

2014-01-01

Las Cruces

Karen Lee Dockal

University of Texas at El Paso, kcattx@gmail.com

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LAS CRUCES

KAREN LEE DOCKAL

Department of Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Lex Williford, Chair

Daniel Chacón

Maryse Jayasuriya, Ph.D.

Bess Sirmon-Taylor, Ph.D.
Interim Dean of the Graduate School

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2014

Dedication

To my husband, Ron, with gratitude and love.

LAS CRUCES

by

KAREN LEE DOCKAL

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2014

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my thesis director, Lex Williford, for his insight, guidance, and support. My thanks also to Daniel Chacón for additional inspiration and guidance through the semesters.

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Preface

The novel has long entertained Western society, but it has sometimes been at odds with it, as well when perceived as frivolous or inartistic. The narrator of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* bemoans the attitude of the late 18th century toward young women reading novels, saying, "Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried" (ch. 5).

More recently, philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset expressed the opinion that, "Not only is grieving and rejoicing at such human destinies as a work of art presents or narrates a very different thing from true artistic pleasure, but preoccupation with the human content of the work is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper" (qtd. in Booth, 119).

Fortunately, many writers disagree with purists like Ortega and produce fiction which is preoccupied with "human content" and which evokes grief and joy, and many readers still appreciate such works.

My novel, *Las Cruces*, attempts both to evoke and to represent such emotion. As with most fiction, it draws from real life. It is autobiographical fiction but not an autobiography. Entire events were created of whole cloth while others are made from the clearest recollections while looking through a fifty-year-old lens. I further altered these recollections with the best enhancement tool at my disposal, the fallible and flexible brain.

Autobiographical fiction is an effort to express a personal truth in novel form. One gathers facts, memories, grainy photographs and warbling home movies, then stirs into them new knowledge, hindsight, research, growth, language, and peace with one's demons.

The writers of autobiographical fiction draw from intimate spaces, as many writers do,

and conceal yet reveal simultaneously and in doing so, discover what they could not see when looking at the past head on. To look at the past through the filtered fictionalized version is to ask not only how did this happen but why? The next step is to ask what if it happened another way in the writers' altered versions. In so doing, their characters, and ultimately, the people they are drawn from, achieve greater dimension and value. It is in this spirit that I approached the characters of *Las Cruces*.

The catalyst for the autobiographical fiction of *Las Cruces* was a family member who exhibited the traits of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Exploring how this disorder affects the family and others around the narcissist as well as the narcissist herself has intrigued me for some time.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) has a frequency of 6.2% in the United States population (Frederick, et. al., par. 1). For perspective, the American Diabetes Association website statistics page states that the percentage of those diagnosed with Type II diabetes is 8.3% or approx. 25.8 million Americans. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the primary traits of the narcissistic personality are: a grandiose sense of self-importance, a tendency to manipulate others, an indifference to legal or moral consequences (a sense of entitlement), and a lack of empathy (669-670).

To put it more succinctly, as a friend wishing to remain anonymous did when speaking of her family member, "Call it narcissism if you like. I say he's just a manipulative, selfish bastard."

Psychology struggles to pigeon-hole disorders like Narcissism based on symptomology and cannot explain what causes the disorder (if it is one), how to treat it (if it can be treated) or how to live with the narcissist (if one must). For the family member quoted above, reducing the behavior of the narcissist to simplistic terms provides a release valve.

I have never been satisfied with such simplification and I sought to understand either out

of an innate desire or out of the assumption that understanding would ease the stress of the relationship. As a writer, trying to put the narcissist in perspective without making her evil and unbalanced, it was all the more critical that I not simplify her in such a way. I needed to wrap images, events, and other characters around her, and place her in circumstances that forced me and the reader to reach a better understanding not just of the character but of the disorder and how it affects those around the character.

Poetics

Structure

I originally set out to make *Las Cruces* a sort of generational study—a saga, if you will—rather than the more constrained novel into which it evolved. I looked first to William Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*. I hoped to separate each character's story in *Las Cruces* into sections, telling events from each point of view.

I worried that the three main characters, Ruth, Jackie, and Leah, were not as distinct as Faulkner's characters in terms of voice and that this lack of distinctiveness might work against a similar structure. Faulkner's voices are so clear and distinct that they define themselves the moment each section opens. From the first paragraph of "April Seventh, 1928," Benjy Compson says:

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence

while Luster was hunting in the grass.

Benjy's language is choppy: "Through the fence [pause] between the curling flowers [pause] I could see them hitting [stop]" The images are simple but vague and almost out of context for us. "Curling flower spaces" and "flower tree," for example, are open to interpretation. The pronouns used, *he*, *they*, and *the other*, refer to vague entities in the scene. All of this makes clear Benjy's limited verbal and intellectual capabilities.

From the first sentence of "June Second, 1910," Quentin Compson says:

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's.

In contrast to Benjy's language, Quentin's sentences are long and rhythmic. One can almost hear Quentin run out of breath while reciting his grandfather's words at the same time being particular about how he pronounces *mausoleum* and *excruciatingly*.

Mother, Ruth, and sisters, Jackie and Leah, thus far, lack the differences of the Compson brothers in terms of voice.

In addition, *Las Cruces* demanded a good deal more backstory because it is as much Ruth's story as the two sister's stories. The history of Ruth's relationship with her sister in the 1940s runs parallel and in contrast to that of Leah's and Jackie's relationship history in the 1960s through the 1970s.

Nonetheless, Faulkner's structure and his stunning voices in *The Sound and The Fury*

played in the back of my mind every time I considered writing about these women.

As I moved away from Faulkner's modular structure, I saw Louise Erdrich's polyphonic work as an interesting and challenging alternative approach. In *Love Medicine* and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, the meanderings of family loves and conflicts and intra-communal clashes take on highly textured and realistic shape and that shape illustrates the polyphony of family dynamics.

M. M. Bakhtin defines polyphony as when "a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (ch. 1).

Erdrich's characters are entangled with each other, slipping over each other, missing each other by a breath or a step, and the tight weaving of her novels reflects this. Yet, each inhabits her own emotional, spiritual, political, and ethnic world and the characters never quite come together. This facet of the books is possibly due to the structure being that of a novel in stories rather than a novel conceived as a whole, yet it works as a single unit.

At this stage, *Las Cruces* cannot be said to be polyphonic by Bakhtin's definition for the characters do merge "in the unity of the event" which is not true of *Love Medicine* or *The Sound and The Fury*. But the *Las Cruces* characters make the story amenable to the polyphonic structure and that concept is still something I considered. Leah, whose personality develops in response to her sister's actions in childhood, reflects those around her and so exists as different, labile, consciousnesses in different circumstances. She behaves, speaks, and feels differently with different family members in a dramatic fashion, almost dissociative in manner. Ruth's character in the present action is subdued but her voice is clear and independent. Jackie lives an isolated life, even with the people who share her home but presents yet another face when forced to step outside that home.

While *Las Cruces* is not strictly polyphonic, its three major characters still require

separate story arcs and having ruled out Faulkner's methods, I decided on interleaving chapters as Erdrich has done. I began with a purely chronological order left over from the early Faulknerian effort. Any attempt to keep it chronological in this new chapter form required significant time that the thesis program didn't provide. More important, at best it produced a plodding story. At worst, the work was forced and tedious with chapters that were necessary to make connections but were of little depth or value to the story.

Henry James, in his "Preface to Roderick Hudson," laments the difficulty of ordering and stretching or compressing time for his character, saying, "how much too scantily projected and suggested a field poor Roderick and his large capacity for ruin are made to turn around. It has all begun too soon [and] fails to commend itself to our sense of truth and proportion" (266). In the long run, he tells us, what James "clung to as [his] principle of simplification was the precious truth that [he] was dealing, after all, essentially with an Action, and that no action, further, was ever made historically vivid without a certain factitious compactness; though this logic opened up horizons and abysses of its own" (14-15).

While I hadn't James' wise words rattling about in my head, I had that essential thought and decided the most organic structure for *Las Cruces* was what I called a "memory trigger" or what my thesis director refers to as a "layer cake." This structure is common in modern fiction. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison uses analepsis to carry us through the story of Sethe, Denver, Paul D., and the mysterious Beloved, although the layers are not as discrete as my chapters. *Fried Green Tomatoes* by Fannie Flagg has discrete chapters that flip back and forth in time, from June 12, 1929 to December 15, 1985, back to October 8, 1929, and so on. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje is also interleaved. Like *Beloved*, Ondaatje's chapters are often not so sharply demarcated.

Like Ondaatje's book, *Las Cruces* begins with a present action event at the end of which

the point-of-view character experiences something to trigger a memory and the next chapter takes the reader back seventy-one years. Chapter three brings us back to 2010 and so on. Some memories are further layered within chapters. These events occur when a brief flashback occurs in the course of discussion or other event that doesn't bear lengthy interruption. In chapter twelve, Leah and her husband drive across Texas to Las Cruces and stop for gas in a small central Texas town where Leah slips into a reverie to an unpleasant memory.

Leah waited in the cab for Jim to fill the truck's gas tank near Comfort, Texas. She kept the windows up, hoping the cab would hold the lingering whiffs of cool, conditioned air. She watched the pump counter race and the dollars creep up. She thought she might tolerate a few more minutes when the pump stopped and Jim cranked the cap tight on the tank. She let out a soft sigh and turned forward when Jim tapped on the driver's side window and made a drinking motion with his curled hand to his mouth.

Leah nodded and smiled.

After a minute, the cool faded, Leah's face bloomed red, and her back and chest dripped with sweat.

Leah remembered stretching, stomach down, across the laps of her sister, Jackie, and her second cousin, Terrie, in the back seat of Dorothy Parson's 1965 seafoam Chevy Biscayne. Vicki Parson, twelve, sat in the front seat, dangling her glossy, red nails in Leah's face. Leah, seven, turned her head to look at the green carpet.

Vicki had strange powers over Jackie and Terri, each a year younger than she, and Leah trailed the preteen clique. The older girls teased Leah

with Ouija board predictions that frightened her, ghost stories that gave her nightmares, gory Halloween pranks that sent her home without candy in bag or gut, and disappearing acts that left her abandoned in the overgrown field behind the Piggly Wiggly. Yet Leah continued to turn to them for company. (69-70)

The scene stretches out a couple of pages and Leah is brought back to 2010 when her husband returns to the truck. Analyses of this sort are few in the book, however.

