so I forced myself to do multiplication tables instead. Then I tried Michael’s wishing game. I wished for Jo to still be my friend. I wished for Lenny to find something that make him as happy as fishing. I wished Ma and Pops would stop fighting. Maybe even like each other again. I even wished for Ma to not be pregnant, but then I took it back. Not for Ma, but for the baby who was like me and didn’t have any say in whatever happened next.

Jo didn’t invite me in, but she didn’t shut the front door in my face. I figured I had one chance to make it right. In a rush, I told her about Ma and the baby.

“And really,” I said, “I came to say I’m sorry. I was a jerk.”

I couldn’t look at her. There was a jack-o-lantern on the porch from last night. Its candle was burned out, and the cut-out eyes and mouth were sagging into the middle.

“You can’t come in,” she said. She must have seen the despair on my face because she put her hand out like a stop. “I’m babysitting Rosemary. You know my mom. I’m not supposed to have friends over.”

If my despair had showed on my face, so was my relief. Blocked by a babysitting rule
was a much better option than any others that had run through my head. I liked Jo’s mother. She was the kind of woman Pops called “high maintenance,” although he said that about all the wives of men with certain kinds of jobs, and Jo’s father was one of those men. He was a doctor at the University hospital. But I liked her. She didn’t seem nervous or anxious. And she always thought to ask me, *How’s your family?* Which made it easier to answer for our general well-being without going into the details.

Rosemary peeked around Jo’s leg. She was still a baby but old enough she could pull herself up. Jo had said she was starting to walk a little.

“Hey, it’s okay. I wanted to see you. Can I see you again?”

“Jude Wildish, are you asking me out?”

The prospect caught in my throat. “Yeah, maybe.”

Rosemary lost her grip on Jo’s leg and sat down hard on the floor. She made a little baby sound like she might cry. Jo swept her up to her hip like I’d seen grown women do, and it made me feel like I had not been paying attention. I looked down at her feet. Her socks didn’t match. One was striped red, and one was blue.

“I’m a jerk,” I said. “I’ll try to do better.”

“Me, too,” she said. “Now get out of here before my mom comes home and has a conniption.”

I tried to be cool as I walked away from her house, but as soon as I turned the corner, I leaped into the air all hurky jerky and had to check to make sure no one had seen it.
Chapter 10

Ma did leave us, but only for a short visit to Indiana to stay with her sister. She promised to come back. A week went by, and she called to report that Uncle Jack would be coming with her. He’d stay for Thanksgiving.

With Pops and Lenny still gone, David seemed to be in charge. Sawyer didn’t mind. He was busy with football and a new schedule of training to pitch that would set him up for the high school team in the spring. David kept us on track. He made each of us take cooking and grocery shifts, and he put Michael’s laundry in with his so that everyone had clean clothes.

Then one night we heard Fire, Fire! and hauled out of our beds as if it was a real emergency. We pounded out the back door in our shorts and bare feet, calling to make sure everyone got out. On the back porch, the night was cold with a chill that hinted at the coming winter. Behind us, the deadbolt was thrown, and I knew we’d been duped.

There was a time I wanted to be like Lenny. More than that—I wanted to be him. When we were little kids, he could do anything. Even lately when he seemed to invite more trouble that he could handle. I’d seen him pitch a breaking ball in under the wiliest batter. Coax a rise out of a skittish cutthroat. Grease back a Black Ghost as if it was second nature. Once he was like a god to me.

Michael and David were banging on the door with their fists, and Sawyer was fixing to pry the screen off the front window. He was cussing up at least a dollar’s worth of nickels.

I figured Lenny was long gone from behind that door. He was likely chasing up a stash of Pops’ whiskey. There were half-empty bottles tucked between books in the study or inside a boot at the back of the closet. Sometimes when I found one, I poured it out. Most times, I left them. Once I lifted the porcelain top on the toilet to fix the float, and there was a bottle of amber
whiskey cooling in the running water.

Around the side yard, I picked my way in the dark along the iris garden under the kitchen windows. The earth was hard and damp under my feet. The furthest kitchen window was open. I popped off the screen and felt over the sill for the crank handle to open it enough to let me in.

Even with Ma gone, our house smelled like a regular home. Garlic and day-old bread. Sour hamster cage. Wet towels. Dried mud. Feet.

My brothers were hollering out front for Lenny to let them in, but I blocked out their noise. I was leery of an ambush. The tinkling of metal sounded from Pops’ bedroom, and I crept down the hallway.

Used to be, nights like this Lenny would get us to drag our sleeping bags outside to the trampoline. We’d watch the moon rise and pretend we knew something about the constellations until the sky clouded over or we’d fall asleep. Used to be we did everything together. Catch salamanders in the slough. Listen to baseball on the radio. Even share a stolen clove cigarette behind the garage.

Once a long time ago, I went with Lenny and David up the hill at the drive-in to watch *Hang ‘Em High*, and for days afterward, we tried to catch the horses in the pasture across from the orchard. Their legs were stiff with mud, but their noses were soft as rose petals. I remember how the fat brown mare with a choppy mane rolled a white eye at Ranger. She grabbed him in her square teeth by the scruff and tossed him over the fence rail. Tamped her hoof. *Out of here, dog.* The herd spun like a flock of birds turns in the sky, as if they had a secret signal. They bucked across the pasture, ass and tails, mud flying, and farts bouncing out of the brown mare as if she’d pulled off a big rehearsed joke.

That was the summer Michael was born with his brain swollen and his head full of fluid.
He didn’t get to come home from the hospital for a whole month. Us boys were left mostly by ourselves. We made melted cheese sandwiches and Ovaltine every night and stayed up late to watch _Johnny Carson_ and _The Rifleman_. We talked about what-if-we-were-orphans or which of the _Magnificent Seven_ was the coolest. Whether we’d stay with the girl even if it meant we had to be farmers instead of gunfighters. We ate cereal in front of morning cartoons and again in the afternoon for double episodes of _Creature Feature—Hound of the Baskervilles_ and _The Blob_. I must have been six. Lenny told us what to do. He was the oldest and the smartest.

Now he’d locked us out in the middle of the night for no reason. Inside Pops’ bedroom closet, a neat row of Forest Service shirts hung in a row. The chain from the ceiling fixture ticked against the bare light bulb. I was sure he’d been here. I pulled slow on the string until the light clicked off and felt my way down the hall. Outside the TV room, I waited for my eyes to adjust.

Pops called this the Rumpus Room—’cause you boys sure do make a rumpus—and it used to make us laugh. The TV station was signing off with the home-of-the-brave and Viking I and II mission pictures. In the flickering lights, Lenny was stretched out on the couch with his boots kicked up on the coffee table. He threw back a slug of whiskey straight from the bottle.

The anthem peaked, and then a single note toned over the color bars on the screen. I kept to the shadows until the square glass bottle slid from Lenny’s fingers onto the couch. It leaned up against his hip like an old friend sleeping. Lenny’s mouth was open and his lips were gray and wet with spit and whiskey. Green shadows lay in hollows of his face and over his cheekbones.

I edged around the door jamb but caught a toe and tripped into the room. Lenny’s eyes opened. He stared straight through my terror. But then his eyelids sagged into oblivious slits. His breathing slowed. His head jerked downward, bobbed and stuck with his chin to his chest. He
looked different. Older. As if he was someone I didn’t know. I didn’t want to open the front door. Not to let in the rest of my brothers. Not to let Lenny go away from us ever again.
Chapter 11

Ma and Uncle Jack were due to arrive by evening. Everyone was still surly after Lenny’s fake fire. David had hollered himself hoarse, and only Sawyer’s intervention and Lenny’s hangover had kept it from turning into an all-out brawl in the morning. None of us minded that we had to miss church to clean the house, although Lenny managed to skip out on us and was gone for the rest of the day. He showed up as I was finishing a batch of hamburger soup. It was the only thing I knew how to make, and we’d already eaten it twice this week. I wore Ma’s apron—Kiss the Cook—and was stirring in the tomatoes when Lenny strolled in from the back. David had made a decent blackberry pie that was cooling on the sideboard, and Lenny gave it a close inspection. “Did you boys get your chores done? Who made the pie?” he said.

David was either too angry or too intent on his homework to answer. He worked over a page of numbers and formulas that he wrote in black pen.

“I’m setting the table,” Michael said.

“Well aren’t you a do-gooder!” Lenny said to no one in particular, as if he was his own audience. He hopped up to sit on the edge of the counter. For all his trouble, he always kept a certain swagger, as if nothing could ever beat him. He began to sing, “How much is that doggie in the window” while juggling a pair of apples from the sideboard.

Michael stood in his socks and watched Lenny. “I don’t ever want another dog,” he said. He ran out of the kitchen. I started to follow, but David touched my arm. “Leave him be.”

“Yeah. Leave him alone,” Lenny said. He made his voice loud. “He’s a crybaby.”

David squinted. “That was unnecessary.”


“Shut up.”
Lenny added a pear to his juggling. “Do you know that if a person jumps off the Aurora Bridge, it’s nine seconds before they hit the pavement below?” Lenny said. “I bet you didn’t know that.”

I didn’t like the turn of his story, and he looked strange again. His eyes were wide and bright.

“Nine. Long. Seconds,” he said. The pear broke out of its orbit and smashed into the stack of plates next to David and his notebooks. The top plate split into three white china bones. Lenny caught the apples.

David pushed back from the table and took a swing at Lenny. The table shrieked against the wood floor. Lenny ducked. He grabbed me in a headlock and was strong enough to yard me around, keeping my body between him and David. Sawyer came into the kitchen and was hollering over this new chaos. Lenny didn’t smell like he’d been drinking, but I had started to recognize this new kind of crazy that wasn’t a drunk.

Lenny taunted David. “Come. And. Get me.”

None of us would’ve noticed Michael standing in the doorway if the puppy in his arms hadn’t started yelping. Michael struggled to keep the pup flipped over on its back as if it was a baby. It was a brown and black. Its white feet flailed until Michal lost his grip. The puppy slid, half-falling, down to the floor. Lenny froze. I could feel him breathing hard against me, and he didn’t resist as I shook off his hold.

The pup barked with such effort that it fell backwards. One of its ears was flipped up and inside-out.

Michael was a crisis of indecision, crying and laughing at once. “He was in my room,” he said. He looked around, dazed, until he found me, and a laugh or a cry hiccupped out of him. “I
think he peed on your space poster.”

“What?”

The pup pounced on stiff-legs at David’s shoelaces. The white tip on the end of its short tail waved side to side.

“What is it?” Michael said. “It looks like a bear.”

David shook his head. “I’d guess it’s a shepherd of some kind.”

I caught the pup from behind and swept it up to eye level for inspection. Tipped it. “Well, it’s a boy,” I said.

He looked like puffed cotton, but there was a sturdy weight about him. He stopped squirming and folded his white front paws over my thumbs. His black eyes were almond shaped, steady and alert. I tipped my head to one side, and the pup cocked his.

“You’re a smart little guy, aren’t you?”

I put him down, and Michael crawled after him. David swept up the broken dish and tried to get us to the table to eat.

Into the general disorder, Jack in full uniform burst into the kitchen, hollering, *Happy Thanksgiving*. He dragged in a couple of suitcases, and Ma was right behind him to hug us. Michael was jumping around, holding up the pup for Ma to see.

Jack handed his military hat Sawyer. He swung a suitcase into the hall and took the pup from Michael. He hollered over the noise. “Darlene. Who on God’s green earth is responsible for this flea-bitten animal?”

Sawyer checked Lenny with a side-armed piece of slushy pear. “Who, indeed?” he said. Lenny batted it down with a grin.

Ma stared down Lenny, but she looked happy when he came to her for a hug.
Dinner was a raucous event. After our string of mopey days, we cleaned up the soup and cornbread and finished David’s pie. Jack had new stories of a recent trip to Tokyo, where he’d visited the Emperor’s Palace and something called a Shinto shrine. He gave us each a blue fish banner mounted on a stick with its mouth open at the top like a windsock.

“And who are my boys?” Jack said. We called back, we are, and he raised his beer in the familiar toast. “Long live the weeds and the Wildishes yet.”

“And Sawyer,” Michael said. “Sawyer is our brother. He’s your boy, too.”

“Sawyer, too,” Jack said.

It was late by the time dishes were done. Lenny helped Michael make a bed for the puppy in our room. Jack took a cigar out to the back porch. He’d changed out of his uniform, all but his black boots. He sat back in one of the Adirondacks, legs stretched out, and watched the crows as they set to roost in the trees along the back fence. Sawyer slid into the other chair. Lenny was quiet in the corner. I was leaned up against the stair rail across from David when Ma’s voice came soft through the screen. “Jude, honey. You need a jacket, baby?”

“No,” I said. I wanted to add that I wasn’t a baby but figured it would make me sound like one if I did.

“Don’t you boys stay out too late,” she said.

“I’ll send ‘em in before too long,” Jack said. The metal top on his Zippo rang as it snapped shut.

Perched on the rail next to the ashtray was a green Muddy warbler fly, the tip of its single barb pricked into the rail. I plucked it out of the wood. It had a yellow thread tie-off that was Lenny’s signature. I wondered when he’d put it there or even tied it since it had been weeks.
since he’d been home.

“This yours?” I said.

Jack turned it in his fingers. “Nope. But I’ll take it.” He pocketed the fly. “Tell me. How long has my brother been gone?” Jack said.

“If he went up to the Gifford Pinchot, he’s supposed to be back on Monday,” Sawyer said. “But no one’s heard for sure. He left, um, abruptly.”

“I heard,” Jack said. The tip of Jack’s cigar trailed red in the dark.

Between the three of us, we retold the story of Pops walking out. Jack opened another beer.

“Well that explains the radio silence,” he said.

I clenched my body to keep from shivering in the dark, even if no one could see. I’d wanted to ask him if he had a girl. Which was really so I could ask him about Jo without asking.

Beyond the back fence, the crows were roosting in the big hemlock. One of them fanned its wings.

Jack took a slow pull on his cigar. “That was a good thing you did, Sawyer. Coming here.”

Sawyer stammered a bit like Michael, flustered or surprised. He ducked his head, and his face was hidden funder the bill of his cap. “Did you always know about me?”

“Leonard made me promise not to tell. All of us. Sam. And Robert before he died. When you were little, he wanted to tell you himself. But then later, he stopped talking about it. I think it made him too sad. Not like he lost his nerve. Don’t you believe it. Even if some people say that’s what happened. Your Aunt Charlotte used to say that. You probably heard it from her.”

“Yes, sir,” Sawyer said.
“I think he believed he missed his chance. It was there, and then it wasn’t. It’s like second guessing the river so as you miss a good strike. Or maybe because he thought he’d never see you again. He said that to me after your mother. . . your mother, God rest her soul. She took you to France and said it was better off if you didn’t know. I think it broke his heart. He cried like you were dead.” He rapped his knuckles twice on the porch rail to ward off inadvertent bad luck.

“Not calling it down on you or nothing.”

Sawyer was eager for news from home, that home and family were too far away for me to keep track. Jack and Sawyer spoke with the same softness in the middles of their words. They pressed sounds together in one work. Drew it out in another. The more they talked, the more they sounded the same. I wondered if I sounded like I had an accent to them, when I realized Jack was leaned up looking at me.

“You alright, champ?” he said.

“Sure. What’d you say?”

“About Ranger,” Sawyer answered for him. “How Pops brought Ranger to Washington from the farm in Indiana. Ranger was just a pup.”

“Did he ever bring you a bird?” Jack said.


“I knew it. That dog had the softest mouth on him.”

David laughed. “Remember that time he brought one to Ma? We were camping out on the Palouse.”

“I remember.”

“Ranger trailing Ma while she’s cooking dinner. He’s trying to give her this bird. Finally she gets mad and decides to tie him up. Reaches in for his collar, and he drops this bird into her
hand. Bird flies up into her face.”

Jack was laughing with us.

“Ma’s screaming. Pops comes running back from the river. He thinks someone’s dying or who knows what,” David said.

“That was a good dog,” Jack said.

The waning moon was a cold sliver. “What do you say, boys? Call it a night?”

The sweet smell of his cigar folded around Jack. I wondered what it would be like if Jack was our father. I felt guilty for thinking it. But only for a minute.
Chapter 12

Pops surprised us by showing up on Monday. He acted like he’d just been out on a job, same as usual. But the look on his face was the happiest I’d seen for a long time when he saw Jack. He slapped his little brother on the back and called him a son-of-a-bitch. With Jack at the house, at least Pops didn’t start in on Ma, not in front of us anyway. Jack went out that day and returned with a turkey the size of Michael and an apple box full of potatoes and fresh vegetables. The full refrigerator felt like a flush. We fixated on our good luck at not having to watch the Dallas Cowboys on Thanksgiving Day, even if the replacement game was the Dolphins. After a few days without a blowout, it was almost as if we were a normal family.

We’d tried all week to name the pup. Nothing seemed to stick. Not Charlie or Hank. Buzz. Topper. Strider. Bo. Champ. By Friday night, Lenny threw down an ultimatum—name him today or he’d pull rank and name him George. No one wanted that, especially because it meant we had to hear him sing “George of the Jungle” every time he called the dog. David proposed we make a naming ceremony. Maybe that would a good name. Like a christening, only for dogs. Lenny said he knew the perfect thing.

We met up on the back porch in the late afternoon. Michael was running circles in the yard with the pup nipping at his feet. Lenny smoked a cigarette near the corner of the garage. David was the last.

“Finish your physics project?” Sawyer said.

“Yep.”

“You know Thanksgiving break is actually a school holiday,” Lenny said

“How would you know?” David said.

Lenny shrugged. “Let’s do this,” he called. “It’s a sin to be nameless.”
Daylight was already fading, and the streetlamps were flickering on along the streets. We walked in the middle of the road when there wasn’t traffic. The pup was distracted by everything: Lenny’s loose shoelaces; a leaf; his own feet. David carried him through the lot behind the abandoned Ace Hardware.

We crested the runoff gully at the lucky Lightning tree. The bare trunk was all that was left of a fir snag after a double lightning strike a couple years ago. The first strike hit in an early spring torrent, and the second was a dry summer strike. King News did a live report from the site after the second hit, zooming in on the blackened bark split over the smoking heart of the tree. Pops said he wished he’d bought a lottery ticket that day.

The county topped the snag and the bark had sloughed off, but it was still considered lucky. The yellow trunk was carved with hundreds of initials, hearts, and all kinds of graffiti. As we rounded the lucky tree, each of us tapped the its bare skin with a fist for good luck and dropped down toward the old highway.

Lenny took up the pup when we got to 124th. It was too early for rush hour traffic, but there was an occasional car. We stuck to the sidewalk on one of the Bellevue overpasses that stretched over I-405. Traffic streamed underneath us: trucks, station wagons, and cars full of families. Michael and David bent over the rail. They pumped their fists at the big rigs to get them to honk. Michael tried to spit, but it ran down his chin. Our laughter was drowned out by the sound of the traffic.

Michael pet the pup’s ears, dodging the snap of his puppy teeth.

“How about Prince?” he said. He had to yell against the noise.

“Prince is a dumb name.”

“Hey, man,” Sawyer said. “Everybody gets to say one.”
“Ok,” Lenny said. He stopped in the center of the sidewalk “We have ‘Prince.’ What else?”

“Turk,” I said. “It’s cool. Like from a novel.”

“What novel?” Lenny said.

I shrugged. “It just sounds tough.”

“Or like a turkey,” Michael said.

The streetlight overhead buzzed and blinked and went out.

Lenny looked up at the dark fixture. “So that’s a ‘no’.”

The overpass sloped down past freeway ramp into the Bellevue side. On the furthest horizon, the Olympics were blue in the waning sunset. Over Mercer Island, a glittering line of headlights cut through the black trees and the regular lives of other people that we could almost imagine were just like us.

Christmas coming meant school was halfway over. Not our best year, but we seemed to be surviving ourselves. Lenny was still skipping a lot. He’d got a job at the new Kingdome, hocking popcorn and beer at the Seahawks games. I think he was hoping to stay on into the first Mariners season in the spring.

After the huge Homecoming loss against Rainier High, Sawyer quit the football team, deciding to focus on baseball instead. His fast pitch had gotten to be tight and high so that everyone called it “The Sawyer Eckersley,” and Coach Mays said it could draw some attention from the college leagues. David had been on T.V. with his brainy friends in the academic Quiz-bowl competition that Ma said would get him a college scholarship, and Jo and I made a pinky-swear pact to go to the University of Washington as soon as we graduated high school. We were as optimistic as anyone. If we could have called our luck in that moment, we might have given us
all an equal chance.

Lenny held the pup. In both directions, streetlamps made solid yellow circles of light over the wide lanes and cement guardrails of the freeway.

“Here’s what we do,” Lenny said. He hefted the puppy up over his head. Then out over the railing.

Michael screamed like a girl.

Sawyer came from somewhere behind me. We grabbed Lenny. Our momentum sent us into the rail, crushed and precarious. Lenny stretched his arms out with the puppy hanging in open space. We banged against each other, skidding in the slick of gravel.

“Stop it,” David yelled. “He’ll drop the dog.”

Sawyer stepped back. Pulled me off. Lifted both hands in surrender.

The puppy was rigid in Lenny’s hands, as if it had stopped breathing. Its eyes were wide and black, tongue a pink triangle. His white sock paws hung limp. Lenny braced his feet. Yelled back at us.

“The next truck. That’s his name. Call it.”

The overpass seemed to rock sideways. I gripped the guardrail. Michael slumped at my feet.

David looked like he was going to puke, one hand on top of his head as if holding himself down. Several cars went through. A Volkswagen Bug rattled by.

Up the freeway from around a hill of trees, a semi-truck and trailer came over the rise. David’s hand came off his head. He pointed. “There,” he said.

Michael was crying a thin wail. “Don’t hurt him.”

Lenny’s eyes were closed. His arms were shaking with the weight and extension over
The tunnel gasped with sound beneath us as the truck came through, pulsing with engine and air brakes. The blue trailer was marked the full length in tall, red letters: *Pacer Stacktrain*.

With a crow of triumph, Lenny swung around. As his arms cleared the rail, Sawyer tackled him. He wrenched the pup free of Lenny’s grasp.

Lenny seemed oblivious of our terror. Pinned in the gravel, he hollered and pumped his fist. Sawyer released him, and Lenny leaped up to dance at the rail, calling out the name of the truck. Cheering it away

David took the pup. He took Michael’s hand and marched toward home. The rest of us followed. He didn’t stop even on our own back porch. He pushed through the screen door and into the house.

I didn’t know if I should be worried or angry with Lenny.

Lenny lit a cigarette. “It’s a good name,” he said. “Pacer Stacktrain.”

Nobody answered.
Chapter 13

Toward the end of March, Pops got his second DUI and was sentenced to 30 days and his license was suspended. His first one back in January had cost him money but no fine. Ma bailed him out on bond with her personal savings, and Pops was released that same afternoon in time to fight with her before dinner. David filled me in when I got home from the record store where I worked part time. He told me Sawyer was at the school getting ready for his game, and Lenny still hadn’t come home after a couple of days.

“Good riddance,” said David.

He hadn’t forgiven Lenny for terrorizing of us on the freeway overpass or for their fight a few days later. David had thrown the first punch, but Lenny had ended it. David’s black eye had faded, but the broken glasses were still waiting for some extra money. One corner of his frames was held together with black electrical tape.

I helped him finish cooking the pork chops, and we got dinner on the table for three of us. Michael pretended not to hear the back and forth of our parents by talking to Pacer through dinner and slipping him bites of his pork chop.

David passed me the mashed potatoes.

“Fishing or trapping?” Michael said. “What’s the bet?”

But none of us wanted to play. A good fight usually meant Pops would head out for a few days, but this time, he’d be in trouble with more than Ma if he took off. I was starting to wonder if we’d survive ourselves much longer. I’d been talking to David about joining the Junior ROTC that would help me pay for college. Or at least I could build a career like Uncle Jack. David would remind me that I had a few years to figure it out. I couldn’t see how it was going to get any better.
We left for the game without saying goodbye. Pops had stopped yelling, and Ma seemed to be reasoning with him by then. We hurried across the field. Jo was saving us seats behind the dugout.

This would be Sawyer’s fourth start of the season and the first one against Sammamish High School. In the end, he pitched a no-hitter. Everyone went crazy cheering. The team mobbed Sawyer on the mound, and in the bleachers, the crowd gave him a standing ovation. Sawyer stepped up to home plate and tipped his cap. He was a class act.

As the crowd broke up, David decided to take Michael straight home since it was late for a school night. It was a bad sign that Ma hadn’t shown up in the stands. I hadn’t expected Pops.

Jo and I had hollered ourselves hoarse. We waited outside the school for Sawyer, and people I didn’t even know came up to ask me if I thought he’d be able to take down Bellevue next week. I said Yes to every one of them. No question about it.

Sawyer came out in his regular clothes, and I could tell he was pleased. He’d smacked his mitt on top of my head, even though he didn’t have much to say. I wondered if he’d heard how Pops had missed the game. Another DUI was complicated enough for me, but it would be double for Sawyer with the anniversary of his mother’s death only a couple days away. Multiplication tables in my head held back the worst of it, but lately I’d get through twelves and thirteens and have to start over—sometimes more than once.

“Come with us,” I said. “Jo’s brother is going to get us into the new theater at the Sunset. It’s Dawn of the Dead.” I looked quick at Jo. My invitation had been impulsive, but she tipped her head, which meant it was alright with her.

Sawyer didn’t seem to notice. He rolled his shoulder. “Naw. You go on without me. I’m going to eat and maybe put some ice on this shoulder.”
Sawyer nudged my arm and slid five dollars into my shirt pocket. “You’re going to need some popcorn and Jujubes.” He waved his mitt at us. “Make sure Jo gets home on time, mister,” he said.

Jo grabbed my hand. “Come on,” she said.

Nobody can figure their whole life when they’re a kid. A kid’s life is too small to know what’s best. But in that moment, I decided I’d do anything for Jo to always be in mine.

We ran the rest of the way to Factoria Square, and I didn’t let go of her hand until we got to the ticket counter, where Brian slipped us tickets. Flush with popcorn and sodas and a new daring, we took seats in the back as the opening credits rolled.

“You okay?” Jo said. I could only nod.

Long after the movie was over, my skin seemed to prick with heat, as if I could feel Jo’s fingers wrapped up with mine.

On Easter Sunday I opened the back door to take Pacer out and met Lenny coming up the steps. There was a strange car in the driveway, a beat-up red Buick. He must have figured we were at church because he looked surprised. He looked hard at me, and then as if he needed time to make a new plan, he swung around to sit on the top step.

Ma was at church by herself. I’d gone with her a couple Sundays ago, but she’d stopped making a fuss. I think her immediate problems were enough for her to worry about. Eternal salvation would have to wait. The driveway was empty since the Smokey Bear truck was stuck in the impound lot. To be fair, if someone was looking for no one to be home, from the outside this morning, it seemed like a safe bet.

Pacer came bounding back up from the yard as Lenny lit a cigarette. He frisked between
me Lenny, jamming his muzzle into Lenny’s hands and pockets so that Lenny had to hold his cigarette overhead for safety.

Across the yard, the alders were yellow with fluffy catkins. Beyond the trees were the school tennis courts and the baseball field, and with every shift in the wind, clouds of pollen lifted out of the trees. I slid into an Adirondack chair. Lenny fished in the apple basket for a baseball and threw it into the yard. Pacer raced out after it and brought it back.

Lenny looked at me sideways. “Jude, you knucklehead. You still riding that piece of shit bicycle around everywhere?”

“No, man,” I said. He made me nervous, and I couldn’t stop my mouth. “Got a new one. Raleigh Super Grand Prix. I’m working at the bike store on the weekends to pay it off.”

He hadn’t meet my eyes until then, couldn’t say hey-how-are-you, but the bicycle earned me a look. I almost felt like I’d won a round, and my nerves shifted to something else. His face was gray like it got when he didn’t sleep. His hair was greasy over the collar of his flannel button-down and a *Dreamboat Annie* t-shirt. He was a lighter version of David—an even mix of Mom and Pops, the not-quite square jaw, not-so round face, somewhere-in-between. He didn’t need glasses like David, so I could see his green eyes. That was the Scottish in us, sure as genetic markers go, and for Lenny, it was what I imagined attracted the girls. It surprised me to realize how I was almost as tall as him.

“Pops still down in the Siskiyous?” he said.

“Yeah, right,” I said. “Pops is in jail.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Not even. He won’t get out for another three weeks.”

Lenny’s head rocked back and forth. “Fucking incredible,” he said. “In-cred-i-bull. Ma’s
all knocked up. Pops is a jailbird. What are you little junior pricks doing with yourselves, all
unattended?”

My face stung hot. “Go to hell,” I said.

He coughed out something like a laugh. “Easy, boy,” he said. “Jesus. Can’t win for
losing.” He dragged on the end of his cigarette. Stamped it out with his shoe.

The screen door banged. Sawyer stepped out, rubbing his head with both hands to wake
himself up. Lenny tossed him the baseball, which Sawyer caught on reflex.

“I take it David’s still mad,” Lenny said.

Sawyer accepted a cigarette and a light from Lenny. He blew out a straight stream of
smoke, wound up, and threw the baseball over the shed where it smacked off the biggest alder
tree. A cloud of yellow pollen broke skyward, swayed in the air, and drifted off over right field
toward home plate.

“You punched him in the face,” Sawyer said.

“Barely knocked him down.”

“Scared the bejesus out of all of us.”

“David’s still a pussy.”

That afternoon on the overpass was stop-time. A slide show gone bad. Even later, when
David and Lenny fighting in the yard. Pacer barking. Ma yelling. The slow flight of the apple
basket off the porch where Lenny threw it over the rail, where it exploded baseballs over the
yard. Words like stones. Blood on David’s face.

Sawyer leaned on the porch rail. Below in the flowerbeds, purple crocuses pushed up
through the brown crud left from winter. He blew three perfect smoke rings that hovered like the
start of a word—oh, oh, oh—and then they drifted apart into nothingness.
I thought what it was like before Sawyer, as if he wasn’t standing there on the rail just now. It had been less than a year, but it seemed like we’d known him forever. Just last week, he’d gone with me and David out to Dawkin’s Creek to go bridge jumping. Michael begged out. He would always be scared of heights. I’d never jumped before, but I wanted to try. The rocks at the bottom didn’t seem so daunting a barrier as they did last summer, and the river was high. From the top of the bridge, we counted down to make the jump together. I stood with my arms out and anticipation banging in my chest as if I might die. We yelled *Three!* and jumped. Hollered all the way down.

“You still pitching?” Lenny said.

“Yup,” Sawyer said.

“How’s school?”

Sawyer spit over the rail. He squinted over the baseball field. “You still working?” he said.

“At the Kingdome. You should come over. Regular season started this week. I can get you in. Get you good seats.” Lenny put on a bad jive imitation. “*Give a brotha a chance.*”

Sawyer rubbed one hand over his chin. He was so much like Pops, and some of it was in him before he came here to be with us. I tried to think it through in the genetic sequences from Biology class—red-eyed flies and white-eyed flies. What he got from Pops. What I got from him. Maybe all Lenny got was the Jack Daniels gene. I almost laughed out loud at the joke inside my head. I’d tell it to Jo later, only she might not laugh. She always got this sad look when I talked about Pops, especially now since he had to go to jail. Sawyer probably wouldn’t think it was funny either.

A frog creaked up from the crocuses. Sawyer leaned down on his elbows, studying the
alder trees at the edge of the yard. “I was there on Wednesday for the opener. Angels shut them out,” he said. “Seguí is really too old. I can’t believe they brought him back.”

Lenny straightened up. “Yeah, yeah. Fell apart in the fourth. You were there?”

“Me and Pastornicky. His dad got us tickets.”

“Huh,” Lenny said. “Go figure Cliff’s dad would take you.”

Sawyer pointed his cigarette out past the end of the driveway. “Who’s the girl?” he said. We all looked. I hadn’t realized the shadow against the passenger window was a person, let alone a girl. Leave it to Sawyer to notice.

“A girl,” Lenny said. “She’s pretty tired. I’m letting her sleep.” He squinted at the trees as another wave of pollen took off from the branches. “How come you didn’t come find me? At the game?”

Sawyer flexed his shoulders and leaned forward, as if gauging the distance to dive off the porch. The frog in the flowerbed below creaked in the dirt.

“I saw you,” he said. “Two sections over. You had on a blue and white striped shirt and a paper hat. You were selling peanuts.”

Lenny looked sharp over his shoulder, his face scrunched, trying to remember what he was doing.

Sawyer spit. “At the end of the game, you were hanging out just above the dugout with a guy. Long blond hair. Scruffy mustache. A couple of girls. You looked happy.”

Lenny shrugged. His cigarette made a black smear on the rail where he rubbed it out.

“You could have come and told me about Pops,” he said.

Sawyer didn’t flinch. “In front of your people?”

“You could’ve called.”
His eyes were as clear as if he was reading a pitch. “Sure. I’ll dial your number straight up.”

“Dammit to hell. Why you always got to make me look like I’m the jerk?” He took out another cigarette, the last one, and crushed the box. His hands were shaking a little. He tried to laugh, but it came out like a cough. “You got any beer in there? I’m feeling a little thirsty, if you know what I mean.”

Sawyer shrugged. The porch door slapped closed, and there was a hubbub of voices inside, David and Michael. One of them laughed, and then Michael was doing his Jimmy Carter voice, shaking his throat like a turkey warble, “America, our beloved country.”

Lenny hollered over his shoulder. “Come out! Come out. I’m not the plague, you know.” He arched his back, as if he had a pain in his bones.

Sawyer came back with a couple of Milwaukee’s Best. Lenny snapped one open and drank down half of it without taking a breath. He wiped a hand over his mouth and whacked my shoulder.

Out in the driveway, the door to the Buick opened with a squeal that echoed in the hollow around the house.

Lenny held up his beer. “You can always count on a woman to ruin a good drink.”

The girl smoothed her hair down as she was walking, and it made her weave like a drunk. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, cocked on one hip. “Hey, baby,” she said. “I gotta pee.”

Sawyer pointed her into the house.

Michael’s giggles followed her down the hall. As if he’d never seen a girl before. Most girls who came here were like Jo, either from the church or school. Except for the time those girls from the bar brought Pops home in the middle of the night—the ones he swore were both
waitresses. Ma didn’t speak to Pops for weeks after that.

My thinking must have conjured up the real deal because there came Ma down the street in the pink and orange swirl of the only dress that would still fit over her pregnant belly.

“Aw, shit,” Lenny said.

Sawyer set his full beer down under one of the porch rails. “You should talk to her.”

Ma walked right on by the beat-up Buick, Lenny on the porch, and almost past us all without a word. At the door, she paused. “Nice to see you remembered how to get home for Easter dinner.” She didn’t wait for a reply.

Out of cigarettes, Lenny swallowed down the last of his beer and most of Sawyer’s, nervous as a wet cat. The ruckus of pans and dishes in the kitchen went on forever before Ma called out the door. “Dinner. Wash up.”

Julie was sitting at the table while Michael told her knock-knock jokes. At the stove, David stirred the gravy, one of Ma’s aprons tied twice around him. He made a face, but Ma gave me a look like she’d whip him herself if he started anything. Her face was pink with the heat from the stove. A strand of damp hair stuck to her cheek like a dark feather.

We squeezed around the sides of the table, Pops’ chair empty at the head. Michael straddled the piano bench next to Julie, Sawyer straight across. Ma said grace and then sighed and made a little smile as if she was going to make a speech but changed her mind. “Now isn’t this nice?” she said. “Pass to the left, boys. Julie, thank you for joining us today.”

It made us a regular family to sit around the table for Easter dinner. As if it could hold off what was coming. Ma kept glancing over at Lenny, quick as if she couldn’t bear to look too long.

“Julie, honey,” Ma said, “where’s your folks? Are they local?”

Julie examined the potatoes on her plate. “Omaha. They lived there since forever. My
grandparents live right next door.”

Ma dabbed a bit of gravy a slice of pot roast. “What does your father do?” she said.

“He used to work at the meat packing plant. Everyone knows Omaha beef steaks. But now I guess he’s in real estate.” The lil in Julie’s voice must have been from her place in Nebraska, close to what I could hear in Ma’s words sometimes, especially after she’d been on the phone with her sisters in Indiana.

We passed food back and forth across the table—potatoes, asparagus, hot rolls, and gravy. Next to me, Lenny ate as if it was the first real food he’d had in weeks, while Julie poked a fork around her plate. She tipped her face toward Michael for him to tell her another stupid joke.

“Knock-knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Orange.”

Julie looked across the table at me. The overhead light scooped out shadows under her eyes. “Orange who?”

“Orange you glad I didn’t say banana?”

Under the table, Lenny’s leg was starting to bounce on his chair in a nagging twitch. I was glad David on the other side next to Sawyer. He squinted across the table but kept his calm. Mom started talking about Mrs. Burchart reading the scripture today. On the radio by the kitchen sink, Casey Kasom counted down the Top 40. Holding the number five spot for the second week in a row, The Things We Do For Love by 10CC.

David said, “Pass the salad.”

Red wedges of tomato slices were arranged so carefully around the edge of the salad in
front of me. Tomato art.

Lenny lifted the bowl and held it. “Where’s your manners? Say please,” he said.

David shot up. “Oh, for god’s sake. I can’t pretend this is normal.”

“Sit down,” Ma said. Lenny and Sawyer were up. Lenny said he didn’t do anything.

David called him an asshole and more. Sawyer was trying to talk them both down. Ma struggled to get up under the awkward weight of her pregnant belly, calling for everyone to sit down.

David threw his napkin on his chair and walked out.

Ma’s mouth tightened into a thin bead. “Everyone. Sit down.”

Lenny eased into his chair. He handed me the salad bowl. Ma stood at the end of the table. Her eyes were wide and blinking.

The sound of the front door slammed after David.

“Not like we didn’t do anything for him.”

“Stop it,” Ma said.

“Every goddamn trip to the library. This book or that goddamn book.”

“Not again,” she said.


“Astronomy Club,” Michael said, his voice so small I almost thought it was Julie.

“Astronomy Club!” Lenny said. Michael flinched.

“Goddamn Brainiac. Thinks he’s so smart. Like he knows everything. He doesn’t know.”

“Enough!” The china rattled. Her face was stretched tight over her jaw. “Leonard Ernest Wildish, that is enough.”

Michael was crying.

“You will not disrespect this family.”
Lenny folded his napkin on the table next to his plate as neat as if setting a place. He pushed back from the table, got caught in the tablecloth, banged his chair down, and went out the back door.

Ma’s bedroom door slammed behind her. I hadn’t even see her go. Sawyer sat across from me, looking at his plate. Michael was still sniffling, and Julie was rubbing a pink mark into the side of her face with one finger as if trying to get at something under her milky skin.

Outside, the afternoon sun was thin. Lenny was standing at the bottom of the stairs. Sawyer came out behind me. He had two cigarettes, lit them both and handed one to Lenny.

“Don’t go,” he said.

Julie tripped out the door as she pawed through the bottom of her purse. Her black mascara was smeared under one eye, and the red mark on her cheek looked like a burn. She’d found the keys to the Buick and held them up, triumphant.

“I wish you’d told me about Pops,” Lenny said. “You didn’t even try to find me.”

“We shouldn’t have to,” Sawyer said. He sounded mad, but then he looked sorry for it.

Sawyer sank back against the doorframe, head down as if he was tired. “We can’t figure this thing out unless you stay,” he said, his voice low.

Lenny plucked the pack of smokes from Sawyer’s shirt pocket. “It’s not that simple, sport.” He waved Julie off the porch. She tossed the keys in his direction, but he missed the catch. The keys landed on the driveway with a metallic splat under Pacer’s nose. Lenny made a show of getting his face licked, but he couldn’t hide the tremors in his hands as he fended off the dog. He started the Buick up hard, rattling the exhaust pipe. The rear window was busted, covered over with plastic and duct tape that buzzed with the backbeat of the radio. The engine revved.
Julie leaned over her rolled down window and shouted. “Tell your mom thanks for dinner.”

A cigarette butt flew into the street from Lenny’s side, and the Buick ground up the hill. The buzzing riff of a Heart song went on for blocks before it faded into the regular sounds of evening as if nothing had changed.
Chapter 14

I caught Lenny at the house once more time that spring. As far as I know, it was the last time he ever came back to the house in Factoria. At first, I thought an owl woke me. Two truncated longs and two shorts. It was a Great Horned owl, probably roosted in the hemlock out back. Its song called into my dream until it was the dream, and then I was awake. The night was deep and moonless, and maybe it was the owl or maybe it was the light in the window of the garage that filled me with dread.

My bikes were double locked out there, and with Pops still in in jail for a few more days, it was on me to do something. At the bike store, I’d worked for weeks to buy the parts to rebuild another touring bike, and I knew they were loose on the workbench along with my tools. At the kitchen door, I laced my shoes tight and, at the last minute, swapped out my baseball bat for the sawed-off axe handle Pops kept on a hook behind the back door for security. He’d drilled it through with a piece of rebar to weight the head and at the grip and set a leather wrist strap at the other end. I measured the balance of its swing in my hand. It was a real knock-it-out-of-the-park kind of solid.

Pacer read my anxiety and fell in at a close heel and without his usual friskiness. We crossed over the grass to avoid the gravel of the walkway. I debated a crashing in with a Dirty Harry move, but the door was ajar, so I eased it open. A single bare light bulb lit the workbench. Out of place in the center of the floor were a circular saw and a case of socket wrenches. Pacer slipped around my legs to pull up short near equipment, and then he made a beeline to corner, tail wagging.

“Jude. It’s me, you knucklehead.”

My held breath came out in a rush. “Goddamn it, Lenny. I would’ve smashed your head
Lenny pointed with the pair of needle-nose pliers. “At least you came equipped. Good boy.” He rubbed Pacer’s ears and straddled the workbench to crouch over a vise affixed to one end.

Under the bare light, Lenny’s face was gaunt and pitted with shadow that made his eyes seem too big for his face, and over the back of his left hand, a dark wound blackened his skin. My fear shifted. I jabbed the axe handle at him.

“What is wrong with you? You sneak back in the middle of the night for what?” I could feel my forced whisper rising.

“Keep it down,” he said, cupping both hands around the vise in front of him. “I don’t need the rest of the whole Wildish gang coming out now. After it went so well the last time we were all together.”

“Now?” I said. “Now? While you’re what?”

I was over the top of him. In the vise, a red and yellow marabou with a split shot at the head was nearly complete. Lenny’s signature red thread hung loose off the end. An assortment of hair and feathers were spread out on the surface next to a bobbin and the hackle pliers. I lowered the axe handle.

“You’re tying flies,” I said. “Perfect.”

He spun the last loop of red, tied it off. Mounted another hook. I pulled up a sawhorse and watched him work. It was 4:00 a.m. by the white face of the schoolroom clock on the wall. Pops had salvaged it from some place or another to add to the junk like everything else in this place. A flat-bottomed kayak balanced across the center rafters, waiting for a new finish. Our old bicycle frames hung on hooks, as if we’d get smaller someday and want them back. The wall of
camping gear was most orderly with bags and tents airing on pegs next to a row of packs and climbing ropes, racks of carabineers. Tent tarps were neatly stacked, and there was a crate of canteens of all sizes and another smaller crate full of tie-downs and bungee cords. Two fire shovels and several hatchets lined a pegboard, and on the floor, there were rows of coolers and a stack of deflated plastic water carriers. The air smelled of dirt and grass from the lawn mower and the rubber of old tires stacked to the ceiling in one corner.

Lenny tied three more flies, his hands moving with a grace detached from the nonsensical rambled about catching the spring salmon. He’d missed the run on the Columbia, but Wind River or Drano Lake should come on this week if it hadn’t already started. driftwood, something about him getting kicked out, and a trip somewhere. I couldn’t figure it out. He wrapped lead wire over a layer of tying thread and lacquer, applied white paint, and set another fly to dry. He wrapped two more bodies and tied one with whiskers and a tail before going back to the white marabou to add a yellow feather wing.

“Murders ‘em,” he said. “Every time.”

“What happened to your hand?” I said.

He turned it over. Out of sight out of mind. Shrugged. “Anyone know you’re out here? Hey, how’s about staking me? I could use some supplies.”

“Where you going?”

“Haven’t you heard anything I’ve been telling you? Jesus, Jude. You’re supposed to be the smart one.”

“You’ve mistaken me for David.”

Lenny grinned, and the manic crazy flickered in that moment so that I almost recognized him. As if none of this was happening. As if it was normal to be hiding out in the garage, tying
flies in the middle of the night. Going on about a salmon run. His words swirled as his deft fingers spun a tight knot. Silver tinsel. Yellow wings. As I watched him, the crazy drew up into meaning coded by the infection in his hand and his sickness on Easter. He wasn’t kicked out of a place—he was “kicking.” It wasn’t a word I had any reason to use in this new context, but I knew what it meant. It meant he’d been using heroin. His plan to go to the river was a plan to break its hold on him. To isolate long enough to purge the drugs that defaced his skin and body, hollowed his eyes, and blacked the tracks along his arms and on the back of his hand.

I closed my eyes. Lenny sighed with what may have been relief. “Oh, little brother. You got it. Got it now.”

I couldn’t look at him. “How long?” I said. “How long has this been going on?” I thought about Sawyer’s efforts to get him to stay the last time. “Sawyer knew, didn’t he? How did Sawyer know?”

“Maybe he’s smarter than you. Okay, that’s not right. How long indeed.”

He said he’d told Sawyer it was helping calm his mind. He thought it was the solution to the strings of days when he couldn’t sleep and the crash that came behind it.

“How long have we had Pacer? Not long after we got Pacer.”

That was all he could do. He became almost joyful, telling me again about the salmon runs. He had Julie’s car. He needed supplies for at least a week. Above us, the white face of the schoolroom clock glowed with its own light and the black second hand swept on with precision. Not junk, only discarded.

I let out a deep breath. “What do you have so far?”

He leapt from the bench. Dug around in a dirty duffle bag I hadn’t noticed on the floor. He fished through some loose clothes, papers, and a jangle of metal that sounded like tools.
Crowing with something like joy, he returned to the circle of light over the workbench and placed a single can of beans next to his new flies.

I picked up the can of beans. Checked the clock. “Better get a move on,” I said. “We’re running out of time.”

One time before Sawyer and before Michael was old enough, Pops geared the rest of us with overnight packs and took us through Idaho to a place called Cascade Corners at the bottom end of Yellowstone Park. It was the summer before I was in second grade, and I had just turned seven. Bechler trailhead was a mile or so past the ranger station. We left the truck parked in the dirt next to a small wooden trail marker. We hiked through a wide meadow deep with wild grass, and on the other side, an additional marker announced recent grizzly sightings on the trail with updates and locations dated as recently as the day before. Pops didn’t seem concerned, so we played it off. I remember Lenny called David a baby for digging out a set of bells to hang on his pack.

That was the trip we hiked over the Continental Divide three times. It was two days up to elevation, and two days back. Pops kept us on a fast pace, which was probably how he drove his training crews. Except that we were just kids. By the time David spotted a bear—the largest we’d ever seen perhaps to this day—we were too tired to be afraid. We stood on the lip of the meadow where the trail fell away to the river and regarded the enormous sow with her two cubs as if it was an everyday thing. She seemed relaxed as she meandered through the tall grass, stopping to turn up whole logs and paw the deadfall for insects that rose up around her in silver clouds.

The wind favored us, and the bear didn’t seem to know we were there. That night over the campfire, Pops said we were going to celebrate. He cooked everything we had left, as if our abundance of food would make up for the driving pace he’d exacted. We ate beans and wieners,
stewed beef over egg noodles, and Spam, which we ate straight from the can. We roasted marshmallows until we couldn’t stomach the sweetness and burned the rest into layers of blackened sugar that we scraped into the coals. It was the greatest meal of all times. We were kings of the campfire.

Pops bedded us in a single tent, and though we wouldn’t know it until morning, he stayed up all night with his pistol close and the fire roaring. We hiked out the next day without incident. It wasn’t until we heard him tell the story to Ma that we learned about the tracks along the creek where we got our water and, in the morning after that last night, how the same set of tracks circled our campsite. Paw prints as big as dinner plates, he told her.