One of the “abysses” of this structure is that the reader must be attentive to the chapter headings else descriptions of character behaviors may seem odd indeed. Another abyss is simply the effort on the part of the writer of keeping the sequence of events in mind while creating the work. I went through several variations with mind maps and data flow diagrams in my attempt to keep the layers organized as I worked.

However, a horizon of this structure is the ease with which it allows future changes to the story. Little tweaks here and there revealed new vistas for the characters that I am eager to pursue at a later date. Why didn't this character marry the man who got her pregnant at eighteen? What can I do to deepen that character? Can this peripheral character be more integral to the story? Should he? This beauty of the layer cake, with its chronological unpredictability, is that if I choose to broaden a character's story, I can do so with little damage to the structure.

The beauty of this form from an aesthetic point of view is its organic sense. Most of us, while we live in Einsteinian time, always going forward, also spend a good deal of time reflecting on past events, especially when confronted with family conflicts. The layer cake lends itself to this story form.

Narrative Elements

Because *Las Cruces* centers on the relationship rather than events and was inspired by a real-life personality, it is an example of psychological realism. As psychological realism, characters take center stage. The three main characters are perhaps best investigated via narrative mode, character traits, and reliability.

Narrative Mode

Initial narrative mode decisions in *Las Cruces* placed two characters, Ruth and Jackie, in limited third-person narrative mode with Jackie's little sister, Leah, in first-person mode since she most resembles me. I desired more than one narrative mode in the book at that time, hoping to experiment with the effect of these points of view both on character and on distance. However, Leah and I could not be teased apart as long as Leah was written in first person. I remained too emotionally tangled in Leah to step away from her pain and anger to look into the lives of the other characters. I was unsympathetic to Jackie's character at times and excessively judgmental of her and tended to martyr Leah. When I switched Leah's narrative to third-person point of view and placed her at considerable distance from my concerns, her flaws became more visible.

At the same time, lengthening Leah's leash allowed Jackie to speak, to reveal her humanity, and to be a witness to Leah's less-than-perfect behavior. Here, Leah and Jackie discuss Jackie's injury on a table saw:

"So which beast snacked on your hand?" Leah asked.

Jackie led Leah to a portable table saw.

"This one. I was cutting a small piece and it got stuck. I tried to push it through—"

"You couldn't use a push block?"

Jackie stared at the saw for a breath, "No, the piece was too small. Anywho,

next thing I knew it caught one finger, then the other and I had a mess. It left me with this." Jackie thrust her stumpy middle finger at Leah with a broad grin. "And this." She extended her first finger, also missing its tip.

Leah didn't flinch. "Ouch. Sorry you had to experience that. No task complete until a Mueller bleeds on it, eh?"

Jackie nodded. "Yeah."

"Can I see some of your latest stuff?"

Jackie led her back to the isolation room where several geodes sat polished and ready for findings or mounting.

"Wow. Those are lovely. Can't tell can you?"

"What?"

"What they'll look like inside. You can't know until cut them open, right?"

"Right."

"Do you just toss stuff that's crap?"

"No. Even crap has some color usually. Enough to make a keychain or a coaster or something."

Leah picked up a piece with short cloudy crystals and stretched her arm to find her focus.

Jackie tapped the bench with her nail-less index finger. "I need to get some work done, babe."

"I have to ask you, what if Mom isn't coming home?"

Jackie studied Leah's eyes, mossy-covered stones in deep sockets. Thundereggs.

"Why wouldn't she?"

"I'm just saying, sometimes a break like that just doesn't heal." Leah glanced toward the two men at the raccoon feeder. "Who'll take care of Dad?"

"I will, of course."

Leah put the geode down as if setting down a raw egg. "He's struggling, Jack. You have a grandson to raise and a business you're running and you're sick, so you keep saying."

"Dad's fine. He just forgets little things now and then. He's not crap. I'm not going to toss him."

Leah mumbled, "Can't turn him into a coaster."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

Leah examined her plump but intact fingers. "I mean you can't shut him up every time he gets on your nerves."

"You try living with him. Both of them! Babbling on and on. I love them but for Christ's sake."

"What would you do, anyway?" Jackie asked.

Her sister shrugged. "I just want them to know if they need to come to Houston, we can make it work. That's all."

That's all."

"Dad would hate it."

"Mom wouldn't."

"Mom doesn't make the decisions." Jackie clamped her mouth shut.

"I'm well aware of that." Leah sneered.

"So you'll make the decisions?" Jackie shook a metal pick at Leah.

"God, no!" Leah took a step back and put up both hands. "Chill out, Jackie. I

just want them to know they have options. I'm sorry but the hospital here isn't exactly the Texas Med Center, you know?"

"It's better than you think. You're just being a snob. As always." (147-149)

Leah challenges Jackie's technical knowledge with respect to the saw. In childhood, this would have led to a battle but adult Jackie holds back. Leah pushes again, in sincere concern for her parents but not in the diplomatic way she would have done in her youth. Jackie finds her tipping point and blows a little steam at her sister. This scene came about as a result of looking closely at how Jackie would view Leah's intrusion into her life and her efforts to take care of her family rather than looking at Leah's view of how Jackie is handling things. It gave me an opportunity to give Leah a bit of an aggressive, unpleasant edge and give Jackie a more defensive, sympathetic position. This was a direct result of stepping away from my attachment to Leah.

Even so, the narrative distance from all the characters is short and it evolved as the book evolved. Leah, originally in first person, was close, of course. Jackie began close and remained close in the limited third person with some free indirect discourse. Below, Jackie and her father sit in her car after an outing and Jackie is frustrated to have to cut the outing short for his sake. We see not only how Jackie behaves outwardly toward her father, but free indirect discourse informs us how she feels about him in general:

Her father sniffed. "You really ought to treat your old man with more respect."

Jackie jammed the key into the ignition and dropped her forehead onto the steering wheel. "Sure, Dad."

It was just that he was such a man and always had been and as long as

she could remember he'd been demanding or stupidly pliable and, God, it annoyed the shit out of her. She'd been telling him to fuck off since she was twenty and it was his own fault he didn't stand up for himself. (12)

Ruth's character is formal and rather aloof and I tried to make her voice and the language surrounding her reflect that fact. In the following excerpt, Ruth and infant Jackie have met Wynn Huckle, a British expatriate, on the beach in Tripoli Libya. Ruth is a bit brusque in pointing out that men leave their wives to contend with all the needs of the household while they are in the field and then don't understand why women must adopt an attitude of independence.

"I *do* appreciate your help today, Wynn. Please don't think otherwise."

Ruth opened the gate and set Jackie down in the garden path. "But as long as you men must play in the desert, we women must keep the house from falling apart."

"As long as we men must work in the desert to pay the rent, we will worry about our women and children." Huckle swung his bag around his back, laced his hands behind his neck, stretched tall, and smiled.

Ruth nodded. "Fair enough." She stepped inside the gate. "I do hope you will look us up when you move in. I'm sure we'll be here. I know Rob would enjoy meeting you. He's made several trips to England." (20)

Her words are polite but have a ring of force. "I *do* appreciate" rather than just "I appreciate" and "we women must" as opposed to something gentler like "we do our best to," and finally "I *do* hope you *will* look us up" rather than the contraction "you'll" to emphasize the formality of the statement versus overt friendliness.

Ruth is stoic. To allow the reader (or character) too close to her most intimate thoughts is at odds with her character. Nonetheless, we get into Ruth's head through dialog and action when she is forced to defend her children but even then she fights intrusion. Below, Ruth is older and aware that time is ticking down for her as she recovers in a rehabilitation center from the fall in chapter one. Her husband has been picking on Leah for her weight problems and the pettiness has worn thin on Ruth:

"She's always been good to you," Ruth said as the door closed behind Leah and Jim.

"Who?" Rob pressed the call button on Ruth's bed.

"Our youngest."

"So?" Rob stood and wandered to the other side of the room.

"Why say those things?" Ruth picked a tissue out of the box on her nightstand and dabbed her eyes.

"Because they're true."

Ruth slammed her hands to the bed. "I don't call you an ass but it's true."

Rob's jaw fell open.

The door opened and a nurse walked in. "Did you need something, Ms. Ruth?"

Ruth shook her head and pointed at her husband. "I think he needs to eat." (194)

Ruth breaks loose from her calm, mannerly self long enough to defend her youngest child. Just as quickly, she gathers herself back in to protect herself and her husband from the

nurse's judgment and possible intrusion into their private matters. However, it is a mistake to think she is empty rather than walled off. I hope it is clear, by the end of the book if not well before, why this is so.

While writing Leah's point of view in first-person created the problem of too little distance, switching to Leah's third-person point of view created excess distance. No longer in her head or attached to her emotionally, I sought to make her someone different from myself and struggled to find out who Leah was and how she behaved. This attempt remained partly unresolved and resulted in a somewhat reactive character. Reactivity is a typical trait for many people who grow up with NPDs, always forced to respond to the NPD's demands rather than their own needs, but it makes for a weaker fictional character, at least while Leah is in her older sister's presence.

Without reaching Leah's core and being able to clarify who she is or would become, she feels like a flat and contrived character at times. Her dimensions appear to be anger, frustration and submission, with some sprinkling of passive-aggressive behavior. Now and then we see a glimpse of her complexity, but due to her reactivity to Jackie and lack of her own actions/motivations, those glimpses are relatively shallow. An example of such an event is when, in chapter twelve, Leah is attempting to meditate. Something about the meditating process is critical to her spiritually and emotionally but there is not enough background or depth to Leah at this stage to determine what. Another example, more fleeting, is her brief sexual banter with her husband in the Las Cruces hotel in chapter twenty-six. These are facets of Leah that could further humanize her but narrative distance and my shifting grasp on the character left them unexplored.

Character Traits

In a novel in which the main characters are related women in some form of emotional and/or physical isolation, the reader (and the writer) must be able to distinguish between them.

Not only does the reader need to be able to sort through who is saying what line of dialogue, but the general appeal of the story is heightened by having distinguishable characters rather than similar, flat characters. Multi-dimensional characters help the reader feel as if they are experiencing the story it, getting to know the characters and coming to care about them.

An avid reader whom I know avoids short stories because, as she says, "Just when I get to know the characters, they leave." (Blythe) To her, the joy of reading is in knowing the people in books as if they are real and this verisimilitude is testament to the power of the author to develop characters beyond a flat or otherwise limited scope. In the case of *Las Cruces*, I was less concerned that my characters lacked dimensions and more concerned that those dimensions did not vary enough between the three main characters.

Narratologist Seymour Chatman states "A viable theory of character should preserve openness and treat characters as autonomous beings, not as mere plot functions" (119). To that end, he defines one aspect of character in a very human manner—trait. For Chatman, narratives "demand of the audience the capacity to recognize certain habits as symptomatic of a trait" (122).

When Leah and Jackie share the same physical space, they must not share the same psychological space and most of that psychological separation is accomplished through dialogue, imagery, and point of view. However, showing Leah's character traits or "habits symptomatic of a trait" versus Jackie's traits, both when together and when isolated from each other, further separates them in the mind of the reader (ideally).

Leah and Jackie are sisters with many genetic similarities, raised in the same homes with the same principles, and having the same life lessons drummed into them. Their personalities overlap and so do their voices. Both are temperamental and given to expressing that trait in different ways and under different stresses. Both seek a certain (similar) type of partner (older, financially stable, father figure) as so often happens in girls with absent fathers. Their language

differs somewhat but even this is problematic as they grow up under the same linguistic mantle.

Therefore, while Jackie's voice has certain unique aspects, it is not her sole distinction. Her non-verbal expressions are also critical to character development and separation from her sister:

Leah smiled their father's smile. The same condescending one that preceded, "Now, Jackie..." in Jackie's childhood. She looked down at her hands, and rubbed the thick, red skin over the first two fingers of her left hand.

She looked back to Leah, now perched on the window sill and pulled back into the conversations of the other adults in the room.

There were moments Jackie carried her comforting isolation with her, when she stood among others, looked at them, heard them, but felt as if she were back in her room or on her balcony, staring at the desert spread before her. She could not conjure that peaceful bubble now. She felt a snarl rising to her lips like a cornered dog. (78)

This passage shows Leah treating her sister with disdain, then stepping back and ignoring her to focus on "the other adults" while Jackie slips into herself, looks at the damaged hands she often dwells on, and starts to feel cornered and out of place.

In the following passage, Leah and Jackie argue from Leah's point of view and we see how Leah quite literally uses her husband for support not just here but throughout the story. It begins with Jackie's husband Will leading his grandson, Ethan, out of the room.

"Come on." Will led the child out of the room.

The three in the den listened for a closed door.

Jackie stretched her legs. "Of course, we love him. But it was Hell to watch Nikki throw away her education and get harassed by the father's family and get sick with pre-eclampsia. All because she couldn't remember to take a pill once a day."

Leah clenched her jaw.

"But the alternative wasn't really an option. I couldn't let her do that. Anyway, she wouldn't have. She wanted him. She thought she did."

Leah pressed her thigh against Jim's.

Will returned and sat in his recliner. "Now that the boy is down, what's this about taking Ruth and Rob to Houston?"

Leah glared at Jackie then at Will. "No one is taking them to Houston."

"That's not how I understood it."

"Then let me elucidate. I expressed to Jackie that if Mom and Dad wanted or needed transport to or residence in Houston, we could accommodate them."

"They're hardly being held against their will, Leah." Will crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair.

"Of course not. But all their savings are gone. Even if they wanted to leave, they couldn't. We're offering resources to them if they need to or want to." Leah took a deep breath and pressed herself tighter to Jim.

"What makes you think they'd want to?"

"It's not that," Jim said.

Leah put her hand up. "As I told my sister, I don't think they would. But if they need medical care they can't get here or you can't care for them

for some reason, we have resources in Houston."

"I don't understand why this is coming up now." Jackie yanked Leah's attention away from Will.

"It isn't just now, Jackie. We've told Mom and Dad this several times in the past. Now we're telling you."

"You're not going to talk Dad into anything."

"For God's sake, Jack, it's a hypothetical. Like, 'What if the Germans won the war? What if Nikki had taken her pill? What if Mom and Dad need something Mountain View doesn't have?'"

"I know what a hypothetical is."

"Then stop acting like what I'm saying is so bloody incomprehensible. What's incomprehensible is why you invited us here for lunch after pulling that vanishing act with Mom last night. I thought you were going to explain that but you've only baffled me more." (185-187)

Leah's language rapidly expanded as well, whether in aggression or in precision.

These and other smaller gestures are habits and behaviors that help to define and distinguish the two sisters.

Reliability

Third-person limited narrative mode is generally considered a reliable narrative mode. However, since it is limited and not truly omniscient, it can't be said to be entirely reliable. The implied narrator sees only what the character sees and knows. The character is certain that all she thinks and feels is accurate but human memory and perception is flawed. The reader is given certain clues along the way to determine which character is more reliable but ultimately must

make the call on her own.

How reliable are the witnesses of *Las Cruces*? It appears Jackie has suffered abuses but these could be the interpretations of a small child with vague and dreamy memories. Jackie, like all of us, can only see things from her point of view.

Jackie's unreliability grows larger in the face of her narcissistic behaviors such as embellishments and concealments (telling her husband she ran out of gas when she did not but ran late because she stopped off at a bar for wine and an ego boost), bringing her perception into question for the reader.

Jackie lives in a constant state of anxiety over losing what psychotherapist Rockelle Lerner calls the narcissist's "primary source of admiration or attention," (44) or in Jackie's case, her parents or anyone who can influence them. We learn of this facet of Jackie's personality here as Jackie considers the arrival of her sister and brother-in-law and their interaction with her other sibling and his family.

Jackie slid into the driver's seat of her SUV and let the coming evening balloon in her mind's eye.

Leah and Brian were close. God only knew what bullshit Brian would tell Leah when she and Jim went to visit. All negative about Jackie, certainly. (102)

As more of these kinds of perceived threats add up in the story, we begin to grasp how fear translates "my sister offered to take my mom to a world class hospital, if needed" into "my sister is stealing my mom." This adds yet another layer to the question of reliability for Jackie's character and more depth and complexity to the character.

Of the three characters, Ruth is perhaps the most reliable. When she is available, she is very clear in what she wants, what she thinks, and what she feels. There is no questioning her

motives and her needs. Ruth doesn't play games or mince words or waste effort on manipulation. In speaking to Wynn Huckle again, she is straightforward about her intent to be self-sufficient as a young mother in the 1960s despite her husband's regular absences.

"She isn't walking as yet?"

"She walks when she chooses, which isn't often." Ruth laughed. "She certainly knows how. She'd rather I carry her everywhere."

Huckle bent forward and studied Jackie. "I suppose she's wrung out enough I might could carry her a bit."

"That's not necessary. I'm used to lugging her everywhere. I do wish she'd hold on though, instead of just hanging here like dead weight."

"You are quite independent, aren't you?" Wynn Huckle huffed.

Ruth repositioned Jackie. "What's the alternative?"

"Let someone help you when they offer."

"And get dependent on them. Then when they leave I'll have to adjust to not having them again. No, if I don't have to, I'd rather not." (19)

The aspects of narrative investigated above are, as stated, important to creating character dimension, distinction, and sympathy and reviewing them here reveals where the narrative mode, trait, and reliability among other narrative considerations can be used to strengthen not only the characters but the book as a whole.

For example, Ruth's reliability could be expanded on in the present action or in analepsis by showing some recognition on her part of what is or was true versus what is or was distorted by her two daughters. Leah's interactions in past events with someone other than Jackie might help the reader to connect with her in more depth. Finally, we don't always understand what motivates Jackie. I believe more, judiciously placed, free indirect discourse suits her and her

personality type in the narrative.

In the end, these changes and expansions on character could enlarge the human content of the novel and strengthen the realism.

Language

Faulkner and Erdrich represent recent influences, but to understand my writing style one has to step back to my early reading experiences. In the early 1970s, I purchased my first books of poetry—*Mindscapes*, *A Gathering of Poems*, and a book of Beatles lyrics. I read them all a hundred times over and the two poetry books are still on my shelf almost forty years later. Both poetry books tend toward contemporary poetry, although *A Gathering of Poems* has a number of classics. At twelve I was done for when I was sucked into phrases like, "thoughts meander like a restless wind inside a letterbox/they tumble blindly as they make their way across the universe" without having heard the song. Thank you, Mr. Lennon.

Poetry didn't work out for me as a skill, but I still love it and I find that, despite my spare style, the urge to create a memorable image remains, although it often seems at the whim of my pen and not my brain.

As to that spare style, my brothers steeped my neurons in science fiction and they were fans of Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert A. Heinlein. Asimov had a clean, even minimalist approach to his writing and said of his writing, "I have given up all thought of writing poetically or symbolically or experimentally, or in any of the other modes that might (if I were good enough) get me a Pulitzer prize. I would write merely clearly and in this way establish a warm relationship between myself and my readers and the professional critics— Well, they can do whatever they wish." (Author's note). Small wonder that, as much as I adored his work, when I began reading literary fiction, I was drawn to Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver.

As science fiction fan, by necessity, I became a science nut. My first love was

ornithology followed in short order by botany (when I wasn't writing). I loved all the sciences, however, and studied astronomy, chemistry, and physics although I did not excel in physics. These subjects and their language sneak into my writing. I read more science in my youth and young adult years than I did fiction and this has possibly also given me some of my almost formal style. For example, I steer clear of contractions and have to be reminded to use them in dialogue.

I received my first degree in Biology in my thirties and there was little time for reading literature. I had my head in comparative physiology and organic chemistry books. For these reasons, my knowledge of Literature (stressing the capital L) is largely limited to the exposure I've received in the MFA Online program. I'd read Tolstoy, Chekov, Carver and Hemingway before I began the program, but not with an eye toward analysis.

With time and exposure to other writers, I've grown to love all styles of literature, from the most obtuse minimalism to dense sentences that fill half a page. Hopefully, assimilating the spectrum will round out my style to something that is not easily categorized since I'd rather not be either minimalist or maximalist but let the pendulum fall to center.