In the pantry, I moved slowly so as not to make any noise, I picked a dozen canned goods, an unopened jar of mustard, and a jar of peanut butter. I packed a bunch of little potatoes in a bread sack, and from the fridge, I took a chunk of yellow cheese, bologna, and a loaf of bread. I wondered if Lenny remembered how close we were to that bear. Close enough to hear her sounds as she broke open those logs for her cubs.

Back in the garage, Lenny ate pieces of bread plain, ripping off the crusts and feeding them to Pacer. I stacked the cans next to his duffle bag for his approval. Beans, red and white. Chili with meat. Ravioli with cheese. Mandarin oranges. Chicken soup. Spaghetti-Os. Spam.

“That bear at Bechler,” he said. “Spam always makes me think about that trip.”

“Yes!” I tried to keep my whisper from getting too excited. “Let me come with you. I can help. Keep the fire. Haul gear. Whatever you need.”

He chewed another slice of bread. He seemed to be watching my mouth. I started to wonder what was on my face. I rubbed a hand over my chin. “What do you say? Ten minutes. Twenty, tops, and I can be ready to go.”
Pacer scooted closer. Lenny flipped him the last crust. He squinted, which set a crease between his clear eyes.

“Not this time. There’s no bears on this trip.” Snorted. “Did you see what I did there? Not this trip. Get it?” The crazy was back, and he chanted under his breath as he packed the food into his bag. Spam, spam, spam, spam. He slung the duffle over one shoulder.

At the end of the driveway, I grabbed Pacer’s collar. In the dark up the hill, the shape of the Buick with the busted out rear window was parked away from the streetlight. A dry rustle of the plastic flitted over the back. Trailing to one side was a streamer of loose duct tape.

“Let’s wake Sawyer,” I said. “He’ll know what to do.”

Lenny opened the trunk. Stowed the bag. Secured the back with a slow, hard click.

“You could change your mind,” I said.

“You could be taller,” Lenny said. He didn’t turn around, standing with his hands on the closed trunk. “You know Pops was only trying to distract us. He must’ve figured that bear would cut us off on our way back down. It’s why he hiked us so hard. He’d walked us into an inevitable disaster, and then it was a race to get out.”

Pacer whined, pulling at his collar. I let him go. Over the eastern rise of the Cascades, Venus was a silver gleam in the sky, powder blue.

“You better get,” Lenny said.

I wanted to say something. Wanted to wish him luck. Say he was my brother. Say more. I pointed my hand like a gun.

“Catch you on the other side.”

Pacer frisked around my legs. In the garage, the light bulb had been turned off. The workbench was clean, and there was no trace of Lenny’s fly tying. I had turned to leave when I
realized that the circular saw and the case of wrenches was gone. Not on the shelf or tucked away under the bench. Lenny must have squirreled the gear into his car while I was foraging in the kitchen. I should have been mad, but it made me smile. I thought I was doing the distracting. I held my hand up and measured Venus in the vee of my outstretched fingers, getting my bearings.

Outside my bedroom window, it wasn’t an owl but a robin that began its urgent song, calling up the sun. Down the hall, a door creaked. There was a clattering in the kitchen as Ma started the first pot of coffee. Soft snoring from Michael’s lower bunk. In the corner, Pacer pawed at his blanket, circled twice, and dropped with a contented sigh.
Chapter 15

April was warm and wet until the end of the month. Pops got out of jail in time for a week-long cold snap, with corn snow and days of hard rain. The gutters were drowned in cherry blossoms. Mornings the yard was streaked with frost, but the crocus and grape hyacinths came up anyway, followed by daffodils and tulips. As if no amount of divergent weather could hold back what was next.

The baby stopped moving one morning. Not that Ma explained it like that exactly. It was four weeks from the date circled on the calendar. She woke me to say they were going to the hospital.

“This baby’s giving me some trouble,” Ma said. “Best see the doctor to get it sorted out.” She touched my cheek as if to reassure us both. Her eyes glinted like metal. Pops had been working close to home, still on probation and driving on a work release. In the dark out front, he pulled the truck up close and lifted her into the cab. Ma called back to us to make sure everyone got to school.

Sawyer and I stood at the window as truck disappeared over the top of our lane. David stomped the mud from his shoes on the porch mat.

A few hours later, Pops was back. We hadn’t even finished breakfast. Ma had been checked into the hospital.

“She’s going to be just fine,” he said. He said the word twice. *Fine.* He stood in middle of the cold kitchen and looked at his hands, as if he’d made notes there and was checking for the right answer. We waited for him to say something else with our spoons suspended over cereal bowls, the kitchen clock tick-ticking.

Then there was Chris Pastornicky at the door. Sawyer grabbed his books, gym bag, mitt,
and baseball cleats. Pops followed them outside, and we heard the truck leave in a spurt of gravel. The gap in the curtains was enough to catch him speeding up the hill. “Do you think he’s going back to the hospital?”

“No idea,” David said. “I’m calling over there.”

I couldn’t catch my breath.

“Is Ma going to die?” Michael said. His arms were pulled inside his sweatshirt, and he was swinging the empty sleeves around him like helicopter blades.

“She’s not dying,” I said. “She’s in a hospital.”

“Sawyer’s Ma died.”

“Don’t be dumb.” I flicked the top of his head but then felt bad just as fast.

David gave me a look. “Whaddya think you’re Lenny now?”

He got someone on the phone and left a message.

Michael was sniffling a little. He was worried about his big performance at school the next day. His class was doing part of the May Day dance.

“Probably Ma will be home tomorrow,” David said.

After my classes, I went straight home. Tuesdays were the days I was supposed to study with Jo after school, but I came home instead. I had told her something was wrong with Ma, and Jo had looked like she was going to cry. She very nearly hugged me, which sent a rush of mixed impulses through my head and body. Once when Lenny was still around, he’d predicted that Jo and I would grow up, get married and have kids. Four strapping boys and one girl. That’s how he always said it. As if he was Carnac the Magnificent. The answer is four strapping boys and one girl.

The phone was ringing as I came through the door, and it was Mrs. Suzuki, Michael’s
teacher. Michael was still at the school. “He says your mother’s in the hospital?” She sounded confused.

“Yeah,” I said. “Something’s wrong with the baby.” I tripped over the words, my tongue too big for my mouth.

“I’m so sorry.” She sounded sorry. “Michael’s upset. Do you have someone who could come get him?”

Sunset Elementary was a short hike up the hill, the streets wide switchbacks and S-curves with houses on the sides. Michael skipped out of the classroom with a construction paper flower as if he’d forgotten to be sad. He hopped down the steps from the school, singing the May Day Carol. Again.

“If I have to listen to that damn song one more time,” I said, but not so loud as he might hear. Every year, Sunset Elementary made a big deal out of May Day in celebration of its sister city, Galway, in Ireland. There was singing, some dance numbers, and the playground tetherball poles were turned into May poles. This year, Michael’s second-grade class was doing a song where they pretended to be seed pods that popped up into flowers.

A low ceiling of clouds had moved in over us by the time we got to the house. Pacer pranced his white feet at us at the top of the porch steps.


David was making pancakes. The kitchen lights made everything yellow.

“Ma called,” David said. “She said Marlene Jenkins will drive her home in the morning. The doctors said she can come home tomorrow.” He chewed the inside of his lip.

“What else?” I said.

He looked at me, and I knew what he was going to say.
“She asked if Pops had called.”

I took out the frying pan from the cupboard. “I’ll pour the pancakes.”

The batter hissed and bubbled. “You should’ve used buttermilk,” I said. “Makes them fluffier.”

“Geez, you’re such a girl sometimes,” David said. “Where’s Sawyer?”

“Practice,” I said.

David gave a nod to the window. “Not for long.”

He broke a couple eggs into a bowl and whipped them with a fork. At the table, Michael was drawing rainbow stripes on his paper flower. He didn’t look up. “Did Ma go to have the baby?”

“No, stupid. It’s too early.”

“Jeremy Ryan said his mom had a baby. Ma asked me if I wanted a brother or a sister.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I said maybe a sister. Since we don’t have one.”

David’s fork fell with a thin clatter onto the table and then the floor. He knew something else, something he hadn’t said yet. My breath stuck in my throat, as if I’d swallowed something halfway down. David put his hands to his face. If a kid could be made with one parent, David was definitely our mother’s. His cheeks had the same round curve, his chin was wide and soft, and the color of his hair and eyes were darker than brown but not black, same as hers. Michael looked up.

Michael kept on about how his baby sister would be a good baby. “Don’t be sad,” he said. “You were a good baby, too.”

He ate through a humongous stack of cakes. David picked a crater into the center of his first pancake and piled it with the scrambled eggs he wasn’t eating. Another dozen pancakes
made a cold tower on a plate.

Sawyer came in from baseball and made a sandwich, rolling eggs into a pancake like a burrito. “Heard anything from the hospital?”

David looked stricken.

“Tomorrow,” I said. “She said she’ll be home tomorrow.” I tried to make it sound cavalier, but my words came out in a thin squeak.

Jo showed up with a plate of Toll House cookies. She had come to get Michael ready for his performance. She’d brought felt and glue and glitter. Working at the table, she used the pattern Michael had brought from school. She cut a crown and a sash. We glued cutout seed pods along the sash in a different color felt, and Michael put glitter on everything. It was an adequate seed pod, as far as seed pods go. Michael stuck it with a bunch of red and gold stars.

“I better get home,” Jo said. “Call me if you need anything. Tell your mom I’m thinking of her.”

Michael looked half asleep in his chair, pink and green marker on his fingers and a little smear on his face. David tucked him in. “Can Jude read to me?” he said.

“Okay. But only a little,” David said. He signaled me to come talk to him when I was done.

I read to him from my latest book about keeping electric sheep until his breathing slowed. Outside my window, I heard Pacer race across the yard, chasing a thrown ball. Soft as I could, I disengaged from Sawyer’s bed and crept toward the door.

“Leave it open,” Michael said. “A crack.”

Outside, Pacer frisked out from the corner of the porch, a slobbery baseball in his mouth.
He rolled over, and I rubbed his tummy. With the lights off, the shape of Sawyer was the darkest corner of the porch. Even knowing he was there, his voice startled me.

“Michael in bed?” he said.

“Hey, man. How long you been out here?”

The orange butt of a cigarette made a brief glow. He looked like he’d been crying, and that made me scared to ask anything more. The empty slab where the Smokey Bear truck usually parked was a dark mouth that might swallow us whole if the truck did not return. Out in the swamp the frogs were shrill. Next month even the smallest puddles would be filled with black tadpoles.

The screen door huffed open. David tried to talk, but his voice was tight and strained. He cleared his throat. “I’ll tell you the same thing I told Sawyer. Ma says the baby’s heart stopped. She says the baby’s dead.”

The fear in my chest jolted into my stomach. I thought I might throw up. I laced my fingers into Pacer’s thick fur.

“They did a surgery today to take the baby out. She might be home tomorrow. But it could be another day,” he said.

I couldn’t breathe. It was as if I’d had the wind knocked out of me. Jo had told me how her mother lost a baby. A miscarriage, she’d called it. One day she was pregnant. The next day she wasn’t. But this was different. Ma had been all pregnant. The baby was almost ready to be born. Had stretched Ma in to a big pregnant shape. The images spun in my head. Even Pops, standing in the kitchen, looking at his hands.

None of us had any good ideas about what to do. It was impossible to know where Pops had gone. I counted the days to figure if Lenny should be back. What it meant that he hadn’t
shown up after the ten days of his plan. My head seemed wracked by something too big to even cry about.

“How does this even happen?” I said, but mostly to myself.

Singing frogs answered in the dark. Pacer squirmed in my lap. Sawyer whistled, and the Pacer’s ears sprang up.

He handed me the box of Marlboros. “Passing the torch,” he said. “No pun intended.”

“Ha ha,” I said. Neither of us laughed. I wondered if he’d been crying for his mother or mine.

Sawyer left for school early, which left me and David to prepare Michael for his performance. He ate his cold cereal and looked skeptical as we put off his questions about Ma.

“Well, when did she say?” Michael said.

“She didn’t,” I said. “The doctor is in charge of her. Right?”

David focused on getting Michael’s costume together. He looked like he hadn’t slept. I packed Michael’s lunch, and David walked him up the hill to his school.

After lunch, the ninth grade met in the gym for an assembly that was Vice Principal Morris talking about our class transitioning to the high school next year. Pre-registration for high school was in two weeks. *Yours is a class of opportunity,* he said.


As I made my way out of the auditorium, Mr. Morris’s voice began again. *Yours is a class of opportunity,*
They sent me over to the elementary school. In the second-grade classroom, Michael. He wore the green sash, and he looked like he’d been crying. A teacher’s aide was sitting with him.

“You’re Jude?” she said. “He won’t tell us what’s wrong.”

Michael pushed his head into my chest and almost knocked me down.

“What’s up, buddy?” I said.

He’d forgotten his crown, left on the kitchen table at home. I nodded. “Don’t worry.”

There was a blue Mercedes in the driveway, so I went around back and through the kitchen. Michael’s crown was on the table, right where he’d forgotten it. There was fresh coffee on, and I could hear water running in the back bathroom. A man’s voice came from the back.

“Darlene?”

I ducked around the corner. Ma was in the hall, her back to me. Her feet were bare and her old robe hung loose around her body. She shuffled her feet, head down, hands holding to the wall as she made her way to the bedroom, stooped over, feet wide apart.

Cold sweat pricked my face and neck, and I had visions of a dead baby and the owner of that unfamiliar voice in our house. I backed down the hall and into Mr. Barrett from Ma’s church. He stepped backwards fast. We eyed each other from across the hall. He was taller than Pops, with narrow shoulders and long, thin arms that hung bony hands out the ends of his dress shirt.

“I didn’t see you there, son. I was,” he pointed to the coffee maker, “I was getting something for your mother.”

“Coffee,” I said.

“Yes.”
I’d seen him at church. I tried to picture him anywhere else but couldn’t think of another
time I’d seen him. He was clean-shaven and wore a blue tie that matched the blue stripe in his
dress shirt. The rush of what I knew I didn’t know threatened to close my throat.

“You picked her up at the hospital,” I said.

He frowned. “You’re Jude, right? Or David?”

Pacer charged in from the yard, skidding on the wood floor. Perhaps he’d heard my
voice. Or Mr. Barrett’s. He barked twice his white paws pumping up and down. Mr. Barrett
stretched a hand out.

“Don’t touch my dog,” I said. My voice sounded like someone else. I caught Pacer by the
collar, pulled him back to sit at my feet. “Don’t take coffee to my mother.”

“Now, son,” he said.

I straightened up. If I was wrong, I’d pay for it later. “We’re not your family, Mr.
Barrett.”

The man stared. He looked at Pacer sitting at my feet. Over my shoulder at the empty
hallway.

“I think I should leave,” he said.

I knocked on the door to my mother’s room even though it was open. She was on the bed,
half-sitting, trying to get a pillow under her legs. Her face shifted when she saw me. She looked
at the cup of coffee in my hand. Outside, Mr. Barrett’s car started up. Gravel popped under the
wheels as his backed away. Ma didn’t say anything, only started to cry. On the chair in the
corner, a hospital bag spilled a collection of blue and white pads. I set the coffee on the
nightstand next to her pink princess phone. She handed me the pillow, and I helped her get it
under her knees, tucking a blanket around her as if she was a child.

“Michael’s program is starting,” I said.

She leaned her head back, tears dripping off the bottom of her chin. Her breath caught in a small hiccup.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

In the kitchen, I grabbed Michael’s crown.

The choir was on the risers getting ready to start. I put up a hand like a stop sign so Michael wouldn’t break rank. In the chaos of crepe paper and glittering stars, he stood as majestic as royalty while his teacher put the crown on his head. Center stage, the fifth graders began their dance, and everyone was moving with astounding grace through the promenade. Parents clapped. The lines of kids began to trail into the center courtyard to begin the May Day Carol. Crepe paper spun around the tetherball poles.

The second-graders moved down the risers in rows with their matching seed pod sashes. On cue, they curled up to sit on their feet. The fairy girls twirled and spun around them in choreographed order, tapping each of the seed pods with their fairy wands. With the tap of the wand, each green-felt seed pod rose up into a flower, their leaf-hands reaching to the sky, crepe paper petals flowing down from their crowns.

Michael’s class was on the far side. Mothers smiled and waved to their children. Fathers in suits and ties with their Instamatics took pictures. One woman lifted her glasses with a question on her face, peering into center stage.

The crepe paper flowers circled around one kid still on the ground—Michael. My head pounded out the speed of my heart. Michael was curled into a tight ball, arms around his legs.
The other kids were calling his name, and the fairy girls had their little stick wands out, tapping him. They tapped Michael, and he held tight to his legs, holding on as if for dear life, refusing to come out of his seed pod.

The music stalled. The dancers stood blinking at each other, looking over their shoulders at each other as if someone would tell them what to do. A woman’s voice called out to start again, and the chorus came in late after the piano in a disarray of voices and music.

I stood up. I had no idea.

I pushed through the fairy girls and knelt next to Michael. I touched his back.

“Hey, little buddy,” I said. “Let’s go home.” Michael uncurled under my hand. I pulled him up to my chest and lifted him. He wrapped his skinny legs around my waist and rested his head on my shoulder, arms around my neck.

The rest of the kids stood back, and I carried Michael off the stage.
Chapter 16

The baby was considered a stillborn, a girl taken nearly full term without ever having drawn a single breath. For nearly a month, Ma rarely came out of her room. We didn’t know whether to creep past her door or pound it down. The times she did come out, it would freeze us into silence. She wore the same pink housecoat every day. The skin of her face was gray and folded, and sometimes her eyes squinted like she couldn’t see. None of us dared ask her how she was doing, as if even a single word would break her apart. Sometimes we could hear her crying behind the closed bedroom door usually late at night.

Michael left flowers on the floor outside the closed bedroom door. He’d line them up on the threshold. Thin wild daisies and stalks of purple lupine picked from the sides of the road by our house. They were wilting floral bodies lined up just like the headless mice our new orange cat, Beeker, left on the back porch or on the kitchen rug if the window got left open all night.

Pops didn’t come back, or if he did, we didn’t see him. Somehow Ma knew where he was. I heard her telling her sister he’d taken a shift at one of the lookout towers up to Snohomish for the fire season. It must have been true because she taped a notepaper to the fridge with a thin scrawl of numbers for the emergency radio frequency.

Jack called but couldn’t come. Ma’s sisters tried to get her to come to Indiana. Father Andrew came by a few times, but Ma refused to see him. Some of the women from church, Mrs. Tillson and the widow, Mrs. Babiak, brought dinner to us. But then Mrs. Tillson said that everything happens for a reason. *It’s all part of God’s plan*, she said. And Ma said, *God must be a real bastard then*. The women stopped coming after that.

The summer was layered with clouds and a little sunlight. Sawyer took a full-time job at the filling station out past the 7-Eleven in Factoria. Jo’s family went on vacation to San Diego
and the Grand Canyon, and I guess I split my riding my bike and moping around the library. The record store closed, but I still worked weekends at the bike shop and sometimes during the week when there were a lot of repairs. If any of us was home, we mostly watched TV. That was the summer of news going on about the nuclear arms race until the President finally went to Vienna to sign a treaty with the Russians that David said would never last.

We discovered that David was a decent cook, and the rickety TV trays became permanent fixtures as we ate dinner around the TV every night. By the end of June, we’d seen NASA launch another satellite to orbit Earth and Pete Rose hit in every game with the Reds that would become a record streak. Ma had healed enough to come out to the kitchen during the day even if she didn’t always cook dinner. Some days we ate cold cheese sandwiches and Fritos and called it good.

Then one day Ma appeared dressed in what used to be her favorite dress. We hadn’t seen it for a long time, and Sawyer said he’d never seen it before. It was a black and red dress with the swoopy skirt and an open neckline that showed her collarbones. Her hair was done up, and she wore a touch of blue makeup around her eyes. But the most shocking for us was the red lipstick and the red heeled shoes. We were dumbfounded.

She slung the thin black strap of a new purse over her shoulder.

“Sawyer, I need a ride. Looks like you’re it.”

He jumped like he’d been snake-bit. “Yes, ma’am. Where we going?”

Ma kissed Michael on the cheek. She swiped at the red smear on his face with her thumb. “I’m going to get that sonofabitch father of yours,” she said. “It’s high time we got ourselves together. We’re Wildish, after all.”

She waved from the window of Sawyer’s truck. “I’ll be back by supper,” she said.
Sawyer returned to report that Ma had directed him to a specific car dealership, where she paid cash for a used station wagon with wood-paneled sides.

After two days, Ma called to say it was going to take longer than she expected. She talked to David for almost an hour, making him write down different numbers and names. Jack was sending him some money and she gave him instructions to pick it up so we could get groceries or whatever we needed. She had a room at a motel in Wenatchee. There was only a payphone in the lobby, so she’d have to call us again in a couple of days. David said she must have run out of quarters for the payphone because it cut her off at the end without saying goodbye.

That night we played a hundred hands of *Go Fish*, and I let Michael beat me at Backgammon a couple times before bed. He was suspicious of my deflection techniques and ended up falling asleep on the couch watching *Baretta*. I didn’t wake him. I covered him with Uncle Jack’s red horse-blanket and let him sleep. We were all anxious.

It was two full weeks before Ma pulled up in the driveway. She was all business in a pair of jeans and a shirt that said *Wenatchee High School* and those red-heeled shoes that snapped as briskly up the steps as when she’d gone. She instructed Sawyer and David to the car and Michael and me to keep Pacer on the porch. *So as not to be underfoot*, she said. She opened the back. Pops was as weak as a baby bird and smelled bitter, like disinfectant or moth balls. His beard was thick and streaked with gray. Ma ran a bath, and from behind the closed bathroom door, Pops hollered. “Too cold, bitch!”

If she answered, none of us heard it.

The Smokey Bear Truck was wrecked. Pops had totaled it in a single-car accident, driving off an embankment drunk. He’d either been in a hospital or jail or both. Ma wouldn’t tell
us how she’d found him or what it took to bring him back, but Sawyer said that she’d taken a
two-foot piece of rebar from the back of her new car and asked him to get rid of it for her. When
he ribbed her about disposing of the murder weapon, she only smiled and gave him a pat on the
shoulder.

“Thanks,” she said. “That’ll be enough out of you today.”

Pops sobered up enough to be remorseful. He never worked another day for the Forest
Service, and he ended up doing some additional jail time for a list of altercations he’d accrued in
the time he’d been away.

In all my life, I only heard them talk about the questions I had after seeing Mr. Barrett in
the kitchen that day. It was years later after we’d left the place in Factoria, and their argument
was mild compared to their track record. Pops was sick with the flu, and she was making soup
while he sat at the table with a blanket wrapped around his body. You can be such a child, she’d
said. She told him she expected more from the father of her children. Somehow that gave him
space to say that he didn’t know if all of her children were his.

“Then you’re a fool as well,” Ma said.

I never heard them speak of it again.
Chapter 17

By the time Lenny called in July, he couldn’t be trusted and everyone knew it, even if no one said it out loud. It was a regular Thursday, and I was the only one home when the phone rang. I slid down the hallway in my socks to answer it, Pacer nipping at my heels and sweatshirt, all play and slobber.


On the other end of the line, a garble of noise and a hacking gasp.

I squinted, as if that would make it clearer. “Listen, pal,” I said. “If you think this is some kind of a joke.”

“Jude,” Lenny said.

“Lenny?”

“Jude. I think Julie’s dead.”

“What?”

The mantle clock chimed the hour. Over the line, I could hear Lenny coughing. More coughing.

“Julie,” he said. “She might be dead. She was breathing, and then.” Incomprehensible static. As if the connection was broken, and we were little kids again, pulling to keep the string taut between our tin can telephone system from the tree-house to the canvas Forest Service tent in the yard.

Pacer nudged his muzzle up under my arm. I pushed him away. If only Sawyer was home, he’d know what to do. He’d come in from work at night, grease on his shirt and his face. He’d pretend to wipe his hands on his shirt front to make Ma scold him. If he was home, maybe he’d have known it was Lenny on the phone before I could tell him. He’d have said, *Tell that*
son-of-a-bitch brother he still owes me $15 dollars.

I pressed the receiver to my ear as if to divine my brother’s place in the world through the static. “Where are you?”

Lenny hiccupped. “Sawyer will know.”

“Sawyer’s not here. How do I find you?”

The dial tone sounded.