Currently, the pendulum still swings toward minimalist. I found that this was not a major issue in my short stories but in tackling the novel, minimalism constrained me. I made a concerted effort to slow down imagery and dialogue, to look at my characters and let them speak. The challenge, not yet met, was to use that slower pace without being sluggish or dull. My thesis director refers to it as "deepening the conflict" in the chapters. A less diplomatic way to say it might be, "keeping it interesting," but the effort lies beyond interest or conflict. It also lies in Daniel Chacón's, "el río bajo el río."

I have sought the two rivers throughout this effort in connecting themes and images, parallel events, and spiritual struggles. The story doesn't only tell of the conflicts of two sisters or

the sacrifices of one wife/mother, but shows how the sister relationship of one pair of sisters differed so drastically from that of the other pair and, tangentially, how brothers' and sisters' relationships differ yet another way. It also shows how parents can be the foundation of sisterhood and never be aware of the fact.

The theme of forgiveness runs throughout, on a small and large scale. Who can or can't forgive who for what offense? Who recognizes what needs to be forgiven?

Strength is a current through the river. Ruth's strength is quiet, faith-based, but immense. She was raised in the Baptist church and knows no other approach to life than to buckle down and believe God will get her through anything as long as she stands strong. Leah, though raised by Ruth, was influenced by the 1970s culture and her father's agnosticism and relies on her husband's calm for strength but searches constantly for her own version of God through faddish approaches to Buddhism, Kabbalah, and Christian mysticism. Jackie's created her strength from the self-deception of the narcissistic personality. She believes she is powerful, even omnipotent at times. She is a stone tower with a mass of insecurities locked inside. Her brother Brian's strength is built on his own working man's back and heart.

Repeated images play a role in connecting the characters, their stories, and their truths: thundereggs (the hidden but valuable), Jackie's damaged hand (psyche), Leah's weight (protective padding), Jackie's near-skeletal thinness (thinness of spirit), Ruth's many falls (antithetical to her strength, she just keeps getting up), Brian's loud voice (reflecting his strength and positive approach to life), trees (growth and power), storms (arguments), and prayer (the varying spirituality). Finally, the sea and the desert play important roles. Leah finds joy in the sea while Jackie loves the desert. For Ruth, both environments almost caused her demise. In her childhood (chapter two) Ruth nearly drowns. In advanced age, Ruth suffers a fall on the desert hillside near her home. These events parallel the emotional strains of her daughters' over the

years. Some of these symbolic threads were intentional. Some, again, were the whim of the pen. As with the narrative elements discussed earlier, these images and symbols can be expanded to enhance the texture and depth of the book.

Conclusion

It is the whim of a pen that led me to a University of Texas at El Paso Online MFA program and to this book. A friend in my fountain pen collectors group knew I had given up my dream of writing due to my age and, sensing my discontent, she did some research and located the program. What drives my pen is that other yearning that has been with me since childhood, understanding the mind, mine and others. Sholes, Phelan, and Kellogg in *The Nature of Narrative: Revised and Expanded* have come to the conclusion that this quest is new to fiction. “The ritualistic-romantic quest for the Grail is metamorphosed in modern fiction into the psychological search for identity” (ch. 6). They complain that this has driven “old romantic formulations out of serious fiction and into the realm Graham Greene has called ‘entertainment’” (ch. 6). Perhaps true and if so, perhaps *Las Cruces* will slip into that realm. I hope not. I would like to think, when it is done, it will be entertaining and serious. To that end, I anticipate using what I’ve learned in the program, what I’ve done thus far with *Las Cruces*, to expand and enrich the novel into something still deeper and more evocative, something that does artful justice to writer John Gardner’s “vivid and continuous” dream. (31)

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LAS CRUCES

One

Ruth

Las Cruces, NM

2010

The day Ruth Mueller fell began with a red-checkered mug of tepid Folgers, a thick slice of toast, and a strong breeze squeezing through the covered patio screen. The September sun pushed aside cotton-ball clouds and slanted hot across the bare hilltop yard, then spilled out across the desert.

Ruth's husband and daughter had gone to look for rocks in Deming while she stayed home alone and enjoyed the ruby-throated hummingbirds that argued over the feeders hanging at either end of the patio.

One pale green female came in for a sip of nectar only to be ousted by the other's mate with a barrage of rapid-fire chirps and a flash of emerald wings.

"There's plenty for everyone," Ruth told the birds. "I don't know how a one of you..." she shook her head. "You're constantly picking on each other." She laughed and finished her breakfast.

Ruth brought her mug to her lips, drained it, and put it next to her blue pill box on the metal table.

"Oh." She picked up the box and studied the labels, chewing the nail on her left thumb. She shrugged, flipped open "Saturday," turned the half dozen pills into her hand, and picked up the empty cup.

"Well, shoot."

She eased herself out of the chair and entered the garage apartment kitchen with its dinged and

scratched appliances and peeling, gray-speckled linoleum. Cracker boxes, tea boxes, sugar packets, paper plates, magazines, cups, paper towels, jam jars, and loaves of bread crowded in on her. Notes on sticky paper clung to every surface.

Her hand ached and, looking down at her clenched fist, she remembered her medications. She took one step to the sink and drew water into a clean jelly jar. She opened her fine fingers like a prickly pear bloom and took the lot of pills at once, chasing them with the cold well water.

Ruth leaned her left hip against the counter top, stretched her right leg and grimaced. She tapped her hard, bare nails on the sink rim for several seconds. A sticky note clung to the cabinet above the coffee pot.

"Mom! Will will pick up Ethan from school."

Ruth chuckled and flicked the corner of the note. "Will will, will he?"

She felt the heat from the coffee pot. "Oh, yes. Coffee."

She stepped back outside. As she reached for her mug, a large translucent box under the metal table caught her eye.

Ruth bent at the waist, pulled out the box, flipped a latch, and opened one end. With the empty butter tub marked "Raccoons," she scooped dog kibble and straightened again.

Ruth fought with the lock on the patio screen door and walked out into the day. The wind blew her hair into her face. With her free hand she tucked the long gray strands under bobby pins at the nape of her neck in a motion made deft by decades of practice.

She took small, shuffling steps as she carried the tub across the back yard, past the blooming palo verde tree and up to the desert willows near the ridge. She stood with slippered toes against an empty rectangular planter in the shade of the willows. A yellowed slip of paper clung to the inside wall of the planter.

She sucked her teeth, bent at the waist again, and reached down. Her fingers closed on the scrap.

Her shins scraped the rim of the planter.

"Ow!" Ruth jerked against the pain and tried to straighten her back. Kibble pellets rained down on her as she tumbled over the planter. She grabbed at the air as if it could hold her up, then slid on her back and left hip down the rocky slope. She lost track of her hands, feeling them first under her stomach, then under her legs, then disconnected. She tried to find her feet, failing to dig in as she thought they should. She felt pain but didn't know where.

She came to rest, tilted all wrong. The world had gone upside down.

"Ooh!"

She lay still for several minutes. The rocks beneath her pressed sharp against her back, hips, and shoulders. Long grasses tickled her arms and legs. She didn't like the upside down feeling. She shifted and pulled herself onto her elbows. The sky spun and made her stomach lurch.

She groaned and lay back down. This was no good. She couldn't lie there with her head in the dirt but she couldn't move.

"Rob!" she called out.

Her cheek tickled. She reached up to scratch it and saw her right hand. The skin hung from her palm in three thin ribbons. Blood trickled from the wounds.

"Huh!" She lifted her left hand and found it looked only slightly better. She scratched the itch on her cheek and pulled a clump of bloody gravel from her face.

"Lovely. Rob!" Where was he?

Ruth lifted her head a few inches and looked uphill. She'd slid and rolled about fifty yards, halfway downhill. Her feet angled off to her right and both shoes gone, leaving her socks scrunched and dusty at her ankles. She pulled herself around to try to get upright. A sharp pain shot through her left buttock and leg. She gritted her teeth and kept going, heaving and scrabbling until she perched on her knees and elbows and faced uphill. Ruth dropped her head onto her forearms and breathed hard, pulling

the desert into her nose and sinuses.

She raised her head, crawled a foot or so and rested again. "Ruth, you dummy. How did you do this?"

She inched forward, yelled again for her husband, then for her daughter, Jackie.

She didn't know how long she'd been crawling when she gave up. The clouds darkened and the desert air cooled.

Ruth lay on her good hip and cradled her head with her arm. A tall, blurry prickly pear stood by her and she wondered how she'd missed it and others like it on the way down. Or maybe she hadn't. Had a cactus needle found her? The plant quivered and Ruth felt tears sting her eyes. She'd stopped that nonsense years ago. Only her youngest child made her cry. That one cried often, triggering little salty epidemics that spread through family gatherings when everyone arrived or everyone left.

Where was Leah? Ruth never saw her anymore. Did she move away? No. Ruth moved. Rob made Ruth move. Now she remembered. How could she forget?

She did cry back then. Alone. Sitting in the dark little apartment in west Houston with the shipping boxes crowding around her, rerunning her argument with Rob before he walked out the door that morning.

"Can't we see the kids before we leave?"

"It's a weekday. We won't have time?"

"So this weekend?"

"We'll be packing."

"Rob—"

"There's too much to do. You just saw them a couple of weeks ago."

"I saw Leah. Not Jim and Lyssa."

"We'll see them soon enough."

Except they hadn't. Two years had passed before they flew back to Houston for a weekend and two more before Leah and her family drove to Las Cruces, each reunion more difficult than the one before, each separation more agonizing as Leah hugged Ruth, then, trembling and crying yet again, turned and walked away.

Ruth shuddered. She tried to get up and pain paralyzed her.

"Oh! Shoot!"

She looked up. The hill loomed above her.

"Rob! Robert!"

The sky growled. Light flashed overhead and the earth hummed under Ruth. A mass of dark clouds churned the air and flung sand. She closed her eyes again just as rain fell in a drenching rush.

Ruth gasped at the cold water in her face. She brought up a bloody hand to cover herself and lay shivering. The rain kept coming and rolled around her body from the hill above. She held utterly still and prayed but the sand turned to ball bearings and inched her down the hill. Ruth gulped air and held her breath.

Two

Ruth

Clearwater, FL

1939

The boat crouched, a fat hulk in peeling blue skin. Its gray wheelhouse of two-by-fours sat off-center from its belly, and its rusted stack puffed little black clouds from the rumbling engine below.

Ruth thought the bow stretching away from the wheelhouse made the boat look like a clown shoe—too long, too broad. The entire thing looked like it would pitch back on its stern at any moment. The big man in blue coveralls tromping around on the boat's deck and whistling looked just the right size to upset the balance.

Ruth held onto the dock rail and waited for her father's instructions. A bit of Clearwater, Florida springtime tickled the fine hairs on her pre-teen legs. Fog had come and gone, leaving behind a slippery dock and the smell of dead fish.

"Hand me that jug, Ruthie," Walt Chambers said, and leaned across the gunwale.

Ruth gripped the rail tighter with one hand and stretched out the other with the jug. Her father set the jug between his big feet, then reached his long arm from boat to dock. Ruth put her hand in his and hopped into the idling boat.

Ruth's mother waited on the dock with toddler Kate in her arms.

"Alma?" Walt asked, and put out both hands to take the three-year-old.

Ruth's mother frowned and shook her head. "Just help us into the boat. I've got her."

Ruth's father lifted wife and child together and placed them safely on board.

Ruth's mother sat on the wheelhouse locker with Kate in her lap, as her father made a final check of equipment. He pointed his long fingers at each item and counted off, "Bait, rags, sandwiches, radio,

trumpet." He glanced at Ruth and winked. "No trumpet, Ruthie. We'll just have to make do with the seagulls laughing at us, I guess."

Ruth grinned at her father.

Her mother growled, "One of these days I'm going to bring that trumpet and give it a burial at sea."

"Aw, Alma. I'm just having fun with the girl." He took one long stride, swooped down, barely missing the low roof of the wheelhouse, and kissed his wife's cheek.

Ruth turned away.

Walt eased off the throttle. The stack coughed hot soot as they pulled away from the dock out into the dense blue-black morning.

Ruth pushed her dark auburn waves behind her ears, one side, then the other, then the first again. She sang a hymn only she could hear. She kicked at the bulwark and drummed her hands against the rail.

"Ruth Elizabeth Chambers!"

Ruth jumped at her father's booming voice and scrunched her eyes tight until she heard him whistle short and sharp. She looked at him.

He nodded at a tin bucket of chicken bones. "Hand me some of that when I say." He waved her over, took her firmly by the shoulder and, with one giant hand, pulled and held her next to him. With the other, he guided the boat toward the first crab pot.

Ruth looked to her left where her mother sat with Kate and watched the waves. Kate blinked sleepiness, her round dark head swaying with the boat's roll over the smooth, early morning waters. Ruth's mother locked eyes with her, violet to blue. Ruth straightened her back and thrust her chin out as she often saw her father do and gazed across the seas.

Ruth tugged her father's sleeve and pointed off port side. The boat turned on its back-heavy stern

and rolled up on a large white jug buoy. Walt snagged the jug with a gaff and hauled in a two-foot square, wire pot. Two large crabs faced off from opposite sides of the trap. Parts of another lay scattered between them.

"Told you we should have come out here sooner. Been eating each other." His words tumbled in the light wind but Ruth heard his complaint well enough.

"Ruthie!"

Walt shook the crabs from the pot into a bushel basket.

Ruth filled her hands with slimy chicken parts. She slid the parts around, feeling the hard smooth bone, gritty marrow, pebbled skin, and silky wet muscle.

"Good girl. That's just about perfect for a pot."

Her father packed the center bait box, closed the pot, and swung it back over the side of the boat. He wiped his hands on a gray rag dangling from his coverall pocket. They moved on and repeated the process twice more with three more crabs to show for it.

At the fourth buoy, four healthy crabs waited and Walt hummed as he shook the catch into the basket. "Go play with your friends, fellas. What about it, Alma? Crab boil? Crab cakes?"

"Sore fingers for me either way." Alma answered but smiled a little half-smile at Ruth.

"Aw, Darling. I'll help with the cooking." Walt sang.

"You'll help with the eating is what you'll do."

Walt finished stuffing the bait cage and straightened. "I'm a growing boy, you know. Next one, Ruthie." He tossed the trap, whistling.

In the growing light, Ruth saw the trap slide away. She leaned over, mesmerized by the way it faded into the green-black sea.

The boat jerked as Walt gunned the motor to get to the next pot.

Ruth pitched over the gunwale. She slapped at it, but her chicken-fat-covered hands slid over it

like wriggling fish. Cold water surrounded her.

Ruth couldn't feel up or down. Salt water stung her eyes and nose. She lost the morning light in the murky Gulf water. She heard voices or her own screams in her head and tried to paddle toward them. She ached to breathe, but the water pressed in on her chest and throat.

Something grabbed her side, something large and strong. It hurt, digging into her ribs. A shark flashed its teeth in her mind. She screamed, gulped sea water, and beat at the beast until it brought her to the surface.

She spluttered and slapped.

"Ruthie! It's Daddy! Stop now. Stop. I got you."

Still coughing, Ruth clung to her father's neck as he swam back to the boat, pushing the little girl up to her mother, then climbing in after her. Ruth shuddered as her father fell to his knees and hugged her. He towered over her.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"You did nothing wrong, baby. You okay?"

Ruth nodded. Her mother draped a towel around her shoulders.

The three stayed that way a long time, breathing hard and looking at the deck, not daring to look at each other or the sea.

Ruth's mother spoke. "We're going home."

Walt stood and patted his older daughter's head, "Of course. Ruth, go sit with your sister." He nodded to the wheelhouse locker where Kate sat, thumping the box with her heels.

Ruth shuffled to the box where her mother gathered up both girls into her lap. Kate patted Ruth's wet hair with her tiny fingers.

Ruth looked into her mother's violet eyes. "I'm sorry, Mama."

"Hush."

Three

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2010

The regular rains and shifting isobars of the New Mexico monsoon season soaked into Jacqueline Tate's fifty-year-old joints as she clomped among the isolated ravines and hills of Rockhound State Park. A small backpack slid around her narrow shoulders and against her knotted spine. Her tee shirt crept up while her jeans rode low on her hips, revealing the sharp bones there. Heavy black hiking boots gave her the look of a sapling picking up and dragging roots and soil with each step.

She studied the walls of the ravine, reading them like a novel, the words scattered on layered stone pages.

A grasshopper followed her. Every few minutes she heard it buzz but couldn't get a fix on it. Earlier in the day she'd heard white-winged doves cooing but they had gone quiet in the afternoon heat.

The sky changed from hazy blue to boiling grays and lavenders and the wind picked up the desert, swirled it with cloud and dropped spittle on Jackie. She continued to walk, blinking at the drops but not wiping them away.

Jackie viewed the hillside like a hawk might see the ground from above, a mere backdrop for her target. She might step on a rattlesnake or startle a roadrunner but the geodes she sought would stand out in bold relief.

The wind pushed her along as she searched, no longer a puff of heat every few seconds but strong gusts cooling the sweat at her temples and whipping the strawberry-blond ponytail against her neck.

She had found some forty thundereggs, many of them geodes, since she'd started rockhounding.

She made small pieces into key chains and large eggs into bookends or decorative hangings. When she sliced into them she felt a little rush at what she found inside. They weren't all beautiful but all had some appeal and some, with their crystal growth, seemed as alive as any embryo.

A large drop of rain slapped the top of her head and she brushed it off as if an insect had tapped her. Another struck her face with a sting.

"Shit!" She looked up at the fast-moving clouds.

She looked down just as her right boot landed next to a small node. Someone's loss, her gain. She picked it up and felt its weight. She hefted it, the size of a golf ball, she judged it to be hollow and placed it in her pack.

The scattered, plonking drops turned to a stuttering drizzle. She started to move on but a piercing whistle broke her stride. She turned toward the sound.

A thin figure, her father, in loose jeans and green tee shirt at the bottom of the ravine waved both arms. Jackie waved him off and bent her head and shoulders back to her search.

Again, the whistle.

"Fuck! Dad!" She spun around. "What?" She threw her hands up.

He waved her toward him.

He didn't see her shake her head.

"Hell. It's just a little rain." Jackie walked in long strong strides toward her father who walked away from her, his body leaning to the left and his head nodding on stooped shoulders. She caught up to him at her 4Runner, parked at a popular campsite for the rockhounds that frequented the park.

Rob Mueller sat in the driver's seat and wiped down his face and neck with napkins left over from Dunkin' Donuts. He shivered.

"Damn it, Jackie, I've been calling you for thirty minutes."

"I didn't hear you. The wind."

"Your phone, Jack. Your phone!"

"My..." Jackie thought about the stalking grasshopper. "Shit, Dad. I'm sorry." she took her phone out of her pack, "I must've had the ringer off or something. Reception's not great here."

Her father sighed, his breath a fluttering groan. "I'm cold. We need to get home."

"Storms almost over, Dad. Sun'll come out and warm us up."

"It's getting late. You've found several today. I've found two. We can come back. You've got enough to keep you busy for a while."

Jackie stared out the windshield. She felt it again, that quick steam that rose with his expectations.

He thrust out his hand, palm up.

"Fuck no! You are not driving, my car."

The old man winced.

Jackie threw herself from the passenger side and marched around in the diminishing rain to the driver's side while Rob struggled over the console into the other seat.

Her father sniffed. "You really ought to treat your old man with more respect."

Jackie jammed the key into the ignition and dropped her forehead onto the steering wheel. "Sure, Dad."

It was just that he was such a man and always had been and as long as she could remember he'd been demanding or stupidly pliable and, God, it annoyed the shit out of her. She'd been telling him to fuck off since she was twenty and it was his own fault he didn't stand up for himself.

Jackie stepped on the gas and flung dust and rocks behind the vehicle as she sped away from the campsite.

"Calm down. We promised Mom we'd be home by dusk."

"We had time." Her mother didn't remember anything she was told anyway. And Will was no

different from Rob. A wide-eyed story about the storm and slick, deserted roads and Will would thank them for being late.