I raced to my room. Pacer scrabbled close behind. I felt under my mattress for my secret savings stashed in the pages a MAD Magazine. I didn’t know why I needed money, but this was an emergency. Pacer licked my hands as I counted the bills. Forty-six dollars. I jammed it all into my pocket.

It was 4:30 pm, and Sawyer would be done with his shift soon. I ran my bike down the steps, caught a pedal with one foot and swung over, a single sweep, body and bicycle, that launched me down the driveway. The new sprockets on this bike spun a satisfying buzz. I dropped into gear and pumped hard up the hill. David was coming down the walk with a bag from the music store, and he hollered something.

“Don’t let the dog out,” I said.

The rush of air on my face was brisk with the iron smell of rain. I made the turn toward the shopping plaza. The orange 76 ball glowed over a blockade of construction on the new intersection. I cut through a dirt drop behind the 7-Eleven with its window-wide banner:

Superfriends Slurpees.

At the gas station, a Jeep wagon with wood side-panels was up on the rack, Sawyer under the nose, arms deep into the engine cavity. He was talking over his shoulder to someone at the back of the shop. Country music whined over a radio. Or maybe it was Olivia Newton John.
I braked hard alongside the yellow floor jack. “Lenny says Julie’s dead.”

Sawyer dragged me outside, bike and all. Between gasps, I repeated the entire phone conversation. He looked as if I’d punched him in the face. “Get in the truck,” he said.

I stared after him. He clocked out, and I had to scramble after him. We were pulling out of the station when David and Michael skidded up on their bikes. Sawyer slammed his palm on the steering wheel. “Why we always got to turn everything into a family fucking circus?”

“Leave them,” I said.

David was lifting his bike over the tailgate when Sawyer popped the clutch, and the truck lurched forward. A green Plymouth honked from the street. Sawyer swore, gears grinding. David heaved his bike over the side and rode the bumper. “What the hell?” he shouted.

I opened the slider window. “Could you not bang your piece-of-shit on mine?”

Whether he knew we needed them or because he’d never left any of us behind before, Sawyer stopped the truck and lifted Michael’s bike into the back. David and Michael scooted up against the metal toolbox mounted at the top of the truck bed, bikes at their feet.

We were pulling onto the freeway when David hollered in through the window.

“Where’re we going?”

I yelled back. “Lenny’s in trouble.”

“Again?” he said. I thought David might jump out of the truck. He slapped the back window, as if I’d tricked him into coming.

“Hey!” Sawyer said. “My truck.”

I shrugged at David.

He raised his middle finger.
We drove over the Lake Washington Bridge, water chopped up along one side, smooth on the other as if the bridge cut a breach between two worlds of water. Air pulsed into my ears from the open windows. Sawyer hunched forward over the steering wheel as if reading our way from the lines on the road. Over the lake, we dropped through Seattle to the raised highway. Late sunlight glanced off the Puget Sound, and out from the docks, a ferry cut through the glare, headed to Bainbridge Island, a white vee trailing behind.

Traffic got messy, and we slowed, the whine of the truck less frantic. Sawyer sighed, as if waking up. With one hand, he rubbed the side of his face. We passed a cement plant and another shipping yard before Sawyer turned off at White Center—Rat City. Narrow rows of matching houses with covered porches lined the streets. The truck banged in and out of potholes. Sawyer turned at a brown duplex onto another block of slumped houses. The late sunlight sent blue shadows across the crumbled sidewalks.

Sawyer stopped in front of a pale green house with falling-down porch. The red Buick with plastic taped across the back window was parked in the driveway of the house. A crow squawked from the top of a telephone pole. It crouched and glided on silent wings to an orange-skinned madrone at the end of the block. Behind a low chain link fence, patches of new grass pushed through the scraggle of brown. Everything was soft and beat down like slow erosion. Old riverbeds and snowmelt. Nothing as abrupt as a dead girl. Dead. Certainly not the yellow-haired girl with scooped out shadows under her eyes who’d sat at our kitchen table and laughed at Michael’s stupid knock-knock jokes.

The engine ticked and sighed, and then everything was quiet.

“You’re with me,” Sawyer said.

The back door was open. Inside, a sweet, sick smell like apple cider and cat piss made me
breathe through my mouth. A hallway was narrowed by stacked cardboard boxes and newspapers tied with string on one side. There was no furniture, the rooms littered with junk, cinderblocks, hills of paper debris and cardboard. Sawyer grabbed my arm to keep me from stepping into a paint bucket of dark liquid. A fly buzzed near my head, and I ducked, hands up.

Sawyer checked each of the bedrooms as we went. There were signs of occupation—blankets or sleeping bags and piles of clothes. On the floor of the last bedroom, Lenny was sitting on the edge of a stained mattress. He was dirty in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved flannel shirt open over his bare chest. His feet were bare. Garbage was piled in the corners of the room and a fine dust from the flaking plaster walls and ceilings covered everything in a gray snow. In the low light, I didn’t see Julie at first. Then there was the shape of her naked legs stretched out behind Lenny. Bruises the size of my fist mottled the skin of her arms and the backs of her legs. She lay face down. Maybe it wasn’t even her.

Lenny looked up at Sawyer. “She had a pulse.”

“Are you sure?” Sawyer said. “When did you check?” He bent over her head at the top of the mattress and held his fingers down, maybe in front of her nose or mouth. On the floor in a metal pie tin, there was a syringe with a bent needle and a spoon burned black. Tiny moon slices of a cigarette filter.

Lenny’s cheeks were sunken to his teeth. “I gave her the first hit, and then she was out,” he said. “I checked, and she was breathing. I thought she was.” A cigarette was clenched in his lips. Her skin was as blue as ice in the light from the broken window.

“Goddamn forgot my goddamn sleeping bag,” Lenny said.

Sawyer looked at the ceiling and then at me, his eyes strange with uncertainty. “She’s alive. But if we leave her here, she’ll die.”
I stared. My body felt heavy, as if weighted down from inside. As if all the air in my lungs had become solid and was pulling me down.

Sawyer’s voice sounded strange and far away. “Did you call anyone else?” he said.

Lenny shook his head.

“Her mother?”

“No.”

Lenny picked up a beer can and shook it, flicked his ash inside.

“Goddammit,” Sawyer said. “Don’t touch anything else.”

Lenny stubbed out his cigarette in the can and walked out of the room. Sawyer grabbed a dirty sweatshirt that looked like it could have been one of his.

“Put some clothes on her,” he said. He pointed over the mattress. “The rest of her clothes have to be somewhere. I’ll be right back.” He went after Lenny. “Grab anything that looks like it’s Lenny’s.”

A ratty tube sock was stuck to the end of the mattress, thick with plaster dust. I leaned over the corner of the mattress. The small curve of Julie’s chin rested on her shoulder, her mouth a surprised round “O.” Her eyes were blue. She gasped with the noise like the coo of a dove.

I nearly fell backwards into a pile of magazines and blackened candle stubs. Empty beer cans clanged down around me.

“Christ,” Sawyer said. “Quit fucking around. We’re leaving. Now.”

We got a t-shirt over her head and her arms like bird bones into the big sleeves. Sawyer dug a zippered sweatshirt out of the corner, shook it hard, and swaddled her like a baby. Picked her up. I followed him. The mop of Julie’s blonde hair peeked over his shoulder. Her bare white feet dangled over his arm.
A yellow cat tensed in the overgrown lawn and skittered away. David and Michael were in the back of the truck as Lenny climbed in, sandwiching Michael in the middle. Sawyer put Julie into my lap. Her body was weightless in the bulk of the sweatshirt, and she smelled like mold. I lifted my elbow, and her head slid to my shoulder. Her eyes were closed.

Sawyer was driving and talking over me, straining the gears as he cut corners and bounced the truck through an empty intersection. I was dizzy and carsick. My head felt like the inside of a bubble and Sawyer’s voice was far away. Lake Burien flashed by.

“Jude!”

The red brick of the Highland Hospital rose before us. The truck engine hummed and popped. Sawyer’s big hand was cupped around the back of my neck. He stroked my head, his voice low and calm. “Keep it together, little brother. We’re almost there. You’re doing great.”

I nodded. Gulpéd in a breath as if coming up from deep underwater. Sawyer was focused, his directions specific and clear. He ordered the other three out of the truck to wait behind some squared-off bushed at the end of the block. With the same calm clarity, he opened the glove box for a grease pencil and wrote a number on one of Julie’s white thighs as he talked through the rest of the plan. I felt myself nod as a new terror pricked my skin along my arms. He pointed to a set of doors. At the corner up the street.

“You can do this,” he said, tipping his head.

Sawyer eased the truck into the horseshoe drive marked Emergency. Reached across to pop the door. I swung my feet out and slid down until my shoes hit the pavement. Balanced Julie across my chest, I tried not to think of her as dead.

“Don’t forget what I said. You found her at the lake.”

The glass doors opened before me. I tripped but didn’t fall. Julie’s head shifted, her face
slipped in against my ear as if she was telling me a secret or kissing me goodbye.

I called for help. A man in blue scrubs came running from somewhere I couldn’t see, and I startled, clinging to Julie as the man tried to lift her away until I realized what he was doing and let him take her. I repeated my story to the abrupt flurry of people in scrubs and gloves. They put Julie up on a gurney. There was a plastic bubble over her mouth and nose. Wheeled her down the hallway, calling stats to each other. Picking up speed.

Dizzy, I stopped running with them. The emergency current flowed past, left me standing in the center of the white-tiled hallway. At the end of the hall, they turned the gurney, and I caught a glimpse of Julie, her blonde hair, a thin hand, and the white-blue skin of her leg marked with the orange grease pencil that spelled out her full name with a phone number that was not local.

The road into Munro Park wound downhill through tall firs. At the bottom of the hill, Sawyer brakes hard, spinning the truck sideways and tearing up dirt and grass. He was out the door almost before the truck stopped. David and Lenny were coming over the tailgate when Sawyer grabbed Lenny by his shirt and dragged him down. They fell together, twisting and punching.

Michael screamed for them to stop. He crouched as if to jump into the brawl, but David snagged him by his belt loops.

“Not your fight,” he said.

Maybe that’s all they’d ever had—one long fight broken by short bouts of calm.

Continuing rain with scattered sunshine.

Sawyer got Lenny in a headlock. Lenny’s arms swung wide. Gravel ground under their
sneakers and pinged against the metal of the truck. They grappled in each other’s arms, awkward and kicking. Sawyer got in a short punch. Blood was smeared on his arm. Lenny’s shirt was pulled up to his neck, and his hair hung in long, greasy strings. Over his back, his ribs and the ridge of his spine were bumped up under the skin. Sawyer found his feet and dragged them both up, breathing hard. Lenny coughed, an asthmatic bark.

Lenny pleaded Sawyer’s name. His nose was bleeding.

Sawyer held him by the ragged sweatshirt. Tipped his head as if calculating the odds. He shoved Lenny back, and then laid down a single, hard right. Lenny’s head snapped sideways. He dropped like a wet sandbag.

Michael yelped. He squirmed out of David’s grasp and slid down to cradle Lenny’s head.

Sawyer stood over them. Spit his own blood into the dirt. “Fuckin’ junkie,” he said.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You did this. To us. To that girl.” His voice got caught in the words. “I hope she survives for her own sake.”

The tide shifted in like a slow pulse in the deepening light, shuffling the small, round rocks against the shore in a low growl like thunder misplaced. Branches of fir flailed over our heads. We stood in the thrum of this place, our loss for words replaced by wind and the water.

Lenny twitched. He let out a soft moan. The sound seemed to strike Sawyer, screwing up his face with pain, as if whatever was twisting inside of him had come up through his skin and eyes. I thought he might scream at us, Michael on the ground with Lenny, and David perched on the edge of the sand. He turned hard and got in the truck. The door slammed behind him.

I used the dime in my shoe to call Ma at work from the payphone by the visitor’s center. Sawyer was still sitting in his truck with his head bent over the wheel, and I watched him close
while I made up a story for Ma. I wondered if Sawyer was right about detoxing Lenny. Maybe Sawyer was thinking right now about driving away, with or without us. He was blurred behind the windshield.

Sawyer didn’t look at me as I slid into the passenger side. He held his right hand tight to his chest. One of his knuckles was split open. The cab was thick with cigarette smoke, and with his smoking hand, he flipped me the keys.

“Make yourself useful,” he said. “Unlock the toolbox and grab a couple of tarps.”

“Ma said maybe we should bring home some actual fish this time.”

A small smile turned his mouth. He dragged in another smoke. He let his eyes close for a moment. He reached over me into the open glove box for a flashlight. “You’re a terrible liar,” he said.

We anchored a tarp to the seawall and spread another over the clumps of sea grass along a sand spit that reached out into the Sound like a finger, where dried foam made patterned loops along the edge. A drainage pipe poked out from the seawall and ran a clear stream of water over the sand.

David dug a pit for a fire. The shovel struck hard and deliberate. Lenny curled inside his sweatshirt against the trunk of a log half-buried in sand. He shivered as if chilled from somewhere inside himself and rocked with his knees held to his chest. When he began to vomit, I brought him a canteen of water.

All of us wanted to know how Sawyer knew where to find Lenny, but we knew better than to ask. The answer would come out eventually, never bald-faced or easy, but coy as deer and more often as not, camouflaged in the shades of our own skin and hair and hand-me-down Toughskins jeans, so that if we looked sideways at each other, we’d catch a glimpse of its truth,
and in the end, marvel how we could’ve ever missed it.

Sawyer stood out on the spit and threw rocks. He wound up tight and launched each rock with such ferocity as to reach Vashon Island or somewhere beyond. We sat around the fire. It was late. Pops would have bedded us down by then. *Early to bed and early to rise.* Except we all knew that was more about the whiskey than one of his teaching philosophies. Getting us out of his hair on those nights would let him drink until dawn. He’d taught us just as much about drinking as he did about mountaineering. Or how to identify trees and medicinal plants. Or before that, when I was small enough to sit on his knee behind the wheel of the Packard, how he’d let me steer down the dirt lane to our house. We were bound to him by his teachings—the trees and plants, the Smokey Bear truck, fishing, even the familiar amber smell of his whiskey.

Family love, Pops had told us over more than one campfire, is rooted beyond our parents and their parents. It reaches forward and back. It leaves us smack in the middle. Boondoggled, he told us. Get used to that. How everything spins without being completely understandable. How it keeps us together despite everything we do wrong. Despite our own stupidity, or arrogance, or sickness.

Blood pumped hard in my head and chest. My spit tasted like metal. Maybe we needed Pops to tell us again. Maybe we weren’t strong enough on our own.

But then without anyone saying so, David went to the edge of the pit and stoked back the bottom piece of wood so that a rush of air broke through the red glow, and the fire burst into renewed flames just as Michael added another piece of wood that caught at once and began to pop and spark. We breathed in the musk of salt and smoke and sand, the wind, and the sounds of Sawyer’s pain and Lenny’s sickness. Firelight reflected off David’s face. He touched his fingers to his cheek, and I knew that we’d done everything we could. The fire cracked. A spray of
embers lifted and caught the wind so that they spun sideways into the dark.

In the morning, Lenny was gone, along with my new bicycle.
In the days and months after Lenny disappeared with my bicycle from Munroe Park, the three of us would go out to look for him whenever we could. We drove through White Center, block by block. Knocked on apartment doors in brick tenements that were built around hollow centers of nothing, an aviary of abandoned washing machines, seat-less chairs, couch cushions with exploded stuffing, discarded detritus of poverty. We waded through garbage-filled stairwells. Breathed through our mouths in hallways bitter with the stench of old filth and human waste. Walked slow through downtown alleyways. The junkies in doorways and under highway risers were vague and amiable. Sawyer seemed to know his way around, knew some of them by name, which apartments to check. Sometimes he’d slip a few dollars to one or another of the sallow, hollow-eyed men, boys really, not much older than any of us.

One night as we drove home across the floating bridge, another unsuccessful tramping around in the dregs of the city, David called him out.

“How many times did you find him before?” he said.

I was straddled over the gear shift between them in the small truck. Sawyer didn’t answer, but he tensed. His cigarette was balanced between his thumb and the bulky white cast on the broken wrist that would require two more surgeries to fix.

David looked long and hard across the cab of the truck at Sawyer. It was the last time he ever went out with us. Sawyer and I searched for few more weeks, but then Sawyer didn’t ask me again. He may have gone out by himself a couple more times. If it was true that he had
hunted Lenny down before, he couldn’t find him now. Which meant Lenny had left his familiar haunts. Or something worse. If Sawyer checked the morgues and hospitals, he didn’t say.

The first year, I think we half-expected Lenny to show up one morning for breakfast, drop into the chair at the head of the table, scoop some eggs and potatoes onto a plate and ask Michael to pass the juice. Just like that. We made up stories to explain his absence. Gave him a life away from us, something adventurous. Stowed away at sea to Thailand. Jumped freight trains across the lower forty-eight. Drove dogs in the Arctic. Anything besides what we supposed was the truth, especially as the years accumulated, one behind the other, without any word. The more time passed, the less we were able to talk about him.

To hear Pops tell the story of our exodus out of Factoria, he had no choice. The Mercer slough had been partially drained to make way for a new business complex, and one morning, signs appeared in front of our house: Future Site of the NEW Factoria Mall Parking. The fine print and a flyer in our mailbox explained how our entire street had been folded into the latest round of commercial rezoning. We burned those first signs in a white-hot bonfire behind the garage. The next night, Sawyer and I blacked our faces with the ashes, and armed with orange and blue spray paint from the Ernst Home Center, we tagged every street corner, sidewalk, and brick retainer with sets of marks that matched the work from the surveyors.

But it was inevitable. Real estate was suddenly hot in the midst of the construction boom. Sawyer finished an apprenticeship program after his graduation and had steady work on with a framing crew that was knocking out strip malls and tract homes out toward Issaquah where there used to be nothing but cow pastures. Pops swore he was going to be the last house on the block. He went on about his rights and cursed eminent domain. How the city would take the very roof over our heads by sleight of hand or by force, according to Pops.
Some of it was probably true, but I think it David’s move finally did it. Only weeks after his high school graduation, he moved out. He turned down a full ride to Stanford and took a job and an apartment up in Redmond with a new company called Microsoft. It was the easiest move we’d ever do for David because he had nothing. A couple of cardboard boxes in the back of Sawyer’s new truck, ten minutes to Redmond, and we left him standing in an empty apartment.

David’s move unsettled Pops more than his getting fired from the Forest Service or his years of being out of work. Up until then, he hadn’t kept any kind of job outside of a brief stint on a recovery crew when the Hood Canal Bridge sank into the Puget Sound. He seemed shameless about spending his days parked in front of the television. Ma was working double shifts at Bartell Drugs to keep us from going under, paying the bills and buying his whiskey. But the day we packed David’s suitcase and books into Sawyer’s truck and hauled him away to Redmond, Pops was undone. Within the month, he’d sold the house in Factoria and called in what were probably the last of his favors for a job on a maintenance crew of a golf.

Sawyer was working in Tam O’Shanter at the time, and he made a deal with the contractor to work off the down payment one of the new houses in a tract he was building. It was what Ma called “a modest four-bedroom,” but it was twice as big as the house in Factoria. Sawyer helped her pick the lot toward the top of Bennet Hill and away from the fancier houses that lined the golf course. It was nearly six months before the house was complete with its red brick façade and a proper garage.

Tam O’Shanter was an innocuous community off Bennett Hill on the west shore of Lake Sammamish. Its wide paved streets curled through the natural-looking hillside dells and cultivated stands of hemlock and solitary pines. Ranch houses with matching gabled roofs squatted in seemly rows behind the landscaped swells, retaining walls of railroad ties and white
cinderblock, curbed sidewalks, driveways, and manicured lawns.

Toward the lake, the golf course opened up to the sky. A cement aqueduct disguised with river rocks cut through the heart of the greens and strung together three small lakes—not much bigger than ponds by Wildish standards. The flat gray water mirrored the drift of clouds.

The row of houses with similar floor plans stretched to the north and south, and across the street, there was a private park with tennis courts and a community center strategically placed inside trim thickets of young trees. The front yard was planted with three scrawny locust saplings, and at the end of the driveway, the mailbox was encased in a red-brick pedestal. A set of shiny house numbers were mounted on the curb side and embedded in the bricks on the driveway side was an iron hitching ring.

We were out of our league, but Ma loved the house. Inside, the entry was some kind of gray stone that met with the plush off-white carpet of the sunken living room, the space framed by black wrought-iron railings and an open ceiling. The centerpiece of the room was a white fireplace over a stone hearth with a river-rocked chimney that rose straight up into the apex of the rafters. At the back half of the house, the dining room and kitchen were separated by a bank of cabinets and a wide bar, complete with a set of padded stools. Sliding glass doors opened onto a patio, the house extending in an L-shape on the north side of the yard. Down the hall from the garage, two bedrooms were interconnected by the full bathroom between them, another bedroom across the hall, and the master suite looked out over the patio through another set of sliding glass.

Ma was as happy as I’d ever seen her. On moving day, she was so intent on making a good impression that while we were still hauling in the big furniture, she was in the kitchen busting out the kitchen boxes to whip up a bunch of pies for the neighbors. She was the Welcome Wagon in reverse. If anyone found their place in Tam O’ Shanter, it was Ma.
For the rest of us, the shift was night to day. Except for Sawyer, we’d only ever known was how the sun rose into the kitchen windows and set outside our bedrooms, now flipped around, east to west. The move shifted our bearings and displaced the familiar landmarks. Michael was the one to say the one thing all of us had been thinking.

“Do you think Lenny will know where to find us?” he said. He was kneeling on the floor over an open box marked *Kitchen knick-knacks*. The smell of hot apple pie hung over us, Ma off on another delivery. Pops grunted from the patio as he and Sawyer maneuvered the dining table in through the glass doors.

“Turn it up,” Pops said. Tipped the table so its legs stuck straight up, a beetle flipped on its back, swung it around to land on its feet.

Pops wiped his head with a red shop rag. His hair was thinning on top so the sweat glistened off a bare spot at the front of his forehead. “Your brother was always one to follow his nose,” he said.

Michael unwrapped a green glass bowl from the crush of newspaper and placed it in the center of the table. He’d transferred mid-year to the Bellevue Junior High School even though he could have returned to Newport for one more year to graduate there. Maybe Ma had pressured him a bit, but he’d opted for the new school. After this last growth spurt, he was almost as tall as Sawyer, only scrawny and tan, sun-bleached hair nearly white.

“Sure,” I said. “Like how Santa can find you anywhere.”

“That again,” Michael said.

Sawyer wiped his face with his shirt front and held up both hands in surrender. “I know. I know. We never should have told you about Santa,” he said. “We were wrong. It was wrong of us.”
“I was six, for god’s sake,” Michael said. “What the hell.”

“Yet you still hold it against us. No one is really responsible for the destruction of your childhood. Childhood should be destroyed over time. Systematically.”

Michael threw some shadow-punches at him. Pops stuck his head in from the kitchen.

“Watch the roughhousing,” he said. “Your Ma gets back from the neighbors, and she’ll have all our hides.” He stuffed the red rag into his back pocket where it hung out like a small flag.

Sawyer wiped his hand over a smile and leaned back on a pile of books to catch his breath. He was taller than Pops now, shoulders wide and lean, arms thick and muscular with his new carpenter’s job. I figured I would be lucky to end up somewhere in between Pops and Sawyer, maybe about like David. Who knew where Michael would end up. And with a pang, I remember thinking that it was possible we’d never know about Lenny.

That first Christmas in Tam O’Shanter, Ma didn’t hang Lenny’s stocking with the rest of them. Not even a space between Sawyer’s red-and-green and David’s white-and-blue in the order on the mantel, although there was a single unwrapped gift left under the tree that year, red shiny paper tied with a velvet ribbon and a snowman sticker with no name written in the “To” or “From.” As the years accumulated with no word, the vague sense of dread remained, a tick of anxiety, like waking up too early in a silent darkness, not remembering where you were.
Chapter 19

Summer was an anomaly in Washington. If the rains didn’t break before the Fourth of July, Ma would call it *another summer of green tomatoes*. It started out to be that kind of summer, but by July we were hard into a regular heat wave. Temperatures in the upper 90s with no rain. Jo and I had graduated together from the University of Washington, and we were engaged, but without a set date. We’d planned to wait another year, but that was the summer David eloped with his long-term girlfriend, Rachel, and Ma had was so upset by what she considered a slight, that Jo said we’d better make our intentions clear.