Four

Ruth

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Ruth awoke in fading light, the rain since passed.

"Rob!" She lay still, feeling the emptiness in her gut, the dusk weighing down her limbs, and her wet clothes clinging to her.

The desert whispered little threats. A cold night coming. Diamondbacks out at night. Ants and scorpions.

Ruth dug her fingers into the sand beneath her. She shivered against a chill and her bladder let go. She let out a little cry, pushed her toes into the earth and inched up only to have crushing pain drop her back down.

She lay still and listened to the wavelike murmur of the distant highway, certain any moment the desert would bring her husband and daughter back to find her.

Five

Ruth

Tripoli, Libya

1961

The Libyan beach glowed. Ruth carried plump little Jackie on her hip while six-year-old Brian scurried ahead with a bag of crackers and a Thermos of cold tea. In her cat-eye sunglasses, rhinestones sparkling, Ruth blinked against the brilliant light.

"Please, no migraine today," she muttered and glanced skyward.

Brian, in his little-boy energy, bounced around her. "Can I swim now?"

"Let's get your little sister settled."

Ruth lay the blanket near the surf where morning waves rolled in and caressed the sand.

Ruth looked up as she set thirteen-month-old Jackie on the blanket with a bottle of apple juice and a stuffed toy dog. Her neighbor and friend, Marjorie, swayed up in sandals, blue striped shorts, and a pleated, white blouse.

Marjorie's son, Richard, ran to Brian's side and punched his shoulder. "Hey, Brian, let's go."

"You two just wait a minute," Marjorie said and clapped her hands.

The boys, both thin, long-limbed, with their hair cut close to the scalp, danced back and forth, trading punches and wrestling moves.

Ruth shook her head and, seeing Jackie crawl for the sand, reached down to reposition the toddler on the blanket. "Stay put, young lady." She looked up as three young Caucasian men walked by and admired the two mothers.

"I don't suppose you wore a suit under there?" Marjorie asked.

Ruth smiled. "I'll just sit here with Jackie and watch you and the boys. Maybe wade in the surf

with her a little."

"The water's so lovely, Ruth. I wish you'd let me watch her while you take a dip."

"That's okay, Marj. It's not my cup of tea."

The boys tumbled in the sand.

Marjorie eyed them a moment, then looked back to her friend. "I better get them out there before they kill each other. Come on guys. Let's give Brian's mama some quiet time with the baby."

Ruth sat on the beach blanket and grasped Jackie's dress like a leash. Jackie squirmed and babbled.

Ruth watched the boys and the pretty blond tending to them, and listened to the musical slip-slap of the turquoise sea on the sand.

Palaces, palms, and unending sunlit made Tripoli beautiful, but Ruth struggled to like it. She could get much of what she needed from Wheelus Air base but had few luxuries, and the language barrier created constant anxiety. The ever-present rumors of a pending coup and the removal of King Idris further unnerved her.

While Rob worked for weeks at a time in the Sahara, Ruth raised her two children in the city far from her Waco family. She longed to hear her father's rich voice on the radio waves or the rhythmic click of her mother's knitting needles. She imagined being back in a house without sand on the floors and sleeping on sheets that had dried soft on the line instead of stiffened like concrete. She dreamed of green lawns, long rain storms, and lush trees. She wanted a luxurious Buick to drive to a real grocery store where she could buy bread that hadn't been on the back of a donkey cart, or worse, on the ground behind the donkey cart, as she'd seen one time too many. She wanted to buy baby clothes for Jackie instead of making her own like the simple little eyelet dress she held onto now.

She rubbed the cloth between her fingers, felt its lightness, looked down and discovered only the dress in her hand. She screamed, "Jackie!"

As she jumped up, the dress waved in her hand. A thin man in black swim trunks strode toward her, dangling the wailing, bedraggled toddler away from his body as if she were a wet dog.

Ruth gasped, "I was holding her with this, I don't know how she slipped out."

"Is this yours, madam?" he asked in a cutting British accent, his frown pulling his long face down like taffy.

"Yes. Dear Lord. Thank you." Ruth grabbed Jackie from him and pulled the blubbing baby to her chest.

Brian raced up behind the man. "I saw her, Mama. She went into the water so fast. I couldn't stop her."

The man stood silent and staring at Ruth.

Ruth sobbed into Jackie's wet hair. "I can't thank you enough."

The man dusted sand from his hands. "These things happen. Good thing I was there."

"I feel so foolish."

Marjorie walked up to Ruth's side and smiled at the group. "That little dickens slipped out of her dress like an eel."

Jackie dug her fists into her eyes and cried harder.

"I have some fresh water to rinse her face." The man pointed to a towel and bag several yards away.

Ruth's shaking subsided. "Yes, please."

"Mama? Can I swim some more?" Brian hopped back and forth on the hot sand.

Ruth looked to Marjorie who nodded. "Yes, honey. Thanks, Marj." She followed the lanky Englishman.

"Here we are." The man puffed each word out, winded. A lock of black hair flopped from his forehead in the rising beach wind. He dripped water from a Thermos onto Ruth's hand.

Ruth patted away the sand and salt around Jackie's eyes.

"Wynn Huckle."

"Hold still, Jackie. Excuse me?" Ruth accepted more water.

"Wynn Huckle." The man held out his hand.

Ruth looked at her damp right hand, then shook his. "Ruth Mueller. "This is Jacqueline. Our speedster, as you might have guessed. I'm still so embarrassed. Really, I'm not a horrible mother."

Huckle nodded. "No doubt, Mrs. Mueller. I understand. Far from home. Have to do it all yourself, I imagine."

Ruth took a step back.

"My family is home in England. Aylesbury." Huckle bent and picked up a shirt and tugged it over his head. "My wife regularly reminds me that she has to take care of hearth and home without my assistance while I muck about in the desert." Huckle smiled a closed-mouth smile which gave him a marionette look. "I suffer no delusions that life is easy for women such as yourself."

Ruth sighed. "Thank goodness."

Jackie reached for Huckle's arm.

"Hullo, dear," Huckle said.

Jackie held her arms out to him.

"Perhaps mummy should take care of that sea-soaked nappy before I try to carry you."

Ruth frowned. "She's going to be miserable if I don't get her a bath." She looked over the beach, found Brian, and waved him over.

Brian slumped up the shore. "What? I mean, Yes ma'am?"

"I'm going to take your sister home. Ask Marjorie if you can stay with her for a little while."

Brian ran back to the surf.

"He certainly loves the sea." Huckle nodded at the boy.

"He would live on the beach if I let him." Ruth grumbled.

Marjorie dismissed Ruth from the water's edge with a two-handed wave.

Ruth gathered her things.

"May I see you home?" Huckle placed his Thermos in his bag.

Ruth looked at the ground and fussed with settling Jackie on her hip. "It's probably out of your way, Wynn."

"Nonetheless."

"I'll be fine."

"Humor me, Mrs. Mueller."

Ruth and Huckle walked the bright stone streets toward the garden bungalows many non-military families occupied in Tripoli.

Ruth switched Jackie from hip to hip every few minutes. "Gracious little girl, you're getting heavy."

"She isn't walking as yet?"

"She walks when she chooses, which isn't often." Ruth laughed. "She certainly knows how. She'd rather I carry her everywhere."

Huckle bent forward and studied Jackie. "I suppose she's wrung out enough I might could carry her a bit."

"That's not necessary. I'm used to lugging her everywhere. I do wish she'd hold on though, instead of just hanging here like dead weight."

"You are quite independent, aren't you?" Wynn Huckle huffed.

Ruth repositioned Jackie. "What's the alternative?"

"Let someone help you when they offer."

"And get dependent on them. Then when they leave I'll have to adjust to not having them again. No, if I don't have to, I'd rather not."

"You do sound like my Estelle." Huckle cleared his throat. "I'm on a waiting list for one of these units."

Ruth stopped at her garden gate. "So we'll be neighbors? How nice."

"I should say so." Huckle smiled.

"I *do* appreciate your help today, Wynn. Please don't think otherwise." Ruth opened the gate and set Jackie down in the garden path. "But as long as you men must play in the desert, we women must keep the house from falling apart."

"As long as we men must work in the desert to pay the rent, we will worry about our women and children." Huckle swung his bag around his back, laced his hands behind his neck, stretched tall, and smiled.

Ruth nodded. "Fair enough." She stepped inside the gate. "I hope you will look us up when you move in. I'm sure we'll be here. I know Rob would enjoy meeting you. He's made several trips to England."

"I'll do that. Good day, Ruth." Huckle tipped an imaginary hat to Jackie. "Good day, Jacqueline. No more impromptu swimming lessons."

Six

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2010

"Pull over, I'm going to be sick," Rob moaned.

"What?"

"Pull over!"

Jackie yanked the wheel and on a quiet stretch of New Mexico highway watched, but not too closely, as her eighty-one year old father dropped his pants and let loose his bowels.

Jackie started the car up again and Rob leaned the seat back. "What's wrong, Dad?"

"Cinnamon rolls and that store-bought motor oil you call coffee."

"I doubt that."

"Well, it's all I've had to eat."

"Okay. Sorry. I guess I'm used to it. That coffee is pretty strong."

"Huh!" Rob adjusted his seat back and twisted to get comfortable.

Jackie called her parents' garage apartment to let her mother know that they'd be late and why.

No one answered so she left a message on her house phone.

After another emergency stop, her father seemed to be cleared out.

"I'm sorry, baby," Rob said.

"No need to apologize, Dad. I feel badly that you're sick."

"Bad."

"What?"

"You feel bad. Not badly."

Jackie stared down the desert road, the lights from the 4Runner chasing after the setting sun.

Seven

Jackie

Tripoli, Libya

1963

Jackie soaked up the Libyan desert light on the long mornings with her mother and spent afternoons playing with her big brother, Brian, after the wail of the muezzin woke her from her naps.

Her mother made her cotton dresses with bright bibs and pinafores, and added lace to her socks and matching hair bows.

Jackie posed for her mother's camera, sometimes with a small smile, turning away, hiding her blue eyes, others looking straight into the camera with a big grin.