We announced our engagement plans for December with mixed results. I got a stern talking to from Dr. Brown, and Jo was coerced into putting off the wedding until the next summer. Their family vacation was already booked to Greece that summer, and I sure hoped Jo wouldn’t come back all talked out of getting married at all. Sawyer helped me pick out a small pink diamond, and then he paid for the setting when it was all I could afford to buy the stone. He waved off my argument that I had to pay for it myself. He said it would be better if the woman I loved headed off to Greece with a ring on her finger.

Ma wanted a fence and jumped on the dry weather to get it built, mostly to get Pacer out from under everyone’s feet. Inside the house, he was everywhere at once. Chained in the yard, he languished in his own tragic drama, howling low and mournful at the hint of any siren near or far. Ma had joined the Tams Board by then. She’d discovered a talent for working with people in her job at the pharmacy, and it moved her up the ladders on the job and in her new social life. She plied the board with pie and an unfailing stubbornness until we became be the first on the block to be able to put up a fence. The neighborhood covenants drew the line against chain link, so Pops drew up a plan for a board fence. He figured for the lumber, snapped lines and marked
where we would set the posts in cement.

I had a part-time job at the university and another at a pizza joint in Bellevue. With Jo gone, I worked as many double shifts as I could get, putting miles on my bike to put off buying a car. I’d pieced together from parts. The narrow two-lane road from Tam O’Shanter hugged the west shore of Lake Sammamish under a bowered tunnel of maples and alder. Sunlight peppered the lacy canopy, diffused enough so that I’d only be half sweat-soaked in the heat by the time I rode to work. By the time my evening shift ended, summer dusk filled the with the gray light that would last until late evening.

The day we were supposed to start the fence, I got stuck at work. In the blue dusk, I headed out, pumping hard through the tunnel under I-90. Gravel kicked up behind me and all around the air was heavy with the smell of the lake and everything green warmed through. My tires buzzed on the pavement. On the incline, I tipped side-to-side, the torque of gears and wheels up through the soles of my feet and legs in a satisfying force.

From behind, there came the jangle of cans and the honk of Sawyer’s truck. I waved a hand, and from the passenger window, Pops waved back, one hand up, a stack of red-and-white chicken buckets on his lap. Sawyer honked again, and the truck rattled around the next turn in the road like an aluminum junker.

The Tams maintenance job hadn’t gone well for Pops. If anybody asked, he’d say it was because he didn’t fit with the younger tee-time crowd, but it was more of the same. The long stretch of being unemployed after the Forest Service fired him only confirmed for Ma what she’d always known about his drinking. If his stories had once been accurate about an occasional drunken binge, they were no longer true. Even though he’d cut back, he still had a drink every day.
Sawyer was working a big union construction job down at the Boeing plant and knew someone who knew someone who got Pops a job on the 737 assembly line. Pops had too many outstanding fines to get his driver’s license back, so Sawyer drove him to work every day. To stay in Ma’s good graces, Pops said he’d cut back on his drinking, and I guess he did. He switched from whiskey to beer. Riding with Sawyer to and from his new job at the Boeing plant, the bed of Sawyer’s truck soon filled with Pops’ empty cans—Old Milwaukie, Hamms, and a few Budweisers—tossed through the slider window on the drive home.

At the house, Sawyer laughed at me. “We thought you’d never get here.”

“You could have stopped if you were that concerned,” I said.

Sawyer waved me over. “Who said I was concerned?”

They’d set the posts without me. Sawyer was tying off lines and heights with string for the fence boards, and David and I set to cutting the boards, David calculating the board lengths to perfection. I suggested we start a family fencing company.

“We’d make a good go of it,” I said.

Pops said for me to hold his line while he ran a second line toward the street. David took off his leather gloves, slapped them against his leg to loosen the dirt, and said this would be the last fence he would ever have to build. He’d been promoted.

“Someone will build the next fence for me,” he said. “Besides, you and Jo are college graduates. Professional white collars.”

“I don’t know if Jo considers teaching second graders white collar,” I said.

Pops hollered. “Let ‘er go.” He rolled up his string line and headed to the house. “That’s it for the time being. Buy you boys a drink?”

David punched me in the shoulder. Gave me an upside-down smile.
We ate fried chicken out of the bucket on the glass-topped patio table. Mashed potatoes, brown gravy, corn on the cob, and a yellow biscuit. I locked my bicycle to the water meter with a length of thick chain and popped the front wheel off the forks.

“That’s a fancy car out front. Fiat?” Sawyer said.

“Can I borrow it?” Michael said.

“Not on your life,” David said.

A covey of mourning doves flew up from their roost to the neighbor’s roof in a wild *whup-whup* of flight. Pacer leaped up to survey the flock, gauging whether he could herd them to safety. Odd against him, he sighed and flopped down on the grass. Next to the umbrella table, Ma slid in next to Pops at the edge of the patio where he was smoking. She didn’t say anything, just sidled up to him, and he draped his free arm over her shoulder. David arched an eyebrow upwards and looked away, the moment too fragile to even be observed. Pops flicked the butt of his cigarette into the gravel border that marked the path of the fence we would build the next day and stood with his arm around Ma.

“Jo called,” Ma said, without turning her head.

“She did?” I put down my fork.

“She didn’t know you’d taken extra shifts.” Ma straightened. Pops slid his hand down from her shoulder, slowed at the curve of her back before he stepped back and lit another cigarette. Ma turned, her cheeks pink that was more than just the reflection of porch lights. With one hand, she smoothed a stray loop of hair over her ear on one side and smiled as she walked past me to the house.

“Jo said she’s having a good time and she’ll be back in a week,” Ma said.
My breath caught like a stitch in my chest, and I could only nod.

“She said to tell you not to worry.” Her cool hand brushed my forehead. “See? Don’t you worry.”

Pacer brought me a tennis ball he might have swiped from across the street. The old apple basket full of baseballs hadn’t made the move to Tam O’Shanter. It had gone the way of our childhood stuff, including the old pitching mound that Lenny and Sawyer had paced out behind the garage and marked it with an official rubber, a narrow white slab anchored by an aluminum post at the edge of the yard. They’d practiced there for hours.

“Remember when you were going to pitch for the Dodgers and I was going to join the Marines and make a career out of it?”

“We were stupid kids,” Sawyer said. In the dark, his lighter flared.

“You smoke too much,” I said.

“You talk too much,” Sawyer said.

I threw the tennis ball for Pacer a couple of times, and we sat in the dark.

“We could be astronauts,” Sawyer said. “Remember? Lenny used to always say that.” He looked out over the yard. “But we’re not.”
Chapter 20

Our luck had seemed to change. We didn’t mark its exact shift but noticed it in retrospect. Jo and I finally got married in 1990. I’d been accepted into a graduate program in genetics, and she was still teaching at Green Lake Elementary. Our one room apartment in university housing the size of Pops’ old garage. Sawyer started up his own construction company and started hiring out to all the major developers. As the building industry slowed, his reputation for being skilled and straightforward kept him busy when other crews were out of work. David bought a house on Lake Sammamish and traded his Fiat for an Audi. He gave Ma her first home computer, and he bought a boat and a pair of Irish Wolfhounds, which he named England and Marten.

Michael graduated from high school with honors and joined the Marines. Uncle Jack came for his swearing in and the Boot-camp party we threw for him. Michael was only a couple weeks into boot camp when Pacer died. Ma said he died of a broken heart with Michael gone. Ma and Pops remained in red brick-faced house in Tam O’Shanter, becoming regulars at the Tams Club, especially on bridge night.

Around Labor Day, I started to get Michael’s letters. The first one came in a distinct blue envelope with Michael’s handwriting scrawled across the front: PFC Michael A. Wildish, USMC HMA-775. San Diego. I opened it straight out of the mailbox as I stood on the in front of our apartment building.
August 24, 1990

Dear Jude,

I got re-assigned overseas and am headed to Germany first and then to my final destination. I still dream about Pacer. Not dreams about him so much as he happens to be in almost every dream. I dreamed about Amanda Barnett the other night, and all I can remember is that Pacer was laying by the door like he used to. Pops would get so mad, saying if he wanted a doorstop he’d get himself an oak log. Sometimes when I hear a dog bark on the street or in a yard nearby, it makes me stop and check. Like it’s him. Damn dog could have at least waited until I came back. I miss a lot of stuff. You all. Ma’s cooking. Amanda Barnett. Please talk to Ma and tell her I am fine. I tried to write her a hundred times and don’t know what to say except that I am fine.

Michael – PFC
USMC HMA – 775

The morning fog had burned off, and a single crest of gray-on-gray clouds hung low to the north. The rest of the sky was a swath of blue like late bachelors’ buttons. The air smelled of dry leaves and wood smoke. Michael’s destination was far from here, beyond the scrawled blue ink on this blue rice-leaf paper. I sat down on the cement wall next to the row of covered parking to read the letter all the way through one more time.

My neighbor Mick pulled up. A trail of blue smoke followed his late-model Volvo into the end space. Mick swung a backpack up onto the roof of the car and zipped open a side pocket.
He was so tall it was as if he had to unfold his frame as he got out of the car. His thick hands made the pack look like a child’s bag. Looking over the roof, he waved.

“Hello, Jude Wildish!” He was always happy to see either of us, me or Jo. His direct, pale eyes were edged in crinkles that spread out with an easy smile from his wide mouth. “Hello!”

I rubbed my cheek with one hand. “Mick.”

He came around the car to the curb and stood over me. “Bad news?” he said. “From home?”


Mick nodded his head. “They say there’s trouble. In the Middle East. I do not know enough about it. But I read about it in Time magazine. You know the one? You are worried for him. You are a good brother.”

I agreed, both of us bobbing our heads. “I am worried. Yup,” I said.

“I will put your brother in our prayers, Jude Wildish.”

I could only thank him with a nod. My throat was constricted and buzzing.

I hurried to my car and sat behind the wheel, holding it with both hands. Closed my eyes. Michael catching a fish in Coal Creek. Betting on the Mariners games. Fighting the kid who made fun of him every day in 4th grade and losing. Winning the second fight. Taking a punch from Lenny. Giving one back. Throwing the baseball in the gray light of a summer night. Michael to me. To Sawyer. David. Back to me. Lenny. The ball landing in our well-oiled mitts with a smack.
I called home to talk to Ma from my research lab after teaching my morning classes. The phone rang too many times. Pops answered.

“Jude,” I said. “It’s Jude. Did you disconnect the answering machine again? How come you disconnected the machine?”

“Can’t think why we need it. If it’s important, folks will call back.”

“But I could leave you a message if you’re not there.”

“And here I am. Why would you leave a message, Judah Benjamin? What they paying you to go to school for?”

“Pops,” I said.

“God didn’t give out brains for decoration.”

“Ok, Pops.”

“Well, what’s the message?”


“Well, spit it out, boy. Good thing we don’t got a machine recording this.”

He was either stone cold sober or lit up. It was hard to tell the difference. “Are you drinking, Pops? I thought you were cutting back. Not drinking,” I said.

“You thought we had an answering machine. That’ll teach you.”

“Pops. Forget the answering machine.” I said.

“Oh, sure. Now forget it.”

A persistent beeping began in the other room. I leaned back in my desk chair and squinted through the doorway at the incubator and the light flashing orange on the front panel.

“Pops,” I said. “Where’s Ma?”

“Said the yeast was no good. Got all blustery.”
“Is Ma there? Let me talk to her, Pops.”

“Your Ma ain’t making bread ‘til she’s got good yeast,” he said. He mumbled something else, and then he cursed, and there was a hard thumping and a rattle in the receiver that was the phone being dropped. When he came back, I said, “When Ma gets home, tell her I got a letter from Michael. He’s shipping to Germany.”

“Germany. Got it.”

“Yeah. But Pops, Michael says he’s fine. Tell Ma he’s fine.”

“Michael’s in Germany and he’s fine.”

“Yes. Tell her to call me tonight. At home. I’ll be home tonight. Be sure to tell her Michael is fine.”

The line was dead. Pops had hung up.

The phone box jangled as I banged the receiver down. “Goddam drunk.”

Marilyn the lab supervisor called down the hall over the sound of the incubator alarm.

“Will someone please check the temp in that bleeping unit?”

“Bleeping on it,” I said.
September 12, 1990

Dear Jude,

I guess I’m not in Germany any more. I’m refitting carburetors and conditioning trucks. I don’t know how much I can say or if I’m even supposed to say all that. Things are hopping off. It’s hot here like high summer. Maybe high summer in New Mexico. You remember Brian Zabel from the old neighborhood? We ended up in the same division. We went to grade school together, and I guess he’s good with a dry fly. At least that’s what he tells me. We already made plans to hit the river for a fish-off when we get back. Don’t let Sawyer take my best lures.

Michael

USMC HMA – 775
Chapter 22

Jo had been frantic for Christmas dinner at Ma’s table. She’d made three different practice batches of rolls to get ready. Everyone in our building got rolls that week. The night before her big bread debut, Jo went to be early, feverish and coughing. I begged out of the family dinner. We opened all of our presents that night to try to make up for missing the party.

A few days later when Jo wasn’t any better, I took her to the University clinic. She had strep throat. The short trip exhausted her. I got her home and went out for the prescription and some chicken soup in a can.

Ma was at the apartment by the time I got back. Jo was asleep on the couch. There were wrapped gifts for us on the dining table next to the paper Christmas tree made for Jo by her second-grade students with glue and glitter. Ma brought homemade turkey soup and a Tupperware of leftovers with all the trimmings, including a pile of Parkhouse rolls, her specialty, and half of a pie. The bathroom had been cleaned, and Ma was washing the breakfast dishes I’d left in the sink. I tried not to feel guilty.

“All those germy kids at her school,” I said. “They’re little germ factories in sneakers.”

“It’ll make her stronger. You’ll see,” Ma said. “Where’s your tea? That coffee will taste bad until the infection works its way out.”

“Jack’s slipping if he let this much pie get away from him.”

“David made the pumpkin and two cherry.”

I talked around an enormous bite. “Tell him it’s adequate.”

“I left you toothbrushes. Throw away the old ones after Jo’s been on penicillin for 24 hours. That means tomorrow night. Yours, too. And those wet towels need to get into the laundry tonight.”
Ma set a fresh glass of water for Jo on the side table.

“Call me tomorrow. You’ll come to dinner next week before Jack leaves town.”

I bent to hug her as she shrugged into her coat. She kissed my forehead like she did when I was a kid, checking for a fever. “What’s the diagnosis, Dr. Wildish?”

She gave my cheek a soft slap. “Make sure she takes every pill until they’re gone. Even after she feels better.”

In the bathroom, I left the orange prescription bottle strategically placed next to the wheel of birth control pills and two unopened toothbrushes.

On New Year’s Eve, freezing temperatures created freezing fog, which coated all the trees in white. Jo’s bicycle on our second-story deck became a bleached skeleton. The air was bitter with wood smoke. Under the streetlamps, a fine snow glittered in the yellow lights. Any real snowfall would immobilize the city, but the streets were wet when we went to bed.

In the morning, there was six inches on the ground, and wide, wet flakes still coming down. By the time we’d driven the short distance to the floating bridge on 520, traffic was at a standstill. It took an hour to get to Tam O’Shanter. Everything was white. On Bennett Hill, the rattle of chains on the sand trucks rang like sleigh bells. The snow damped the sounds of traffic and amplified the scrape of a snow shovel down the block or the bark of a dog.

Jack was out back with David and a couple of cigars, and I was anxious to ask him about the sale of the old Wildish farm. Pops had been tightlipped about the details, but I knew his share had been enough to almost pay off the house. Ma said Pops had gone to Karl’s for the bowl games. Or the poker. And she’d expected Sawyer back long before now. He’d gone to the old
neighborhood in Factoria to see Chris Pastornicky. We’d all heard how Pastornicky had been traded to the Royals, but he must have been home visiting his folks for the holidays.

We ate chowder in the kitchen, and then Ma served up pie in the living room. David’s two dogs took up the entire leather sectional on the far side of the living room, so we sat on the orange couch on the other side. The Christmas tree was still up, and Ma said she’d thought she would take it down tomorrow. The television was on with the sound turned down for the news and a rolling montage of images on the soundless screen. Oil refineries. Troops in brown fatigues. Maps of the Persian Gulf. Rows of tanks on a dirt road.

A car pulled up out front, and the dogs launched from the couch toward the door as if they owned the place. Jo tipped back the edge of the curtain.


I opened the door. Peering up from the thick crook of Sawyer’s arm was Cheryl Longley, one of the original Barbie Girls from my junior high school. I hadn’t seen Cheryl since graduation. She was still busty and pretty, but there was a sharpness in her face that I didn’t recognize. She staggered under Sawyer’s weight.

“What happened? Good God almighty.”

The front of Sawyer’s KISS shirt wet. He smelled of alcohol and vomit.

“Party’s over for this one,” Cheryl said. Her attempt to smile vanished as Sawyer swayed over the threshold. Jack stepped in on Cheryl’s side. I yelled at the dogs. They were like moving roadblocks. They snuffed at Sawyer and shoved their heads rudely at Cheryl’s legs.

We dragged him to the couch. He screwed up his eyes as if the blinking strings of Christmas lights were spotlights.

“Drinking, huh?” I said.
“Drank,” Sawyer said. “Drunk.” He held one finger up to his lips. “Don’t tell Ma.”

Ma stood with her hands on her hips. “Don’t tell me what?” She shooed the dogs into the kitchen, her jaw tight like I remember every time someone brought Pops home drunk. She retreated into the kitchen where a cupboard banged.

“Too late,” Jack said.

Sawyer covered his forehead and eyes with his hand.

“Jo, can you see if you can find him a clean shirt?” I said. “Check Michael’s room.”

Cheryl knelt next to the couch.

“How’d you get to be designated driver?” I said.

“Probably not what you think,” she said. I started to protest, and she cut me off.

“Your brother took a table in my section at the Y-Not this afternoon until Pete—my boss—cut him off. My shift was over,” she said, as if that explained everything. She said he’d gotten sick in the street.

“That’s nasty,” I said.

“At least it wasn’t in my car.”

Cheryl’s laugh was sweet and soft. I tried to remember why I thought I didn’t like her. She pulled her hair back and secured it with an elastic hair-tie. Watching from the couch, Sawyer looked as if he’d gotten the wind knocked out of him.

“Did you leave his truck at Pastornicky’s?”

She gave me a cool sizing up. “Not my turn to keep track, Wildish. You think he should’ve driven himself?”

Jo seemed to come out of nowhere with a tray of coffee. She embraced Cheryl long and hard. “It’s been forever,” she said.

“Except maybe for my dad,” Jo said. “Dads are always the last to know. Right?”

“Ain’t that the truth.” They both laughed.

I worked a cup of coffee into Sawyer’s hands. “Let’s get you fixed up.”

Jo circled an arm around Cheryl’s waist as if they’d always been best friends and guided her into the kitchen. “Some fine mess you got yourself into. Darlene, you remember Cheryl Longley?”

The kitchen had somehow become a restricted space. A spoon rang in a cup. A chair scraped back. The unfamiliar murmur of women’s voices sounded geese in an open field. Or music.

Sawyer was staring bleary-eyed over the rim of his coffee cup. “Women. Gotta love ‘em.”

I glared. “What the hell are you doing?”

“What? You don’t love women?” His words ran together like slurry. He drank down almost half of his coffee even though it was hot.

Jack unfolded the clean shirt Jo had found. “C’mon, Casanova. Let’s lose the puke.”

Sawyer stripped off the wet shirt. He was lean and more bulked up than I’d ever seen him. He motioned for Jack, as if he was going to tell him a secret.

“I’m going to marry that girl,” he said.

Jack forced the clean shirt over Sawyer’s head. “I’d probably wait until at least tomorrow,” Jack said. “You don’t want your anniversary to always conflict with all the football games.”
Sawyer nodded and touched his nose with one finger. “When you’re right, you’re right,” he said. I balled up the soiled shirt and forced the clean one over his head. It was an old 49ers jersey, red and gold, too small so that it stretched tight across Sawyer’s chest. He pinched the gold helmet on the shirt and pulled it off his chest like he was holding it out to me.

“San Francisco,” he said. “Really?”

“That the fuck up,” I said.

He looked surprised, and for a brief moment, his eyes cleared as if he hadn’t been drinking at all. He smiled a small, real smile and closed his eyes. With a hand up over his face, he leaned into the couch and within minutes, he was asleep. The mantle clock clicked at the top of the hour and rang eleven. Ma started fussing with pillows and sheets for what beds we had. I pretended not to listen as Cheryl made a phone call in the hall to say she wouldn’t be home.

“I’m sure you don’t,” she said. “Not my problem. You’re not a child. You didn’t need me the other night when you didn’t come home. Not the same thing. Not until the snow clears. Surely, it won’t last.”

From the couch where I thought he was asleep, Sawyer whispered, “Don’t call me Shirley.” I swallowed hard to keep from laughing.

Ma called over to Karl and Jane’s and talked to Pops about digging out the Lincoln in the morning.

“David?” Ma said into the phone. “Oh sure, he’s got that big fancy truck. But he’s gone off to Mexico for the holiday. Remember? That’s why we have the dogs. No. Sawyer left his truck at some bar. You’ll have to ask him. Jude and Jo are here,” she said. “Don’t you miss out on seeing them.”

Jo poked a finger in my ribs, made a victory sign with her fingers, her words without
sound. *We win,* she said silently. It was an unspoken contest for her to get Ma’s approval.

The lights flickered, and the power went out. It wasn’t five minutes and Ma had flashlights and candles out. I stoked the fire and hauled in more wood, the glass windows over the fireplace inset projecting a deep orange light into the room. Ma lit two fat candles for the coffee table, and we played a couple rounds of Scrabble, the red and silver glass balls of the Christmas tree reflected the fire and the candles like a string of golden lights. Ma took up some knitting in her rocker. Jo sat with me on the floor in the La-Z-Boy, and Cheryl had curled up on the far end of the couch with one of Ma’s knitted afghans. The dogs took up the rest of the floor.

Jo alphabetized the game tiles, grouping in tidy rows. “When I was a kid, my sister and I always wanted to sleep under the Christmas tree. With our heads right up under the lights. Rosemary said it was like having stars on us. Family tradition.”

Ma’s needles clicked a soft ticking pattern. A low snore rose up from Sawyer on the couch, and Jo giggled. Ma glanced over her work. “There’s the most predominant Wildish tradition.”

I yawned. “Gee. Thanks, Ma. Love you, too.”

Cheryl gathered the lacy edge of the afghan into her hands like a soft fan. “What’s your secret, Mrs. Wildish? After all these years.”

Ma’s needles didn’t miss a tick. “Acquiescence,” she said. “Pick your battles.”

Jo patted my leg and leaned her head against my shoulder. The fire whistled in the stove.

“Snowed in on New Year’s Eve,” I said.

Cheryl snorted a little through her nose. “Been worse off,” she said. “More than once. Besides, it won’t last. We’ll all be out by morning.”

“Or at least by next year,” I said, and laughed at my own joke.
“Out with the old,” Jo said.

Cheryl gave her a nod. “And good riddance, I say. It’s got to get better from here. Right?” she said.

None of us answered. In the flicker of candles burning low, Cheryl looked around the room, eyebrows up in look of mild surprise. From the couch, Sawyer breathed out a soft snore. Ma’s knitting needles tick-ticked from her chair in the corner.

The clock rang midnight, and Ma trussed up the ball of yarn and stuck it through with her needles. “That’s it then,” she said, and before there could be any creative speculation, she asked Jo to help her get some beds made. “Cheryl, you can have Michael’s room since he’s away. We’ll have it made up for you in a jiffy.”

By morning there was almost a foot of snow on the ground. The red line of the thermometer was stuck down at 14 degrees and not rising in the gray daylight. Our little Datsun was a mound of white on a set of bald tires parked square behind the Lincoln in the driveway. We were debating whether we could dig one out and move the other when Pops showed up on a pair of borrowed snowshoes, his breath frosted into his mustache. Packed in a gallon of Dairy’O and a case of Old Milwaukee.

Cheryl didn’t seem in any hurry to leave and even found Pops entertaining as he told her the same stories we’d heard over and over. We set up a raucous tournament of Scrabble, changed the rules to allow words in any direction, even diagonal, and used the Boggle timer to keep the game moving. Ma put some beef stew on the camp stove, and when the power came back on, she shooed us all out of the back to let Cheryl and Jo get first crack at the hot water in the deep jetted tub in the master bathroom.
After what seemed like hours, Jo emerged with her head turbaned in a towel. Cheryl wore a pair of sweat pants and one of Sawyer’s old Heart shirts, her skin pink and smelling like Ma’s bath powder. I sat at the kitchen table and watched Jo and Cheryl move through my mother’s kitchen, setting the table with napkins and full silverware set at each place, chatting comfortable with Ma about huckleberry pies and cutting her hair and how she got books and a crocheted afghan for Christmas. Mysteries I wouldn’t have known existed without Jo. I wondered how it would have been for Ma if the baby that would have been our sister had lived. Even if it wasn’t Pops’ baby. What we’d look like now. Except if there was anything we knew for sure, it’s that there’s no going back.

Sawyer slept late and then seemed off his game for the rest of the day. Cheryl seemed to have his number, the way Ma would tell it later, this girl who had once been a target of Wildish contempt—especially from Lenny who had baited her without mercy during school. Love’s a funny thing, Ma would say. You can’t predict who you’ll love. That day we were snowed in, I’d catch Sawyer watching her, his face serious, eyes crinkled in the corners with surprise, as if he’d been caught off guard by something not unpleasant. Of course we didn’t let him off the hook for his drunken entrance the night before, including Ma, and Sawyer knew better than to protest her shake down by comparison made our ribbing easy to shrug off.

The freezing temperatures broke and the day began to shift and drip. We shoveled out Cheryl’s car, a newer Jeep Cherokee, and she drove Sawyer out to the Y-Not to retrieve his truck, hoping it hadn’t been towed. Odds were good that the city had been too busy with the snow to tag it yet. He called to say he’d gotten home, truck and all.

As the early dark set in, Pops hunkered down in front of the television for the news, and
the lull in the evening settled around us. I led Jo through the kitchen and through the back, the
two great silver dogs clamoring along behind us.

“We could get our car out, too, baby. Go home for the night,” I said.

Jo had found one of my old coats and was intent on getting the zipper to mesh up. She
had an ugly scarf draped over her neck, something Ma had given her, and it bunched up around
her face, blocking her view.

“There’s time tomorrow,” she said, muffled in her concentration. “Besides, your tires are
as bald as a baby’s butt. We couldn’t get up Bennett Hill if our life depended on it.”

Outside along the edge of the doorframe, a flick of light caught a reflection of metal. I
reached up for a stray nail or broken wire. “Still,” I said. “We could have made it. What do you
think? I don’t think Sawyer’s new girl likes me very much.”

“Cheryl? She doesn’t not like you.” she said.

“What does that mean?”

Feeling along the doorframe, something sharp stung into my finger. I jerked back my
hand. The pad of my index finger was pierced with a barbed hook of a tied fly. A black ghost
marabou, yellow tail on a single hook.

“Hey!” I said. “This is one of my favorites. How’d you know?”

“It means she doesn’t know you to know what she thinks. Cheryl.” Jo glanced at my
hands. “You have a favorite bug?” Near the doorway, she pulled on a pair of my boots. Marten
pushed past her legs and dashed into the snow, England close behind. They made lapped the yard
in a breakneck spray of snow and fur and play.

A breath of air breached the corner of the house, ruffled the feathers of the lure stuck in
my finger. I eased the point out, and a bead of blood drew up behind it. I tucked the tail feather
under the barbed hook. Sucked on the end of my finger, blood like metal in my mouth and an old ache like dread.

“Be nice to her,” Jo said. “Your brother like hers. Plus she’s been through enough of her own shit. She doesn’t need more of yours. Look at this. How often does this happen? Never.” She threw a handful of snow at me, shrieked as I returned her fire. Dodging the dogs, she trundled over an unbroken section of white.

The earlier temperatures had softened the surface that had since re-frozen into a light crust. Our boots squeaked against the snow. The moon was bright, cold air stinging in our throats and noses. The dogs huffed another lap around the yard.

I caught Jo at the corner of the patio, tugged on her hand. Her too-big boots slid out from under her, and she almost fell. I grabbed her up close. She lifted her chin, and I kissed her, warmed by an internal rising heat. She eased back, discrete and careful, our breath melding into a cloud of white.

“Snow day,” she said. The tip of her finger touched my face. “There won’t be class tomorrow. We’ll get one more day.”

“I wish there was always snow,” I said.

“Really?” Her head ducked down under my chin and pressed against my chest. “I wish it was warmer.”


Her laugh made me think of a bird. “Oh,” she said. “Does that mean I get to snore and fart? Maybe scratch myself in public?”

I scooped up a handful of ice snow and tried to stick it down the back of her neck.
“Goofball,” I said.

She mimicked Ma’s soft drawl. “It’s the Wildish legacy, girls,” she said. “It’s all you can hope for.” For as much time as we spent together, Jo continued to surprise me. Made me laugh, mostly at myself. I tried to keep her hand as we tromped boots over the patio, criss-crossing our tracks into geometric shapes. One of the dogs cut close around us, body leaning into the turn like a motorcycle racer, circling out to the fence and back.

Jo said Ma was going to teach her how to make an apple pie in the morning.

“She’s got a good heart. Your Ma,” Jo said.


The warm aura of kissing and the novelty of the night fell away. The wind had picked up. Patches of sky were lit with stars, and the moon seemed to dodge from one bank of clouds to another, an illusion of movement like a boat anchored against an incoming tide. The dogs were wearing a path that circled behind us on the end of the patio out to the same spot along the back fence. I whistled and called, and their headlong rush pulled up in front of the fence. Their broad heads lifted in unison, bodies tensed and still except for the pulse of breath that came in white clouds over their beards. England was affixed on a shadow, and out of him came a deep rumbling that pricked the hair on the back of my neck. I slipped Jo off my arm. Stepped out.


The moon broke through a wash of clouds, light rolling over the yard, and as the shadows separated and I saw them clearly, the two dogs and a man. It felt like a trick of light or shadows. Behind me, Jo gasped. It couldn’t be, I thought. The moonlight would shift and it would be nothing. Damn this light. Damn all the other times I’d wished for this. A cloud of breath the
same as mine hung between us. Lenny’s eyes were exactly as I remembered, except steady and calm. He reached for my hand as if he would shake it and turned it up instead. Stroked the feathered fly in my palm.

“I hoped someone would find it,” he said.
Chapter 23

When I was little, Pops went missing after a job on a fire line. In the days that stretched into a week, Ma worried herself sick, making calls and pacing around. We found full cups of cold coffee all around the house, forgotten in her anxious distraction. Then one morning, I got up for school, and Pops was sitting at the kitchen table, shaved and showered, reading the paper, as if he’d been there all along. He acted all surprised when we asked him where he’d been so long. 

*What you boys talking about?* he said. Told us *If a tree falls in the forest, but nobody hears it, maybe it didn’t.* Winked and went back to his paper.

Jo and I came in from the back, the two dogs bullying past us into the warm room. Ma was sweeping up a spray of ground coffee from the kitchen floor, shoulders and arms hunched over the straw-head broom and plastic dustpan.

“I was making more coffee,” she said. She was glaring at the grounds swept up in a haphazard mound.

Jo touched her hand. Took the dustpan. The broom.

Lenny stood in the kitchen like a mirage. He greeted her, and there was no slur in his words or crazy in his eye. He moved so gently over the floor to her. Circled his arms around her narrow waist. She was shocked still. Immobilized. I could hear Lenny’s voice, low and sing-song, but couldn’t make out any of his words. Ma sighed. She tipped her head to his shoulder. Her sigh became sobs.

The thick smell of coffee began to fill the kitchen along with the sound of Ma crying. Then there was Pops wondering at all the hullabaloo. *Well, I’ll be goddamned.* All of us caught in the space of not knowing what to believe.
I called over to Sawyer’s place. He answered like he’d been asleep, and then he sounded strange. He sounded like he didn’t believe me when I told him about Lenny, but he said he’d be right over. By then, Ma was exhausted and quiet. Jo made her a cup of chamomile tea, and we all sat in the living room. I told Lenny about Michael being in Kuwait. The dogs had taken up a position on either side of us. Marten was the sweetheart of the pair and had given over to Lenny quickly, butting her head against his hands for affection. England was a harder sell. He watched with suspicion as Lenny rolled cigarettes on the coffee table, until the sound of the door made both dogs jump up, and there was Sawyer, his face gray, mouth slack.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” I said.

“You bastard,” Sawyer said, maybe to the both of us.

Lenny had gotten up from the floor. He tipped his head, a strange, small smile on his lips.

“Back atcha.”

Sawyer took off his cap, the old blue Dodgers cap, frayed and faded, still his favorite. They embraced, tentative at first, and then Sawyer gasped and held Lenny tight to his chest. Heads together, they rocked side to side. I couldn’t tell if they were laughing or crying. As if on cue, they broke apart, and Sawyer buckled Lenny with a blow across the chest. Knocked the wind clean out of him.

Sawyer grinned. Shouted. “You bastard!”

Lenny was sucking air, laughing, and maybe even crying a bit, whether it was emotion or because he’d taken a hit that could fell a tree. Unsure if it would be crazy to referee the moment, I jumped between them. Waved everyone forward. “Outside,” I said. “Everyone out.”

We jammed through the narrow archway to the kitchen, Lenny still gasping to catch his breath. Jo held back the dogs and slid the door closed behind us.
We smoked Lenny’s cigarettes. Sawyer alternately paced the patio space and perched on the end of the wooden bench. Lenny swept off one of the old Adirondacks to sit in and then answered all of Sawyer’s questions with even, sometimes guarded answers, but clear and firm. If anything, he looked worn out and a bit old. A diamond-shaped scar split his right cheekbone, and it wasn’t until after watching him smoke more than one cigarette that I realized part of his right index finger was missing, sheared off at the first knuckle.

The shadows of the hemlock trees were long and solid, but it seemed warmer than it had been, and the sound of the snowmelt ticked into the gutters along the porch roof.

Sawyer coughed. “Your rollies are kickin’ my ass,” he said. “Feel like I inhaled a sock.”

Lenny barely lifted his head. “Lightweight.”

Sawyer produced a pack of Marlboro Lights from his jacket and shook out a couple cigarettes. He handed one to me and one to Lenny.

The smoke from our cigarettes encircled us. Floated through and away from us in thin, blue trails. Cirrus clouds of tobacco. We smoked in silence. Lenny coughed. Sawyer laughed once, a single snort. He spit into the snow, and we stood looking out at the back fence, at the hemlocks, at nothing.

I finally broached the silence. “Now what?”


My brothers were looking at me, expecting something I wasn’t sure I had. I stamped out the cigarette on the railing.

“Do you think I can stay here tonight?” Lenny said.

Sawyer twisted his boot in the melting snow. “I think you’d better. Maybe we’ll both stay.”
We hauled out the sleeping bags, Sawyer and Lenny each took a couch, facing each other across the fireplace as if unwilling to be lose sight of each other. Or perhaps it was that old dread of leaving Lenny alone to discover he’d disappeared.

I turned off the lights and stood in the hallway listening as my brother’s voices fill the space of the dark room, and it was enough for me to leave them. In my old bedroom, I curled around Jo in the double bed circled my arm around her so as not to ever lose her.
Chapter 24

Time moved in fits and starts. David returned from his business trip, and Lenny had Sawyer drive him over to meet with David in private. Said they had some things to clear up, and I guess they did because if any of us was expecting to never see Lenny again on good terms, it was David. They got back in time for dinner, including Rachel and David and the dogs. Ma and Jo had been making pies all afternoon, and Rachel took off her heeled shoes and tied an apron over her skirt to make the gravy.

Pops took up his spot at the head of the table and let the women warm his coffee and dote over him. He looked old, and maybe it was the first time I thought so. His blond hair hid the gray, but his chin stubble was a distinct silver. Deep lines crossed his forehead and framed the sides of his mouth. His conversation was regularly interrupted by the raspy wet cough that had become chronic. I wondered if we should have filled in Lenny on Pops’ failing health, but maybe it wasn’t necessary.

That night Pops raised a toast. “To us,” he said. It was all he could get out before his cough cut him off. We saved him with our call back and the clink of glasses. Lenny added, “Wildish and Godenot.”

Rachel touched his elbow. “Didn’t they tell you, honey? Sawyer took your father’s name.” Then there was Lenny, caught with his water glass raised, eyes wide. He looked from Pops to Sawyer, who tipped his head to affirm the claim.

“It’s hyphenated,” Sawyer said. “Surprise, surprise.”

“Well, then,” Lenny said. “I’ll drink to that.”

The house in Tam O’Shanter became a gathering place, as if it was the old days. David and Rachel visited more than they had in the years since they had gotten married. Rachel was a
nurse, and she’d stop by on her way home from work in her nursing scrubs and white shoes. I think Ma appreciated the extra help with Pops. Sometimes David came with the dogs. He never came alone.

Sawyer was slammed with work and running his business, billing and bids. Trying to stay ahead of being out of work, he’d say. Ma had to take over driving Pops to the Boeing plant, if he could go at all. The television news had put the new war on every day, Operation Desert Storm, and Pops kept the television on every minute. We watched the videos of eerie green globes of light that were artillery fire arch across grainy pictures of the night sky. We heard the rooster crow in Baghdad in the dark along transmitted from the other side of globe. We knew the names of the men with familiar voices: Peter Arnet, Bernard Shaw, John Holliman, Norman Schwarzkopf. We came to know places on the map. Kuwait City. Tel Aviv. Ras al Jubail.

Pops kept a daily SCUD count in his notebooks as if they were a new kind of bird. He tracked the news of air strikes and POW numbers. I couldn’t help but wonder if he was hoping to catch Michael in the images that repeated on every channel. There were no new letters.

Lenny stayed in my old room as if he was a guest. My old posters still hung on the walls. David Bowie. Heart. Led Zeppelin. I’d sat on the bed that first night while he unpacked the Army surplus C-bag he’d carried in that first night. His clothes were clean and neatly folded but worn, and he only had two pair of jeans, both of them busted through at the knees, and one pair of sneakers. The can of Drum tobacco was not new. The rest of his belongs included a book, fishing cap, and his baseball mitt. The book I mistook for a Bible, but it turned out to be a book for alcoholics. The spine was broken and the pages were marked up in different sets of handwriting.

Lenny set two prescription bottles on the night stand. I gave him a look, and he hung on
my unspoken question for a minute.

“It’s called manic depression. The lithium banks it back. The other is for anxiety and it helps me sleep.” He hung his tee shirts in the closet and stood looking at them. Three shirts on wire hangers in the empty space. “One of my therapists told me that its common for people like me to try to self-medicate. That’s what they call it. The drugs and alcohol seem to work at first, but then they make it worse in the long run.”

I sat back on the bed. The flashes of Lenny as a teenager played in my head with all the craziness and then the days and weeks of sleeping after the crash. The more Lenny explained about his diagnosis, the more it made sense.

“One summer a couple years ago, maybe five years. Or six. I got a spot on a fishing boat that took me up to Alaska. Salmon mostly.”

He sat down on the bed next to me. Took the book out of my hands and put it on the nightstand next to my old radio-alarm clock and the lamp I’d made in high school woodshop. The wooden pump handle lifted to turn the light on and off. He reached for the can of Drum and rolled up a pair of cigarettes in nothing flat.

“If two summer seasons, I got on with a winter crew. Drinking too much. Some other things,” he said. “I thought it was bad before. Like it couldn’t get any worse.”

He told me how they’d tied off to unload their catch, and he’d been drinking as they made port, but he was in full blackout by then.

“I remember docking, but that’s the last thing I remember. I came to in the back of a truck, bouncing my head hard off the truck bed. Trussed as a pig in a poke, Pops would say. They tell me I worked a good hour before I walked straight off the dock into the bay. Barely missed getting crushed by my own boat. The captain hauled me out himself, working the
hydraulics. He saved my life. You die in water that cold. In minutes. That’s all you have. You drown because your lungs stop working. Circulation fails. My crewmates wrapped me in blankets and dropped me at the hospital with all my gear and a pink slip. Fired me. The hospital stabilized my body temperature and detoxed me.”

He juggled a cigarette along his fingers so that it flipped and turned over each one, circling back on the severed finger to start again. “Four days later, the cops showed up and drove me straight to the airport. Told me, don’t come back. Handed me an envelope of cash from my ship. My boat captain had paid for my ticket out of Dutch Harbor from my take. Cashed out the rest.”

He caught me staring at his hands.

“You got kicked out of Dutch Harbor for drinking,” I said.

“I’m not sure it’s that dramatic. But yes. After that, I stopped drinking. Drugs. Everything,” he said. He held out a cigarette. “But that’s not where I lost my finger. Smoke?” he said.
Chapter 25

November 24, 1990

Dear Jude,

We got sent through [Censored] and came out in a crazy place I’m not supposed to name. Been here a week. There’s a post exchange, and there’s a lot of us here. Our ships are [Censored]. Plus you can see the commercial ships loading and unloading in [Censored]. The water is shallow, and it smells like salt and diesel smoke all the time. Not like SeaTac. The air is different. Or the light. Like it’s coming from somewhere else. Weird. There’s a fancy soccer stadium [Censored] [Censored]. Football, they call it. They call our game “American Football.” Isn’t that funny? We call the place the [Censored] – duh. I think it’s only [Censored], at least that’s what they say. The trucks are painted [Censored] before they go out into the desert. My battalion has temporary quarters, and my unit is building [Censored]. I set up some portable generators today almost like those ones we did for Pops’ fire tower at Snoqualmie. There’s supposed to be a poker game at Camp 3 tonight, but there was supposed to be one last night and instead the sirens went off and we spent most of the night suited up. Bee-Zee (you remember Brian?) fell asleep in his gas mask. This morning he came to chow with a red ring around his face and we gave him all kinds of sh*t for it.

Michael

USMC HMA – 775 Devil Dogs
Chapter 26

Jo called me at the lab to say she would bring me dinner. It would be a nice change from PB&J. I heard her voice from the front before I saw her. Boston and Marilyn were finishing the shift reports. Her face was flushed. I kissed her lips and then her forehead.

“You alright?” I said.

She pressed my hand to her cheek and then tugged me toward the table in the back next to the black vinyl couch in the break room. “Have some dinner,” she said.

I held up a finger. “Ten minutes. I need to sign out my reports for Marilyn. Ten. I promise.”

An hour later, Jo was reading on the couch, her legs curled up under her. She looked up from her magazine. The table was set with paper plates and four square boxes from my favorite restaurant, Thai Village in Bellevue. It meant she must have gone to see her parents earlier in the day that she was over on that side of the lake.

The table was set for two with a single white candle in the center. I looked at my watch. Checked the date.

Jo handed me the takeout boxes. “We should zap these in the microwave for a minute.” She lit the candle.

Rice and red curry. Coconut shrimp.

I held up my plastic fork. “What did I miss?” I said. “Am I already an insensitive husband?”

She laughed as if she’d been holding it in for a while, but that didn’t help. I felt guilty without knowing why.
“You look so confused,” she said. “Poor husband.”

“I’m still confused.”

“You didn’t miss anything. Not yet,” she said. “We’re having a baby.”

I looked at her. She nodded.

“How did this happen?” I jumped at her, and she shrieked, startled.

“Well, you should know,” she said.

“We’re having a baby?” I kissed her, but I was unbalanced and we tipped into the couch.

The door opened. Jo scrambled off my lap, and Boston let out a wolf-whistle. “I heard this was the lounge,” he said. “But this is more than I expected.”

Jo smoothed her hair away from her face, flushed pink. I pulled her up.

“Boston,” I said. “You’ve met my wife, Joanne.”

“Your wife,” he said. “Of course. Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No,” Jo said. “We were. . .”

“Jo brought me dinner.” I pointed to the table, as if the place settings and lighted candle were not unusual in a university lab breakroom.

Boston didn’t look at the table. His eyes narrowed. “Special occasion?”

I straightened my lab coat. “Occasion? You’re the first to hear,” I said. “We’re having a baby. Isn’t that right?” Jo only smiled.

“Well, that’s different. Congratulations all around. Statistically, it’s always better for me when someone else has a baby. That isn’t mine.”
Jo looked at me, her eyes wide. “Statistically,” she said. She rustled around in the brown paper bag next to the table and produced another plate. “Would you like to join us?”

The curry was reheated, and Boston told us how his mother had married a widower with nine children and then gave birth to him. “I’m an only child with nine siblings,” he said. “What are the odds?”

It was after midnight before I got home. Jo was in bed. There were three letters on the table, unopened, the familiar blue tissue paper bordered red and white. The postmarks were all the same, so I opened them and read them in order of the date. Afterwards, I sat at the table long enough to get cold. Shivering, I crawled into bed. Jo was as a little furnace, but she bolted up as my skin touched her, and then I had try not to laugh while I apologized.

We lay side by side with the lights off, both of us wide awake. She told me the doctor explained how the antibiotics had blocked her birth control. Said she was already eight weeks along.

“I heard the heartbeat,” she said. She lifted my hand and put it over her flat belly.

“But a baby,” I said. “It’s so crazy.”

“If it’s a boy,” Jo said, her voice suspiciously sing-song and dreamy, “we should name him Boston. Statistically speaking.”

Even in the dark, I knew her grin was wicked. “Perfect,” I said.

She turned on her side away from me. “You lab rats.” Her hips shifted, and she fitted her backside up against my lap. She could sleep most of the night curled up next to
me like that. Her breathing slowed, and she began to snore a little. Her skin was warm.

Careful not to wake her again, I pulled the sheet over the curve of her shoulder.

Outside, a dog barked. A car went by, the buzz of tires on the wet pavement. I wasn’t trying to think about anything, but then I must have slipped into something of a dream because there was Michael as a baby in nothing but a thick cloth diaper and rubber pants. He was strapped into the Johnny-Jump-Up in the doorway of the kitchen. His fat, white legs bobbed up and down and his wide mouth laughed with the sound of rain. A wind kicked up in the alders outside and wet leaves patted the window. The light in the room began to turn morning gray, and the sound of geese passed overhead. It was the last thing I remember before falling asleep.
January 28, 1991 SUPERBOWL MONDAY

Dear Jude,

I was up at 2am to watch the game, all of us trussed up in our sleeping bags in the mess. I made $40 on the Giants, and Bee-Zee lost his shirt. Last week we got hooked to a Ripper unit and followed it all the way to the Kuwait International airport. The roads are like chalk dust only gray. The smoke from the wells on fire is so thick sometimes it’s like night in broad daylight. It soaks into everything like black rain that doesn’t wash out. All my gear is turning a greasy brown. Me, too. Good thing I was never a smoker before. ha.

Playing a lot of spades at night. Took a roll of pictures with a camera we traded for some bronze plates we found. Probably used to be gold plated but it’s been stripped. Worth nothing. Anyways, I shot photos of me and Beanie Wright standing on a burned [redacted] that could have nailed us all at [redacted]. The cargo ships move in and out of here all the time, and [redacted] there’s a sweet [redacted] with the rotor blade cans forward on the deck. I hope my pictures turn out. The light was kind of bad.

Michael

USMC HMA – 775 Devil Dogs
February 14, 1991

Dear Jude,

They don’t give us very good odds here. Scuttle says we’ve got 1-3. Is that real?

Me and Bee-Zee were out a couple days ago and took a ricochet off the kick-plate, but that was it. One of our other units took a hit, [redacted], one man down with a dislocated shoulder because he fell out on his Kevlar helmet. They brought back three sets of [redacted] shoulderboards and a [redacted]. I wonder if that’s better. POWs get trucked out of here packed in like fish [redacted]. What kind of odds are we getting at home?

Michael

USMC HMA – 775 Devil Dogs
March 11, 1991

Jude,

One more day on shitter duty, and I’m coming home.

Michael

USMC HMA – 775 Devil Dogs
Chapter 28

I counted the days to hear from Michael. One morning, Jo had me go with her to her morning appointment. She was scheduled for an ultrasound and asked if I wanted to know the sex. Would it matter if it was a boy or a girl? I said no. The hospital visit put me late at the lab, and by noon, and I hadn’t had time to finish my first cup of coffee. When the phone rang, I almost ignored it. It was Michael.

“Where are you?” I said.