She loved the rare times when her daddy came home from the desert but it upset her that he came home dark brown with hair all over his face. "How's my little Campbell's soup girl?" he asked to coax her away from her mother, but she slapped at him and yelled, "No!" until he laughed and let her be. When he came back later, clean-shaven though still as dark as the Arab man that tended the bungalow yards, she let him pick her up and cuddle her. Jackie and Brian sat on the floor with their father while he handed out gifts—dolls for Jackie, toy cars for Brian—until her mother had dinner on the table.

Mama walked around with a fat tummy one winter when Jackie's father came home with an empty bag from one of those desert trips.

"Sorry, kids," Rob said after he got the hair off his face. I didn't have a chance to go to the base and pick anything up and I didn't feel like dealing with the souk."

Jackie stayed at her father's knees.

"Okay," Brian said and ran out of the room.

Rob sank into the sofa and leaned his head back.

Jackie leaned on the sofa and stared at him.

"I'm so tired. I don't think I can eat."

Ruth stood at the den door, drying her hands on an apron. "You can always eat. It's almost ready."

"I'm sorry, Ruth. I just need to rest."

"Robert Mueller, you've eaten semolina and sand for a month and I went to a lot of trouble to cook this meal."

Rob lifted his head and looked at Jackie. "When I left Texas, I didn't know I was bringing my mother with me." He reached down and lifted Jackie into his lap.

Something banged in the kitchen. Jackie turned to see an empty den doorway.

"I think that's the dinner bell. We eat whether we like it or not."

"That big dust storm come through here?" Jackie's father asked as they sat down to lamb chops, vegetables, and sweet tea.

"It wasn't bad." Ruth cut Jackie's meat for her. "Just a couple of days of sweeping up, really."

"It was a doozy down south. The sand just about buried us. I'll have the slides developed soon. It buried some of the jeeps over the hoods. What a mess. We're behind now. I have to go back sooner."

"Sooner?" Ruth asked without looking up.

"Just a couple of days."

Brian clanked his fork hard on his plate.

Jackie looked at her brother who stared at his carrots.

"Something wrong, son?" Rob said through a mouthful of lamb.

"May I be excused?"

"Are you okay, honey?" Ruth patted his left hand.

"Just not very hungry."

"Yes, you may."

Jackie twirled her fork, stabbed a piece of meat on the end, and watched her brother drag out of the room.

"Was that about me?" Rob asked.

"What do you think?" Ruth tapped Jackie's hand and pointed at the fork, "Eat. Don't play."

Jackie patted her mother's arm and woke her from a deep sleep on the couch. "Can I see Daddy?"

"He's lying down," Ruth mumbled.

"I'll be quiet."

"No, sweetie. He's tired. Maybe later."

But later her father decided to repair a faucet in the bathroom, to tighten a doorknob, and to sweep the sand off the patio into the dead back yard. Jackie followed him from task to task until he put his tools away in the kitchen cabinet.

Jackie yelped when her father bumped into her as he turned to leave the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't see you."

Her mother appeared. "What now?"

Jackie leaned away from her father and rubbed her head where Rob's knuckles had hit her.

"I bumped into Little Bit here. I thought she was with you."

"She was, until she said she was going to see you."

"I've got work to do."

"Work? You've been at work for five weeks. Spend a moment with your daughter."

"Just a few minutes on maps. If I get these to Red, I can relax the rest of the time."

Jackie stared at her father who reached out and rested his hand on her mother's fat tummy.

"I don't know how you had time for that," Ruth grumbled.

Rob laughed. "There was the homecoming, wasn't there?"

"Daddy!" Jackie patted Rob's leg.

Rob leaned over and kissed Ruth.

Jackie began to whimper.

"Rob." Ruth pushed him away and nodded at their daughter. "Please."

Jackie's father grunted, hefted Jackie, and headed for the den. "How's my little Rae of sunshine?"

Eight

Jackie

Tripoli, Libya

1964

In the bright African day, Jackie sat in her apricot dress and white sandals and felt the sun cooking her hard. She kicked at the sand and plucked at Ruth's roses. With her brother's toy shovel, she scooped up dirt and flung it at clean diapers pinned to the clothesline.

Jackie could hear her now, that creaking cat cry from the kitchen as Mama warmed a bottle. Brian played in the Tripoli streets or empty sandy lots leaving Jackie to herself while their mother took care of the scrawny little sister that Jackie and Brian had never asked for.

Jackie heard a rustle-shuffle-sniff. The sun flickered. She looked up.

A long face with sad eyes peeped over the garden wall.

Jackie waved. "Hi, Mr. Huckle."

"Why so glum?" Huckle asked. The Englishman spoke like he couldn't get enough air but Jackie liked his accent.

Jackie dragged the shovel through the sand, drawing a large heart. "Leah! Mama is always taking care of the baby."

"Ah. Babies do need great care. Can't do for themselves, you know."

"I guess."

Wynn Huckle turned as if to go into his house next door. Without looking at Jackie, he asked, "Would you like to come visit Crump for a while. He'd like some company."

Jackie dropped her shovel and jumped up. "Really?"

The man nodded. "Just for you. To cheer you up."

"Yay!"

Huckle turned and put out a hand to stop her. "None of that, remember. You'll upset Crumpet."

Jackie blinked against the sun that washed out Huckle's face. She bowed her head. "Okay."

The man waved to her to follow him.

The desert sand and the stark white brick walls outside lit Huckle's small bungalow kitchen. They found Crumpet the Cocker Spaniel cooling there on the hard floor. Dressed in long butterscotch and white fur, the little dog greeted both of them with spastic wiggles and a giggling whine.

"She sounds like she's laughing," Jackie said.

"He. That's how he says, 'Hello,'" Huckle said and crossed to the pantry.

Jackie sat cross-legged on the floor and Crumpet wriggled into her lap. The dog licked her face and neck.

"He sure likes kisses," she said.

"Everyone does."

The man dug through the pantry. "Here we are. How about some biscuits?"

Jackie looked up and wrinkled her nose. "We have those with dinner."

Huckle paused, the box of lemon biscuits perched in his hand.

Jackie saw the box. "Cookies! Yes, thank you."

Huckle frowned but brightened again. "Cookies. Of course." He placed several of the treats on a plate and presented them to Jackie.

Jackie took a cookie with thumb and forefinger and nibbled it while Crumpet tried to get his share.

Huckle squatted on the floor next to the child and dog and tugged the dog's head away from the treat.

"Thank you," Jackie repeated, crumbs tumbling from her mouth.

"You're quite welcome," Huckle said and controlled the dog. "Another?"

"Um. Yes!"

As Jackie ate her second cookie, Huckle stroked the silky fur, his long, thin hand dragging the length of the dog's back from head to tail in slow motion.

"He's a fine dog, isn't he?"

Jackie, chewing, nodded.

"And you're a fine little girl."

She nodded again.

"Must be difficult to be a big sister now."

"Uh huh."

Huckle smiled. "I was little brother. My big sister didn't care for me much. I got in the way a lot. She went out a lot after I came along."

Jackie scratched Crumpet's chin.

"You can come over any time, Jacqueline. To see Crumpet. And get away from the baby, eh?"

"Really?"

"Really."

"And cookies?"

Huckle laughed with a sudden sharp burst and made Crumpet startle a little. "And cookies."

"Thank you."

"All right then. Run along. It's getting late. Your mummy must be wondering about you." Huckle plucked Crumpet out of Jackie's lap. "Best not tell Mummy about the cookies. She'll worry they'll spoil your appetite."

Jackie shrugged and turned to leave.

Huckle stopped her with a hand on her head. "Wait now. You've got crumbs."

Jackie looked down at her dress as the man lightly brushed cookie crumbs away.

"There. Off you go."

Jackie rushed into the Mueller kitchen but found it empty. She ran to the den where her mother sat on the couch with Leah asleep in her arms.

"Mommy. Guess what?"

"Ssh! Not so loud."

Jackie lowered her voice to a hoarse whisper. "But guess what?"

"What, sweetie?"

"Mr. Huckle let me pet Crumpet." Jackie's voice went back up.

The infant startled, arms shooting straight out, legs stiffening.

"That was nice of him, honey. Go wash your hands. I can smell Crumpet from here."

Jackie ran through the house, her sandals clapping on the stone floors and clomping on rug.

Ruth stepped out of Brian's room into Jackie's path, a wad of rumpled clothes in her arms.

"Jackie, shush. No running," her mother said in a low voice, "I just put Leah down for a nap."

"But it's early."

"It doesn't matter what time it is. Leah's sleeping and you aren't supposed to run in the house."

Jackie folded her arms and flopped to the floor.

"That lip's stuck out so far a birdy's going to land on it. Come help me wash these."

Jackie huffed and turned away.

"Have it your way." Ruth left Jackie alone in the hall.

Jackie sat for a while, staring at the fringe on the wool runner, noting how the beige thread

crawled into the carpet and made diamonds that marched down the length of the rug.

She jumped up.

"I'm going to see Crumpet!" She yelled as she dashed past her mother through the kitchen into the garden.

Her mother followed. "Jackie. Stop."

Jackie ran to the iron gate and climbed onto the bottom rail to try to free the latch. She dropped to the sand, turned and clenched her fists. "Open it."

Ruth walked toward her. "Honey, Mr. Huckle won't be home right now. Everyone's at work."

"You're not at work."

"I'm a mommy. My work's at home taking care of you and your sister and brother. Mr. Huckle works in an office."

"So? I can go see Crumpet without him. Open it!"

"You can't just go into other people's houses without their permission."

"He said I could." Jackie stomped and the fine African sand flew up around her.

Ruth laid her hand on Jackie's arm and opened her mouth to say something but stopped. She tilted her head.

Jackie looked at the back door and rolled her eyes. "It's crying again."

"Come inside now. When Mr. Huckle gets home, you can go see Crumpet. If you behave."

"I want to go now."

"Behaving means no more arguing."

Jackie lunged away as Ruth gripped her hand and led her into the house. "You're hurting me."

Ruth released her at the kitchen door and Jackie bolted back into the yard.

She hung on the fence and kicked it until her toe hurt. She tried to look through the gate bars down the alley between the villas. The wind came up and blew sand in her face and she blinked the grit

away. She inched along the rail to the hinge side of the gate and peered again down the alley, catching a glimpse of the road and the occasional motion of cotton layers on dark skin as Libyan men strode by.