“You know. Here,” Michael said.

“Here in the states? Here home?”

“I’m standing in Ma’s kitchen,” he said. His voice was thick like he’d been drinking, but I couldn’t quite tell. We both started to talk at the same time, catching each other up.

Through the windows of my office, sunlight came off the lake to send wavering shapes on the ceiling. The forecast this morning called for the usual rain and sun breaks for the rest of the week. The smell of iodine and gram stain hung in the air from our morning project, and my coffee cup was half full. My heart beat inside my head that if I could feel it in my eyes. I tried to answer. My voice sounded thin, pulled too tight. “Is Pops there?” I said.

“No one’s here. So much for my surprise. You okay?”

“Jo’s pregnant. We’re having a baby. She’s fine.”

He must have put his hand over the receiver, and the sound of his voice was muffled on the other side. My lab jacket was hot and tight. I pulled it off. Stood. Sat back down.

“Michael. Do you know about Lenny? Has anyone told you?”

There was a long silence, but he was there, my brother, connected to me across the lake. The weight of his silence carried through the phone.
“Tell me.” His voice was deeper than I remembered.

I tried to tell him everything. Anything I knew. What happened that first night. How Lenny was working for Sawyer now. He was the one living at the house in my old room. It was a relief to talk to him. When I had run out of words, we sat on the line in silence. I hoped that there was sunlight across the lake at the house.

“I should have written it to you. Written you a letter,” I said. “I didn’t know if I should.” I held my hand to my forehead. “I didn’t know if he would stay. What if I sent you a letter, and he was gone before you even got it?”

The static over the line ticked and hummed until Michael’s voice broke through. “I thought he was dead.”

My breath came out in a rush. “Yeah.” It was all I could get out.

The shadow of a bird crossed the office wall, a seagull or maybe an osprey. It was a gray shadow over the dazzle of the lake’s reflected on the wall.

“So you’re having a baby! Come on, I’ll buy you a drink, old man.”

I checked my watch. “I’ll be right there,” I said.

“I’ll be here,” he said. He said it like when he was a kid.

“I’m on my way.”
Chapter 29

In the middle of the night, I called Sawyer’s place. When I got an answering machine, I tried David.

“This is what you think of now?” he said. “What is it? Like two in the morning?” The question in his voice wasn’t irritation but something more thoughtful.

I was standing barefoot in the kitchen of my apartment with the lights off. Outside the waxing moon was almost full, lighting a broken bank of clouds in silver swirls. Flashes of our past replayed in my dreams that gave me a dark foreboding sense of doom. Hiking on the trail to Squak Peak. Crossing the Snoqualmie. Passing outside the windows of the White Center hospital. Lucid dreams that spun me between the present and the past. I tried to call out to them. To talk them. Inside the dreams, my brothers nodded and turned their heads to each other, talking. I strained to hear them, but they were always moving away from me, and I woke up every morning exhausted.

David yawned through the phone. “God, I can’t sleep anyway. Rachel kicked me out of bed for tossing around.”

“Michael picked up a halibut tag. We could take his boat,” I said.

“That piece of shit? We’ll take mine.”

David always won the battle of the boats. Every model was bigger and better. Rachel nagged him about driving the ten-year old Audi sedan when he traded up his two boats almost every year. He kept a small cruiser at the Sammamish boathouse below the house, and he leased a slip at a marina in Des Moines for the other. His newest model was a 31-foot Sea Ray Sundancer with a radar arch, bimini top, maple interior and a full wet-bar. Over the years, fishing on David’s boats had become a luxury experience.
“I’ll call Michael in the morning. You call Sawyer.”

I laughed a bit and rubbed my eyes. “Good. It’s a plan.”

David sighed. “Jude. What do you want? What do you think is going to happen to us out there?”

I didn’t know.

It was Monday before we went fishing. Sawyer had a side-job through the weekend, so we waited. Michael hadn’t returned any of our calls, but he must have gotten the message from Ma because when Lenny and I pulled up at the marina in the old Ford, he was leaned up against a brand new Toyota truck, waiting as if we were the ones late to the party.

Sawyer pulled in behind us in his big rig, the big white extra-cab dually marked on the sides, Hoffman Construction. He got out of his truck shaking his head at Michael. “You could have called back, you little shithead.” He tossed one of the gear bags at Michael. It caught him square in the chest and rocked him back on his heels, but he raised his chin and gave us that wide, toothy grin like when he was a kid. Sunlight flashed off his military-issue sunglasses.

David waved us in from the end of the pier, and we headed down the floating walkway. I shouldered my gear and followed Sawyer as he fell in beside Michael.

“Lenny says you haven’t been home. Ma thought you were staying at my place,” Sawyer said.

Michael flicked a cigarette butt into the flat gloss of the marina. “What’d you say?”

“What do you think I said? That you’d gone out. Took a message. Like I was your goddamn secretary. What the hell?”

Michael cocked his head, lips pressed together in a smile like a kept secret. “You
remember the Nashes? Golf-pro guy with the fake blond hair?”

“From the Tams neighborhood barbeque? Tie with the golf flag. Sure. Wife was the blonde in the short skirt.”

“Yup. Showed up with the wife. And daughter,” Michael said.

“She and Ma were on some committee together. I didn’t see any daughter.”

“Blonde in the yellow dress. Farrah Fawcett hair. Pamela.”

Sawyer’s steps hesitated. “Pamela?” He twisted sideways, peering at Michael as if to see behind the mirrored sunglasses.

Michael tipped his head. “Legs as long as the universe.” The dimple in his cheek deepened.

Sawyer stopped so fast, I nearly plowed into the back of him. “You did,” he said.

“Walking,” I hollered from behind. “Don’t stop.”

“For three days?” Lenny said. “You’ve been gone for three days.”

Michael looked over his shoulder at me. “Like you should talk. I told her I just got back from the war. On leave before my next assignment.” He shrugged. “Pamela is very sympathetic.”

Sawyer looked out over the dark water of the Puget Sound and squinted. “It’s such a line. Taking advantage of some poor girl dragged to the neighborhood hoopla by her parents. and you didn’t think to let Ma know where you were? Did it occur to you? Wait. You’re next assignment?”

Michael pulled off the sunglasses. His blue eyes were slitted against the morning sun. He squared up against Sawyer, both of them broad-chested and solid, blocking the pier.

“Re-enlisted,” Michael said. “I’ll get a new assignment after my leave.” He put the glasses back on. “Fuck you. Don’t you tell me I don’t think about Ma. And don’t any of you tell
her I signed new papers. I want to tell her myself.”

Sawyer raised a hand in surrender. “Whoa, there, Marine.” he said.

Michael spit into the water, turned slowly, and stalked down the pier after David. Our collective stride rocked the pier, water slapping the sides in time with our step. The sound of it marched out in front of us until we reached the end of the floating dock. David was sorting through his keys at the door to the slip.

Michael scowled behind his dark glasses.

Lenny looked sideways at him. “You made that chicken fried steak and gravy,” he said.

“At the house. Made dinner for Ma when no one was there and left it for her. That was you?”

“Yeah. So what.” He was still mad.

Lenny shifted the shoulder strap of the gear bag he carried. “Ma thought it was me. She thanked me for it. Said it was the best I had ever made.”


“For three days,” Lenny said.

“God,” David said. “I’m feeling rather inadequate.”

“That explains the boat,” Sawyer said.

David unlocked the door and, without looking back, raised a middle finger at us.

The boat was a beauty. Sleek open bow, twin engines and a wide platform off the back.

David waved us through to the front.

“Unwrap those bench cushions,” he said. “Bait coolers in the aft lounge.”

We spread out and stowed our gear.

David picked up the gas can. “We had to prep the engines to bring her in, so she may
need a boost to get started.” He pointed to the case of beer Sawyer had lugged in under one arm.

“Refrigerator. Down in the galley.”

“Maiden voyage?” Michael said.

Sawyer watched David fuss over a set of brass handled-knobs in the cockpit that were still wrapped in plastic. “Sure,” Sawyer said, almost to himself. “What could possibly go wrong?”

David and Michael primed the pumps, and with some coaxing, the engines started up to a raucous buzz. As the thin blue cloud of exhaust dissipated, Michael secured the engine cover, and the noise dropped to a smooth internal hum. Lenny loosed the moorings. David eased the boat out of the slip and taxied across the marina. He sighted in the point of Maury Island. Once we were past the speed buoys, he wracked the engines and slid the boat into a wide, smooth arc north toward Tramp Harbor along the shoreline of Vashon Island.

The rush of air beat loud on us, hull thumping against the waves. I hunkered down in the back. The ride got choppy and Michael retreated to the back. Sawyer remained braced up front with David.

In the distance, the enormous blocky shape of a cargo ship plowed up a frothy white crest at its bow, heading away from us in the shipping lane that was marked by the occasional red-and-white buoy. The rolling surface of the water reflected a low ceiling of gray clouds, what Pops called all the grays of the universe. Streaked with a slate blue, the gradient layers of clouds were infused with the shades of water shadows, gray above and gray below. To the east, a strip of blue peeked over the ridge of the Cascades, and the edges of the clouds shone gold, back-lit by the late morning sun. The peaks of the mountains were cornflower blue and rock gray, white cumulus clouds already gathering in clumps that would roil upwards as the day warmed.
David gave me a thumbs up from the wheel. I leaned back into the diamond-tuck seat and stretched my legs full out in front of me. Off the wake, a couple of sea lions made torpedo shapes in the dark water. I punched Michael and pointed. He flashed me a smile. He was setting his gear, the thick pole and reel, hook set with a cone-shaped salmon head.

Our course took us straight up the shipping lane until we were almost due south of Pully Point where we veered off into the center of the Sound. Against the far shore, a scattering of sailboats turned together in the wind like a flock of sharp white swallows. Beyond the sails, the green of new leaves splashed across the tops of the trees that pushed up along the narrow beach of Munro Park.

David dropped the speed and brought the boat about. He taxied for a ways and then cut the engines. In an instant, the space that was a roar of engines filled with the hush of water and sky. The nose of the boat drifted starboard and the flush of our own wake rolled us forward.

“Here’s as good as any,” David said.

Michael cast with a buzzing whir of the reel and locked his fishing pole into a stand. “Someone buy me a drink,” he said.

“We just got here,” David said, leaning back into the captain’s chair. He pulled the brim of his hat down to the top of his glasses.

Lenny came through the front, zipping the prow canopy down tight behind him. “What kind of grief you giving this Marine, brother? The man wants a beer for breakfast.” He ducked into the galley and returned with a six-pack of Michelob. “First catch of the day,” he said.

Michael caught the thrown can, turned it over and opened it with a snap. A plume of froth billowed out, and he slurped up the foam.

“Heads up, Jude. Sawyer.”
“Thanks,” I said.

David took a can and tucked it into a pocket under the steering wheel, unopened. He flipped back a panel on the side, pushed some switches back and forth, and swore. “Anchor won’t drop all the way.”

Lenny popped the top of a Pepsi and laughed. “How much you pay for this junker?”

“So we drift,” I said. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Sawyer opened a beer. “Remember that first piece of shit Pops had? Traded for it with Ma’s old washer and dryer?”

Michael lay back, arms folded tight across his chest. He kicked off his flip-flops. “The one with the black canopy? I remember you and Lenny made the anchor for it out of a coffee can. Knotted a rope through the bottom and filled it with cement. I don’t remember it being a piece of shit.”

David smacked his fist down on the panel. “Dammit.” Sawyer laughed. Our sounds were muffled by the enormity of sky and water that was the Puget Sound. A thin slap of water echoed against the prow, through the hull, and down into underwater depths. Michael teased his gear a bit and then left it.

I opened my beer. The sunlight was thin and barely warm on my face. A break in the clouds collapsed, and a shadow crossed over. We were straight out from the curved shore of Munro Park. It had a new name now, but I couldn’t remember what it was or why it had been changed. The clouds shifted and a wide bar of light fell to the rock beach. The seawall was a thin line of cement that marked the separation of water and trees.

It had been fourteen years since we’d stood on that shore with Lenny, brothers pressed together under the enormous hush of water and the greens and grays of the sky. In the moment, it
seemed closer. As if there in along the shore, I’d see Lenny curled up on that smooth stretch of sand where it spread black and fine against the seawall and the rocks. Lenny shaking in withdrawals. Maybe there was a campfire that marked the spot where we sat helpless against the forces that wracked Lenny’s mind and body. The illness that had driven him to addiction. I could see Sawyer, defiant on the edge of the beach, hurling rocks into the night, across space and time and sound, as if his stones would break through to our older selves here on the other side of daylight.

A bank of clouds above the park broke in the center, and sunlight burst into a wide, bright swath that lit the trees in brilliant greens and spring yellows. Brown pelicans rose up from the dock and launched across the water in formation. The tidal swells rolled so that the birds dropped out of sight and then, in the space of a breath, rose back up. They flew in a fishing line parallel to the shore, gliding and dipping with the same movement of the Sound that rocked the deck under my feet.

By the afternoon, the sea lions had stolen most of our bait, and David moved us north into deep water. The earlier cloud cover had drifted apart and the sky was a long low strip of blue hung with shreds of clouds. To the east, cumulus towers were rising into the flat-topped anvils that could be thunderheads by evening. Sawyer and I made sandwiches in the galley. Michael had been asleep for a while, and I woke him with a sandwich. He fished around for the unopened beer next to his seat and held it up.

“Trade you for a cold one?”

“What? You didn’t develop a taste for warm beer out in the desert?” I handed Michael another beer and plunged the warm can into the slush of cooler ice.
Sawyer kicked Michael’s foot where it was stretched out across the deck. “When’s that baby due?”

“September.” I stuttered. I don’t know why I was nervous. These were my brothers. I wiped my mouth with a napkin and then balled it up in my hand. “But, here’s the thing. I still have another year of school,” I said. “I need your advice.”

“Seems too late for that now, Sherlock,” Michael said.

Sawyer looked up and talked into the roof of the canopy. “Let me guess. You want to move home.”

“Yes? Yes,” I said, my breath released. “How’d you know?”

Sawyer waved a hand in a circle over his head. “Makes perfect sense. Calm down.”

“Is that crazy? I don’t know how to ask,” I said. “But rent is double for another bedroom, and I can’t afford it. What with Jo’s school up over at Sunset, it would be close.”

“You don’t gotta sell me,” Michael said. “I’m be shipping out any day.” He tipped his beer to Lenny. “Ask him.”

Lenny nodded. “Well, I won’t be there forever either. I’m hoping to move up in the family business and get my own place. Ain’t that right, boss?”

Sawyer gave him a thumbs up. “You should just ask Ma. Then maybe she can get Pops to agree.”

“Really?” I said. My throat constricted with a second wave of anxiety.

“Sure,” David said. “She’s lala over the baby already.” But then he lost it. His straight face crumpled, and he spit beer over the rail. Elbowed Sawyer, and they both laughed. I stared at them.

Lenny gave them a congenial glare. “Knock it off, you two. Stop dicking with him.”
Sawyer came up the deck and grabbed me up in a half-Nelson. I fought him off, but he was stronger and rubbed his knuckles into my head. “You,” he said. “You are the sweetest, kindest, dumbest, smart guy I’ve ever known.”

Tears blurred my vision, and my face felt hot. “Goddam you all to hell and back. What are you saying? Tell me what.”

Sawyer released me. “We already asked her.”

I stared.

“Rachel and Jo are always talking. At her clinic. You didn’t think about that?

Lenny was scowling. “Don’t worry. They didn’t give you up. They’ve only primed Ma and Pops to have you move home. Softened them up, so to speak.”

A fat seagull cruised by, circled to make a second sweep, turned its head to eye the deck. Michael waved his hat up at the bird. It skittered sideways and then veered away from the boat.

I breathed out hard. The sky seemed loud and large overhead. “You’re a big bunch of pricks. You know it?” I said.

Sawyer opened another beer. “Old news.”

Michael nodded. “Amen.” He said something else, but there was a sudden, thunderous blast of a ship horn. Out in front of the boat, less than a mile away, a black cargo ship was headed toward us.

David leaped up from the cooler and scrambled to the dash. “Holy shit.”

“We’re drifting, captain,” Sawyer said. “I’d say somewhere smack into the middle of a shipping lane.”

The boat engine made a bouncing whine as David tried to start it up. It whirred and spat.
A red-and-white flagged buoy bobbed near the rear corner of the boat.

“Shit. We really drifted.”

“David always was an overachiever,” Michael said. We watched from our seats as David flipped switches, adjusted a gauge, whined the engine again. Again. Glared like a crazy man.

“Do something,” he said.

Michael pulled back the engine cover. David hollered something from behind the wheel, but another horn blast from the cargo ship shook the deck. As the ship tugged closer, the air pulsed with its engines, buzzing like electricity. David was working the dash, hollering into the radio. Sawyer and Michael had their heads in the engine hold as it whirred and spun below them. Lenny was lookout over the canopy. The cargo ship loomed closer. Its great horn blasted again.

Sawyer looked across the water, gauging distance. “Coast Guard is going to be late to this party. We might have to swim for it.”

“Swim?” Lenny said. But Sawyer had ducked back down into the engine, so I couldn’t tell if he was kidding.

David was calling out coordinates into the radio. The ship was a good half-mile out. A crest of white froth broke before its bow. At the rail a pair of sailors were miniature forms against the mass of the carrier. Along the curve of its hull, Hanoi Han. The letters were taller than David’s whole boat. My chest began to thump with the pulse of the ship’s engines.

Lenny handed me a life jacket. David’s distraught conversation on the radio was drowned by another horn blast. I held my ears. Then David was beside us, pushing his arms into another life jacket. He grabbed up two more and pulled at Michael’s shirtsleeve where he and Sawyer were bent over the engine, heads together. Sawyer came up and took a life jacket. We took the rail. Jumped.
The water was a shock of cold and salt. At the surface, Sawyer was yelling my name. The air roared with the noise of the ship all around us. I focused on the red cusp of the life jacket that was the back of Sawyer’s neck. Tried to swim. My arms and legs were numb. I couldn’t tell if I was kicking my feet. A swell from behind lifted me forward. My head went under, water stinging my eyes, and I felt someone next to me. Sawyer.

There was a flash of light and a boat. I tried to grab onto Sawyer’s jacket to keep us together. Lost him in the rise of and roll of the water. Willed my legs to kick. Someone hauled me from behind by my lifejacket onto a swim deck.

Michael was piloting David’s boat. The engine screamed, its hood upside down on the deck like an empty turtle.

Sawyer was already on deck, shaking with cold. He shook me by the lifejacket.

Michael swung the boat around. “Hang on.”

We pulled in Lenny, then David. With a mighty whoop, Michael spun the boat away from the cargo ship and set a course straight to the marina.

David’s lips were blue and his skin was as gray as the water. My hands were beginning to tingle with pins and needles. Sawyer was rubbing a towel over David’s arms and legs.

The banter on the radio was more than I’d ever heard on any fishing trip. A Coast Guard boat intercepted us half-way and escorted us to the docks. An ambulance was there, lights on, back open. Three EMTs were standing on the floating dock. I walked off the boat, but they took David on a stretcher into the back of the ambulance. One of the EMTs took my pulse and blood pressure. They handed out thick, white blankets. I stripped down to my boxers and wrapped in the blanket.

We sat on the tailgate of Sawyer’s truck. We were shivering and high on the backwash of
adrenaline. There was a light on inside the ambulance, and we could see Sawyer through the narrow windows bending over the gurney.

“Do you think Sawyer’s got any cigarettes in his truck?” Michael said.

I pulled the blanket tighter.

“Probably,” I said.

None of us moved from the tailgate.

“You think David’s okay?” Lenny said.

Through the window, Sawyer was nodding.

“Yup,” I said.

“Good. Because he’s getting one hell of a ticket right now, and I’d hate to have to pay for it.” He pointed across the parking lot at two Coast Guard officers with clipboards, taking down information from David’s boat.

“What we going to tell Ma?”

“Or Rachel?”

“Or Jo?”

“Ha. Your lips are blue,” Michael said.

“So’s your balls,” Lenny said. “You just don’t know it yet.”

The doors to the ambulance opened, and Sawyer waved us over. We hopped off the tailgate.

The inside of the ambulance was bright with florescent light. David was attached to an IV line and some silver monitors taped to his chest. A silver blanket was spread over his legs. Over his mouth and nose, a clear plastic mask. His eyes were darker than usual against the severe pale of his skin. He reached up with his free hand and pulled at the oxygen mask. The paramedic at
the head of the gurney helped him lift it up and away from his face.

“These fellas want to take me to a hospital. Check me out a bit more.”

The clean-cut blond paramedic nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Just need to do a few more checks. Make sure everything’s hunky dory.” He gave us a smile matched his pink face.

“Someone go and get Rachel. And Ma,” he said. “No, don’t get anyone. For god’s sake, I’m fine.”

Michael leaned forward. “Who do you think you are? The Godfather? We’ll take care of it,” he said.

David lay back. Allowed the paramedic to refit the oxygen mask and take his pulse.

Sawyer swiped at Michael’s head. Michael ducked out of it. “Too bad about the boat, though,” he said.

David struggled to lift his head. “The boat? What about the boat?”

“I’m sure you can replace it. It was a piece of shit anyway.”

David’s looked back and forth between us.

Michael shook his head. Sorrowful. “Nothing we could do.”

I held a straight face. “Confiscated.”

David talked into the mask. “What the hell?”

Michael’s lips pressed together into a tight line. He leaned in, his voice a loud whisper.

“Pirates,” he said. He held up the keys to the boat.

The paramedic looked baffled.

David held up a fist. Managed a coarse growl. “That’s mutiny,” he said.

Michael and Lenny laughed, but David could only cough.

The ambulance circled the parking lot, turning to go up the hill out of the marina. It
pulled up alongside us, the gritty pop of gravel under the wheels next to us as we walked. The front window came down. “Hey! Is one of you Jude Wildish?”

Michael grinned and pointed. He’d lost his mirrored glasses, and his eyes were clear and blue, his face streaked with dried salt. “Jude Wildish!”

The ambulance driver spoke into his radio, and then leaned out to us through the window. “Better follow us to in. Highland Medical over on Sylvester. You know where it is? Your wife says she’ll meet you there.”

Lenny shrugged. “Women,” he said. “Always two steps ahead of us.”

We limped like old men in our blankets to the row of trucks under the wide gray sky.
Chapter 30

Once when I was ten, before Sawyer had come to us, Lenny took me and David from the old house up Forest Road where we cut over on a trail around the shoulder of Squak Mountain. We left our bikes at one point and hiked up a rise and through a stand of red birch and old fir. On the other side of a clearing, there was a single, big-leaf maple and a chain-link fence around a tennis court, the cement slab painted green like Christmas. Yellow tennis balls dotted the court.

The maple was old and thick, its trunk a wide, mossy knob that separated halfway up from the bottom into two separate trunks, like trees growing into each other, pushing out branches in opposite directions. Hoary folds of lichen and witches-hair hung down on the underside of the branches. The tree’s dark canopy spread over most of the court and over a wide stretch of a manicured lawn that rolled out in front of a cultured grove of oak and a single paved lane that curved up the hill. Lenny said it was the Newcastle estate, and I guess we were all impressed. None of us had seen anything like it out in the middle of the forest.

The gate was locked. Lenny curled his fingers into the chain-link and shook the fence. He leaned back to survey the top. Bet me I couldn’t climb it.

“Why would I want to?” I said.

“Toss out those tennis balls, and we’ll split them. 50/50,” he said.

David measured the fence in his glance. He broke a stick in his hands and threw a piece of it towards the paved lane. “It’s Sunday,” he said.

“You climb it,” I said.

“What?” Lenny said to David. “Now you’re a pussy because it’s the Sabbath?” He spit into his hand and held it out to me. “60/40.”

I spit into my hand. “70/30.”
We shook.

The tennis balls were nubby with fluff and smelled sharp like rubber. Lenny collected them in his jacket spread out in the grass as I threw them over the fence. Lenny caught one and threw it back into the court so that it bounced over my head.

“Asshole,” I said. He wound up like a pitcher and threw again, but there was nothing in his hand. I flipped him off and grabbed the fence to climb back over. Coming over the top, I caught my shoelace on a broken loop of chain-link, my leg up high as my shoulder. As I called for help, struggling to get free, Lenny began to pelt me with tennis balls, singing in a wavering falsetto. “Help. I need somebody. Help.”

Just as I got the lace to slip over the fence loop, a tennis ball caught me square alongside the head, and I lost my grip.

What I know about falling is that when you hit the bottom, there is a darkness that fills your eyes from the inside out. By the time air flowed back into my lungs and the haze of yellow and green overhead sharpened into leaves and sky, it could have been a minute or a lifetime passed by.

Lenny and David were gone. A solid ache throbbed between my ribs and back. Leaves rustled with the shift of air or shuffle of insects, and the ground was cold under me in the shadow of the tree. I remember the maple leaves overhead rippled like the surface of a pond, the sun a glimmer of light through the mesh of branches, leaves, and lichen.

The sound of my brothers came first, as if from far away. Then my father’s voice called my name close by, from somewhere just below the crest of the hill, below the cultivated oak and row of arborvitae, below the split big-leaf maple that stretched above me, its dual trunks rising together.
I had a concussion and had damaged the connective tissue around my lungs so that every breath felt as if there was a dagger in my chest. In the weeks it took for me to heal up, Lenny seemed to sink into something of his own. Ma accused him of skulking around. No one had ratted him out about what happened. As far as Pops or Ma knew, we’d just been being dumb kids when I fell and hurt myself. Over time, I watched Lenny became more agitated. He was quick to bite our heads off, and a darkness hung over him like a dark weight. He carried his guilt until he couldn’t bear it, and then he admitted everything in a dramatic, angry, tearful tirade that got him whipped.

After the fishing trip, Lenny seemed caught in a similar darkness. I wondered if his mediations were still working. It made me anxious and watchful. Jo and I moved to the house, and it was a place to keep an eye on him. It was nothing so obvious as back the time we were kids. A subtle shift not quite enough to notice in real time, only later when it was too late.

Jo asked me if I thought Lenny was alright, and I said sure, he’s just tired from working all day. I was tired. I was trying to figure out how we’d ever afford to raise a family, even one kid, as the job market was tight again, gas was up over a dollar a gallon, and I was trying to save enough to pay the hospital after the baby was born.

Jo was stunning in pregnancy, her body shifting and expanding for the little guy. Or girl. We’d kept to our deal to wait to find out at the birth, even when Jo’s parents wanted to buy us a full nursery if we’d tell them. Jo negotiated with her dad, and we still got a crib and a fancy set of green baby quilts, sheets and bumpers. Jo thought it was hilarious and started coming up with an entire list of non-specific baby names that she dropped on her parents. Chris. Kelly. Alex. We were in the final trimester and taking Lamaze classes to be ready for the big day, self-involved on our own life crisis.
Then one day Sawyer called to find out why Lenny was late for work. He wasn’t at the house either. Later, he must have shown up on the job because Sawyer didn’t call back. But I should have noticed. Given it more weight. Asked more questions. Figured it out sooner.

On Labor Day, Michael was home on leave from his latest post in Turkey, and everyone came over to barbecue. David and Rachel and the dogs. Sawyer brought Cheryl Longley, just like Ma had called it back at the first of the year. We watched the Dodgers on TV, and Pops was in fine form, calling the plays before they happened in his raspy voice, reminding us that what we knew about baseball we’d gotten from him. We were jubilant in the win, our team coming in to its own. Making plans for a run at the World Series. Making jokes about getting Jo to swallow a baseball for our kid to start warming up for the big leagues.

Lenny caught Ma up for a whirl across the kitchen, kissed her on the head before releasing her.

“You big goofball,” she said. “All this hoopla over a game.” She didn’t mean it, of course. She knew what it meant, and she was humming under her breath as she set about whipping up a batch of pecan rolls for the next day’s breakfast.

David and Sawyer were rehashing the play by play in the living room, and Michael had slipped away to make some phone calls. Jo guessed he had a lead on that new single girl from the golf club. She’d seen them chatting across the street in the park where Michael had just happened to run into her as she started her regular morning run. Jo figures it took the whole week to time his entrance right.

“Hey,” Lenny said, catching my attention out of our own family hoopla. “I’m going for cigarettes. Need anything?”

“Naw,” I said.
He flashed his nubby finger at me. “Nothing? You know I’d get it for you, little brother.”

And then he winked.

It was the wink that made me backtrack to the kitchen. The same one he’d ever used just before he pulled one over on you. Scam you out of your lunch money. Beat you in a bad bet. Beat an impossible dare.

Lenny had been gone about twenty minutes. I walked all the way through the kitchen and out to the patio where England and Marten were play-fighting, growling and grappling over the grass. Marten slipping the larger dog’s grasp to spin around him until he caught her and pinned her, the play repeating.

David was leaned back in a refurbished Adirondack. “You look perplexed,” he said.

Sawyer pulled out a chair for Cheryl and sat across from her. “Who says ‘perplexed,’ you pompous bastard?” He waved in my direction. “Jude. Throw me Lenny’s cigarettes there. I’m too lazy to get my own.”

On the back ledge of brick above the Folgers coffee can that served as an ashtray, there was a full pack of Marlboros. A jacket of matches was tucked into the plastic along the side. I picked them up, but then I couldn’t let them go. Staring at the clean white filter heads in the box as if they would explain what was coming down the pike.

Michael stuck his head out the door. “Sawyer. Ben down at the Quickie-mart called to say you can’t leave your goddamn piece of shit of Ford out back. It’s blocking the dumpster. He said to tell you he knows it’s your truck. And next time he wants to go fishing, he’ll drive.”

Sawyer looked at me. I looked at the cigarettes. Broke for my bike. I could hear Sawyer behind me, hollering for me to ride with him.
I cut through the woods, the trail as familiar as the inside of the house, even in the dark. Pumped hard over the single rise and dropped out on the road ahead of Sawyer in his big white truck. Two police cars were at the Quickie-mart, lights on. On my bike I cut through the gap between their barricade at the back of Sawyer’s Ford truck. One of the cops caught me before I reached the driver’s door.

“It’s my brother,” I said. “My brother, Lenny.”

“Well, shit,” the cop said. Frowned hard.

And then there was Sawyer coming up behind me. Calling Lenny’s name, loud and urgent, as if calling him back from somewhere far away. I slipped the cop’s grasp.

From the driver’s side, Lenny was leaned over the gear shift. A red bandana was tied around his bicep, the needle still in his arm. I should have known. It was my fault. I should have seen it coming. Stopped him.

Sawyer came in from the other side. He pulled the syringe. Wrapped his hands around Lenny’s face. Called his name again and again.
Afterword

We buried Lenny at Sunset Hills, where Pops had two plots, side by side. His stone was engraved as instructed: Beloved son and brother. Every wildfire frees new life. Each of us moved through the light and dark of the days that followed with varying success. For every moment of relief that we found through each other, another followed that would pull us back into that empty dark space of having lost our brother. Uncle Jack had flown in for the funeral and stayed, spending most of his time with Pops outside talking or sitting in front of the television in silence.

The response from friends and family was far more than we expected. People from Factoria and Seattle, as far as Eugene, Oregon and Sacramento. People we’d never met or didn’t know came to his funeral. Some sent letters, some with photos of Lenny along with some story of how he’d been a part of their life, if only briefly.

A week after the funeral, I took another day off just to get my head straight. I’d gone to collect the mail, and a red and black Towhee flew down to land on a paving stone in front of the azalea bushes. Its head turned to one side and then the other. It jabbed at something in the faded wood chips, hopped, and flew away.

I went back into the kitchen and slumped into a kitchen chair. My legs felt heavy, and on my lips, the bitter taste of tobacco.

Jo slid her hand into mine, lifted me with a small tug.

“I’ve got to rest. Come with me and the baby.” She led me down the hall to my old bedroom, onto the knobby cotton bedspread of the single bed and scooted in next to me, our bodies spooned together. Her legs and ankles had started to swell each day, and the doctor was monitoring her every week now that we were in the final stretch. She pulled my arm over the contortion of her body that was unimaginably part of her and, at the same time, not her. The baby
rolled and kicked under my hand. I breathed in the smell of her hair and the skin at the back of her neck.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said.

“Nobody does,” she said. “Maybe no one ever knows what to do.”

The ache in my chest spread like a cold weight throughout my body, my arms and fingers numb. When I closed my eyes, images of Lenny flowed through the muddled grief that felt like exhaustion. Like the day we all fished Tokul Creek, and Lenny caught a blue garter in the river with his bare hands. He rose up near the bank with the snake held out like a trophy, triumphant, water falling off of him like rain.

I woke up alone and covered with the flannel-lined Superman quilt I’d had since I was a kid. Outside, Michael was smoking a cigarette in a patch of weak sunlight on the patio. The wide blades of iris leaves shone with fresh rain, and to the north, the sky was purple, a roll of gray fanning out toward Lake Sammamish. Michael stood under the awning, watching the rain. Leaning over the railing, I was relieved to see Sawyer sprawled in one of the Adirondack chairs in the yard, a can of Pepsi in one hand. His Dodgers cap was pulled low over his eyes, hair mashed out the sides.

The hemlocks bobbed their lower branches, rising with the sound of rain. We looked at the back fence, at the hemlocks, at nothing. For as much as we gave Ma the credit for this place, everything about the garden was his. From layered indigenous plants to the carefully-groomed row of rhododendrons. The winding line of bricks was spaced with meticulous precision between the clipped grass and the flowerbeds. There was Oregon grape along the fence, flowering yellow in the spring over shiny leaves. And further down in the darkest shadows of the
hemlocks that had been here before the house and the fences and gardens, the single white Trillium flowers in the center of the three-leaf green.

England loped across the yard to join our vigil. His bent right ear flicked once, and then he dropped forward to stretch his bearded muzzle across his legs. A brush of wind ruffled the long gray fur across his back and neck.

“Where’s Pops,” I said.

Michael shrugged. “Den?”

We trooped in through the kitchen, cutting off Jo and Rachel’s talk at the table. Ma stood at the counter, and by the spread of ingredients, she was getting ready to make more cookies. “You boys let me know when you’re ready to eat,” she said, allowing us to pass by without explanation.

The den was Pops’ private space, Ma’s concession for her choosing the house. We only ever came into the den except when invited. Ma wasn’t allowed to clean in there, and when they would fight, it was his inevitable retreat with his whiskey and his phonograph. Jack Daniels and Johnny Cash.

Michael pushed between me and Sawyer in the doorway. He walked around the big desk. He spun the high-backed leather office chair in a slow circle. The room was clean and neat. A tall bookcase ran was built into one side of the room. A long wooden credenza stretched across the other side, the Pioneer turntable and receiver on top. A neat row of record albums stood in a rack of gold wire. By the door, several pairs of leather work boots were lined up against the wall on top of a cut-open brown paper bag.

On the desk, a set of stacking filing boxes, a neat pile of opened mail, and a heavy black telephone. Sawyer picked up the receiver. “No dial tone.”
Michael picked up a record album and flipped it over to read the back. “He disconnected it,” he said. “Actually, it was probably never connected. Didn’t you notice how he never takes a call in here? Always takes his calls in the kitchen.”

Sawyer’s eyebrows arched upwards. “Never noticed,” he said. “It’s true. He didn’t like to be interrupted.”

On the desk, stacks of papers recording the weather and local rainfall. Or a count of the birds spotted on the deck and around our house, counted and dated. A third was a log of outside temperatures and barometric readings, tracked morning, afternoon and evening for every day. Each entry was made in Pops’ thin handwriting, top to bottom on the page. Michael leafed through a stack of papers on the bookshelf, picked them up and flipped to the bottom. The dates went back for years.

I picked up his journal. There were shelves of these journals, leather-bound, some of them dated back to Indiana. I sat back in my father’s chair. The latest entry was dated yesterday afternoon: *Moon waning from full. Low 48. High 54. Rainfall 0.4” Michael looks good but he’s seen war and has been changed by it.*

“Holy shit.” Michael leafed through the stacks of weather reports. “This is some meteorologist’s wet dream.”

Sawyer opened the drawers. Rows of file folders. The middle drawer a menagerie of pencils, a pen knife, tape measure, tin of dried pods that looked like lupine seeds. Bits of paper folded like Origami. I held one up that looked like a fish. There was writing in the folds. I opened it.

Sawyer leaned in over my shoulder. “What does it say?”

“Varied thrush. Nesting pair. 4/22/90. North Squibbs Creek at Sammamish Pkwy.”
Sawyer unfolded a crane folded from a Safeway receipt for a case of beer. “6/12/89. Evening Grosbeaks. 3 female. 2 male, juvenile. North Idylwood Resort at roadside.”

We took turns unfolding and reading the bird notes, scraps of notebook paper, newsprint, receipts, shopping lists, all inscribed with his notes. I leaned my head back. The leather chair was aligned for a full view out the double set of windows set into the corner of the room, overlooking the back and side yards. Over the years, Pops had installed a dozen or more bird feeders in a row of iron stands of varying heights. Each feeder was distinct in shape and type of seed or suet. As I counted the feeders, a squirrel made a series of languid hops across the grass to the stretch of patio under the feeders and began to sift through the spilled seeds and hulls.

A flash of wings appeared near the window, stalled, and then shot over to one of the glass hummingbird feeders hanging under the eaves. The delicate green bird perched, its round head a luminous purple in the waning light. It slid its narrow beak into the plastic yellow nozzle of the feeder, into the pink nectar.

With the smallest movement of the chair, I was within easy arm’s reach of a small pad of yellow paper and a ball-point pen. On a fresh piece, I wrote: Ruby-throated hummingbird, male, April 12, 5:50 p.m. I folded the paper twice in a square, and then twice again, and spun around to put it in the drawer along with the others.

The lower side drawer was locked. “Anyone see a desk key?”

“Like that?” Michael pointed to a glass Pepsi bottle in the window sill, a silver key in the bottom.

“Just like that.” It shook out with a little tinkle of metal and glass. Michael and Sawyer both stretched their necks to watch as I unlocked the drawer and slid it open. Inside, the drawer was filled with lures of all kinds—streamers and muddlers, Black ghosts, marabous, muddler
minnows, breathers. Wings with a side hackle, turned in or offset. Bare lead wraps. All with the signature red thread that made them Lenny’s hand. In the corner of the drawer, a bottle of whiskey, half full.

Sawyer reached across the desk, pulled the bottle out. “Well, that’s something,” he said. “Grab us those glasses.”

He lined up three shot glasses and poured us a drink.

“To Pops,” Sawyer said.

Our glasses touched, a silvery clink like bells.

Sawyer refilled our glasses. “To Ma,” he said.

“To Ma.” Clink.

The square bottle was as familiar as Pops’ own hands and the sound of his voice. There was enough for one more round. Sawyer held up his glass, hesitated.

Michael raised his. “To the Varied Thrush,” he said.

“The Varied Thrush,” Sawyer said.

“Varied Thrush.”

The slow warm was spreading into my fingers.

“Look at this,” Michael said. He held out a photo of Lenny with his favorite fly rod in one hand, a string of trout in the other, a smug grin on his face.

It was the whiskey or the fatigue, or maybe it was our collective grief that thrust down on us like something tangible. Like a gust of wind that turns back into your face unexpectedly. Or a sigh. The photo passed to Sawyer.

Michael breathed out a raspy sigh.
Sawyer’s eyes closed. The creases in his face deepened. The shadow of a beard darkened the hollows of his cheeks. With one hand, he lifted his cap and pushed his fingers through his hair. Gray streaked the thick wave of hair that fell across his forehead, matching gray in his sideburns and eyebrows.

“This isn’t about us,” he said. “We think it’s about how much it hurts us,” he said. His voice faltered, cracked. In all the years he’d been with us, he’d always grieved in private. Like Ma did. As if he was just like her.

Pop’s gravelly voice came from the doorway. “I see you boys made yourselves right at home.”

Sawyer poured him a drink.

“I wanted to tell you,” Pops said. “Say that I think you boys did everything you could for your brother. You were the reason he came back at all.” He lifted one of tied flies. “Don’t you forget it. Otherwise it was for naught, his life.”

He sighed, as if releasing his own pain. “You’re walking around thinking you failed him. You only fail if you don’t hold to what made him so valuable to us that you feel it now he’s gone.” He placed the lure back on the desk next to the stack of old photos.

David called out he was home. Stuck his head in, Jack close behind. He took a quick inventory of our pillaging. “Who’s pouring the next round?”

“Next round?” Michael said, his brows pushed together, his entire face a question.

Jack flung a hand to take in the whole room. “Come on,” he said. “You don’t think there’s only one bottle in here, do you?”

Another bottle of whiskey was yanded from its stash under the turntable, almost full. A pint of rum from inside one of the boots by the door. And in the corner of the bookshelf, bottom
shelf behind *Desert Solitaire* and *Modern Carpentry*, a small, silver flask engraved with Pops’ full name, Abraham Leonard Wildish.

Jack was brazen, handing out shot glasses while Pops grumbled and harped about his privacy. “Drink with your sons, you old man.” He raised the silver flask. “To *Modern Carpentry*.”

“*Modern Carpentry.*”

Our glasses clinked against the silver flask.

Outside the rain was harder. We opened the windows of the corner den to hear the sound of it on the trees and ground.


Jack came to stand next to his brother. “Cow piss off a flat rock,” he said.

We toasted the rain.

At the corner out in the street, a blocked grate created a runoff puddle, and raindrops spiked the surface like something living. The wind shifted, blowing in from the West out of the Olympics with the smell of rock and earth and the melt of old snow.
Curriculum Vitae

Sherri H. Hoffman

**Education**

PhD in English: Creative Writing. May 2018
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM), Milwaukee, WI
Concentrations: fiction and creative non-fiction; 20th century American literature, naturalism, modernist and post-modernist theory; contemporary world literature
Dissertation: *The Wildish Boys, a novel*
Dissertation Committee: Valerie Laken (chair), Liam Callanan, Jason Puskar, George Clark, and Joe Austin

MFA in Writing, January 2013
Pacific University, Forest Grove, OR
Concentrations: fiction; creative non-fiction; novel and short story form; multi-cultural American fiction; contemporary realism; writing from memory
Faculty Advisors: Claire Davis, Pam Houston, David Long, Tayari Jones
Faculty Workshop Advisors: Katherine Dunn, Pete Fromm, Jack Driscoll, Laura Hendrie

Bachelor of Arts in English, June 1991
Weber State University, Ogden, UT
Concentrations: Early American and 20th century American literature; 20th century English literature and poetry; medieval literature; Eminent Writer Seminars–Walt Whitman and Thomas Hardy; Writing Across the Curriculum

**Teaching Experience**

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (2013–18): Graduate Teaching Assistant–English
- English 101: Introduction to College Writing, four sections
- English 102: College Writing and Research, eight sections
- English 233: Introduction to Creative Writing–fiction and poetry, three sections

Weber State University (1989-91): Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing Center Fellow
- Master of Accounting Seminar (MACC): implemented the writing component activities in the classroom for four sections
- Economics 1740: Economic History of the United States, implemented the writing component activities in the classroom for two sections
- Honors 2900: Honors Colloquium: led the 20th century American literary history discussion and writing component activities for one honors section
- Student Director in the Writing Center; one-on-one student tutoring and staff instruction
Select workshops and/or presentations in private and public sectors (1993-2010):

- “Building Your Platform: Social Media for the Job Search,” presentation to graduating students in Creative Media and Digital Culture program at Washington State University-Vancouver (WSUV), Vancouver, WA. March 2010
- “Update Your Department Website Pages,” training workshops to faculty and staff at WSUV, Vancouver, WA. February 2010.
- “Update Your Website: HTML and CMS maintenance,” training workshops for management and staff of the National Psoriasis Foundation, Portland, OR. March 2009.
- “Building your Platform (Business Series): Social Media is Good Business; Blogging; To Tweet or Not to Tweet; Using Hashtags; Amortizing your ROI; Understanding Analytics,” Little Wing Publications, Vancouver, WA. 2001-07.

Publications

Books:

Select Short Fiction:
“Chick.” Intentional Ducati, Vol. 3. August 2011. (online)
“With the Surety of a Revelation.” Poetic Diversity, Vol. 3 Number 1. April 2008. (online)

**Non-Fiction and Craft Essays**

**Poetry**

**Presentations and Selected Public Readings**
“Alumni Panel: Small Press Editors on Submitting to Magazines & Anthologies,” panel to discuss editing work on literary magazines; editorial representative of *cream city review*. Pacific University MFA in Writing residency, Forest Grove, OR, June 2015.
“Storytelling to Access Care,” critical panel presentation on storytelling to secure political and economic support for global health programs; stories from programs in Haiti, Chiapas, Ghana, Kenya, and Rwanda. *Transforming Access 2014: a Graduate Student Conference*, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH. March 2014.
“Commencement in Seven Parts,” student commencement address to Pacific University MFA in Writing Class of 2013, Pacific University, Forest Grove, OR. June 2013.
“Add Real Stuff to Your Writing,” poetry workshop and craft talk at the *Oregon Writing Festival*, Portland State University, sponsored by the Oregon Council of Teachers of English, Portland, OR. May 2013.
“Sacred Objects,” craft talk on creative writing at *Winter Wheat*, the Mid-American Review Festival of Writing, Bowling Green University, Bowling Green, OH. November 2011.

Awards and Recognition

• Ellen Hunnicut Prize for Bring Me Water Until I Drown, a novel (excerpt). UWM, 2017
• Wladyslaw Cieszynski Literary Prize Runner Up for “Stained with Lime.” UWM, 2017
• Graduate Student Excellence Fellowship, UWM 2016
• Pushcart nomination for “Stained with Lime” from Cimarron Review, 2016
• Distinguished Dissertation Fellowship Alternate, UWM, 2016
• Workshop Scholarship, Iowa Writers’ House, Iowa City, IA, 2016
• Winner: Poetry Moves contest, Printed Matter, C-Tran, and Arts of Clark County, 2015
• Distinguished Graduate Student Fellowship, UWM, 2015
• Literary Arts Fellowship with Brian Komei Dempster, Portland, OR, 2015
• Winner: Bronze Feather–Recommended Read Award in Creative Non-fiction for Utah Reflections: Stories from the Wasatch Front from the League of Utah Writers, 2015
• Teaching Award for Dedication to Student Success, UWM, 2014
• Ellen Hunnicut Prize for The Wildish Boys, a novel (excerpt). UWM, 2014
• Wladyslaw Cieszynski Literary Prize for “Seemingly Unrelated Events.” UWM, 2014
• James A. Sappenfield Fellowship for academic excellence, UWM, 2014
• Pushcart nomination for “Seemingly Unrelated Events” from december magazine, 2013
• Chancellor’s Award, UWM, 2013
• Student Commencement Speaker, MFA Commencement, Pacific University, 2013
• Bronze Award: Special Events for Washington State University-Vancouver 20th Anniversary Gala project, graphic design and production award, CASE District VIII Conference, 2010
• Editor’s Choice Award for “Thicker Than Water,” Bewildering Stories Magazine, 2008
• Editor's Choice Award for “Black Bird,” Lunch Hour Stories Magazine Anthology, 2008
• Whidbey Writers Student Choice Award for “Black Bird,” Whidbey Island Writers, 2007

Editorial, Publishing Production, and Other Relevant Experience

• Member, Graduate Faculty Committee, graduate student appointee, UWM, 2016-17
• Member, Graduate Curriculum Sub-Committee, graduate student appointee, UWM, 2016-17
• Fiction Editor, cream city review, UWM, Milwaukee, WI, 2014-16
• Assistant Fiction Editor, cream city review, UWM, Milwaukee, WI, 2013-14
• Co-Editor, Utah Reflections: Stories from the Wasatch Front, History Press, 2013
• Web Manager/Graphic Design, Washington State University-Vancouver, 2009-10
• Website Content Producer, National Psoriasis Foundation, Portland, OR, 2008-09
• Communications Manager, Fairway America, LLC, Portland, OR 2006-08
• Researcher and Writer, Commissioner Jim Francesconi, City Council, Portland OR, 1997-99
• Freelancer: content production, web production, and editing services, 1997- 2013
• Communications Coordinator, Comp-U-Cool, Gresham, OR 1995-97
• Editor-in-chief, Senior Thesis, Weber State University English Dept. publication, 1991
• Fellow and Student Director, Writing Center, Weber State University, Ogden, UT, 1988-91
• Crisis Mediator and Outreach Worker in Oregon Juvenile Courts, Portland, OR, 2002-05