"Jacqueline Rae!"

She hung still, listening to baby Leah coo and jabber on the back porch with her mother.

Her fingers turned white and purple and began to tingle. She stepped off the fence and spun around. "Oh! What!"

But Mama stared into the sky with Leah in her arms and latched onto a bottle.

Jackie scuffed her shoes in the sand and approached the porch. "Can I hold her?"

Ruth chewed her lower lip and closed her eyes.

"Mama?" Jackie tugged her mother's skirt. "Can I?"

"What, honey?"

"Hold the baby?"

"Go wash your hands and you can."

Jackie sat on the sofa, her stubby legs dangling.

"Sit all the way back," Ruth said.

Jackie huffed and rocked her way back until her ankles were at the edge of the cushion. Her mother placed a pillow across her lap and laid the swaddled six-month old on the pillow.

"She's wiggly, even in her blanket, so you have to hold her here," Ruth drew Jackie's left hand around Leah's bottom, "and support her head" and nodded to Jackie to use her other hand under her sister's head.

"Like this?" Jackie slipped her right hand under Leah's head.

Ruth nodded. "Exactly like that. Good girl."

"You can do your housework now, Mama. I'll take care of her," Jackie said.

Her mother smiled, then looked long at Leah who gulped down milk between quick, squeaky breaths. "How about I get the bills and take care of that while you've got her?"

Jackie bowed her head and studied her baby sister.

The infant's round eyes filled her face, leaving little room for the tiny mouth and flattened nose. Pale ash lashes brushed her lids and matching brows arched in thin lines over those eyes. Her hands, fingernails like little window panes, clutched the edge of the blanket and slapped at the bottle.

"Why doesn't she have hair?"

"She has hair. It's very fine and light." Ruth got up from her desk and sat by the girls. "See," she brushed the thin wisps of ash blond hair to stand up on the crown of Leah's head.

"I don't like that color."

"It may not stay that color. Yours was the same and you're a strawberry blond now."

"What's that?"

"It's someone with blond hair with red mixed in. It's pretty."

"Blond?"

"White."

"She'll be like me."

"She might. She might be like your big brother and me and have dark red hair or she might have black hair like your daddy. What color would you like?"

Jackie stared at the round head, the big eyes, the loving touch of her mother's hand.

"I'm tired of holding her." She lifted the pillow with a jerk to hand Leah back to her mother.

"Okay. Let me." Ruth reached in and plucked the baby from Jackie's lap.

Jackie threw the pillow onto the couch. "I'm going to my room."

In her room, Jackie picked up her baby doll, Suzie, blond, blue-eyed with a flat face and suckling mouth. She hugged it a moment, rocked it in her arms.

"Hush baby, hush! I said, hush!"

She threw the doll on the bed.

Jackie ran to greet her brother after school and found him in the kitchen with a hunk of bread in his mouth and her mother standing over him with her hands on her hips.

"I'm sorry, Mama," he said through spitting crumbs, "I wasn't thinking."

"How many times have I told you not to slam the door?"

"About a million. I said I was sorry."

"Just try to keep it down." Ruth saw her older daughter. "Both of you. Baby's asleep."

"Mama, can I go see Crumpet?"

Ruth looked at the kitchen clock. "You can try. He may not be home yet. Fifteen minutes. No more. Tell Mr. Huckle I said fifteen or I'll come get you."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Brian, *quietly* take your sister next door, please."

"Why me?"

"I hear Leah waking up from all your ruckus. Would you rather baby sit? "

"No, ma'am."

Brian unlatched Huckle's back gate and, as she had at the Mueller's gate, Jackie bolted through. She raced to the back door and banged on it.

Brian hovered behind Jackie on the walkway, fingering an oleander.

Huckle opened his door and smiled at the children. "Come to see Crumpet have we?" Huckle opened the door to usher them in.

"I'm just helping her with the gates," Brian said.

"Thank you very much."

"Mama said fifteen minutes. It's almost dinner time," Brian added.

Huckle looked at his watch. "Fifteen it is." He waved at Brian and closed the screen door behind Jackie but left the interior door open.

Huckle clattered his tea cup into its saucer while Jackie and Crumpet played on the tile floor.

"Dear one, your mother gave strict instructions. Fifteen minutes. It's time to go."

"Just a few more, please, Mr. Huckle."

"No. Mustn't upset Mummy."

"Aw." Jackie pushed Crumpet roughly out of her lap and stood. "That's not fair."

"Now, Jacqueline. You must appreciate the time you get with us. You've had your fifteen minutes. Treat Crumpet kindly and do as Mummy and I say and you can come back."

"Yes, sir." Jackie hung her head and plopped a hand on the dog's back.

"There's a girl. Give Uncle Wynn a hug."

Jackie smiled and ran around the table to throw herself into the man's arms. She reveled in the long hug. He smelled like Christmas trees and the strong, honeyed tea he drank.

He released her, turned her by the shoulders, "Off you go."

She ran out of the house, slamming the screen door behind her. She cringed and waited for a bellow of anger but heard nothing from inside. Jackie skipped to the gate, climbed onto it, and unlatched it. She raced home where Brian sat on the porch building a matchbox cars racetrack.

"Let me in!" Jackie called from the gate.

"Let yourself in."

"I can't." Jackie shook the gate.

Brian scrambled to his feet. "Look." Brian flipped the latch open and closed from the other side

of the iron gate. "Try it now."

Jackie climbed onto the bottom rail and fingered the latch. "It's too hard. Uncle Wynn's is easier."

"Who?"

"Uncle Wynn. I don't have to call him Mr. Huckle anymore."

Brian swung the gate open with Jackie still hanging on it. She jumped off and danced into the yard.

"I love him."

"You're weird."

"Am not. Mommy!" Jackie ran for the house.

"Why are you crying, dear?" Huckle placed a plate of biscuits on the table but Jackie shook her head.

"Daddy was supposed to be home tomorrow. Mommy said he isn't coming home for another week."

"Mummy told me. I'm terribly sorry. You miss your daddy?"

Jackie bobbed her head, felt tears drop on her bare arms.

"Well, daddies and mummies have things to do and sometimes it takes them away from us. Remember my family in England?" Huckle pointed to the grainy gray photo on the wall under the kitchen clock. A woman and two small boys sat straight and unsmiling in hard-backed chairs. "They wait for me to come home every few months. They miss me and I miss them. But they know I have important work here. It's what I do to take care of them. It's only temporary."

"Temp—"

"Only for a while. Someday I, and your father will work close to home again and you will see

him more often and my family will see me more often. For now, Crumpet and I can keep you and your family company. What do you say to that?"

Jackie sniffled and wiped her eyes with her hands.

"Here, poppet." The Englishman handed Jackie a soft handkerchief and she tried to wipe her face and nose.

"Come here." Huckle gestured and Jackie went to him.

He pulled her up into his lap and cradled her there, gently wiping her nose. "Better?"

She nodded. She leaned her head on his shoulder and sniffed hard.

Huckle rocked her.

Crumpet wriggled on the floor at Huckle's feet. Jackie smiled at the dog. "Hi, Crumpet."

"Hullo, Crump, old boy," Huckle said, "What say you and I go sit on the couch so he can sit on it with us?"

"Okay," Jackie said quietly and started to climb off Huckle's lap.

"I'll carry you, dear. Here. Up!" He lifted Jackie under her arms. "And—wrap your legs—there you are."

Jackie wrapped her legs around his waist like she would her mother.

"Come along, Crump. You call him, Jacqueline."

"Crumpet. Here, boy."

Huckle sat her on the sofa and sat next to her. Jackie felt sleepy from tears and cookies. He reached across her lap and patted the couch. "Up."

"Up, boy," Jackie said.

The spaniel hopped onto the soft plush flowered cushions next to Jackie.

Huckle laid his hand on Jackie's lap and patted. "Here, Crumpet. Sit right here, boy."

Jackie sat still.

The dog put one paw on her lap. Huckle patted her harder.

"Come on, Crumpet," Jackie pleaded.

The dog jumped into Jackie's lap on top of Huckle's hand. Jackie turned wide eyes on the man as he pulled his hand from under the dog.

"Good boy." He patted Jackie's arm. "Good girl."

Jackie stroked the pup's ears.

"You and Crump sit there a moment, dear. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"Be right back."

Jackie sat back as the dog dozed in her lap and she relaxed and dozed with him. She awoke to a soft click.

Huckle crouched in front of her with a black box in his hand.

"What's that?"

"It's a box for memories, Jacqueline. I don't want to forget our time together."

"It looks like a camera, sort of."

"Clever girl. I'll just put this away for now. We can take some pictures of Crumpet sometime.

Would you like to read? I bought a book for my son. He's a little older than you but I think you'll enjoy it."

Jackie nodded.

"Very good."

Huckle pulled a slim book from a short bookcase and sat next to Jackie.

Jackie leaned in close. Huckle wrapped an arm around her shoulders and held the book in front of them both.

"I read this book when I was young."

"There aren't many pictures."

"That's true. But it's a very good book. And it's for bigger girls and boys. Not little ones. You're a big girl, right?"

"Right!"

"There are beautiful pictures, though."

Jackie drew her finger along the fine lines of the bear stretched at the trunk of a large tree upon which a big black cat lay.

"Can you read that?"

Jackie shook her head.

"It says, 'Bagheera would be out on a branch and call, "Come along, little brother."' That's Bagheera." Huckle pointed to the cat.

"That's a funny name."

"I imagine *Jacqueline* is a funny name in India."

"Hmph!"

Huckle leaned his chin on Jackie's head. "It's a lovely name, Jacqueline. So is Bagheera. Now let's read, shall we."

Jackie yawned and listened to the funny catching breath of Wynn Huckle as it jumped through the words, growing softer and farther away with each word.

A rattling knock jolted Jackie from sleep.

Huckle walked in from a separate room. "I bet that's your mummy." He veered into the kitchen.

Jackie had the book next to her, pages fluttering in the breeze of a small desk fan.

"Mummy's here. I couldn't bear to wake her. She fell asleep reading with Crumpet."

"Dinner, Jackie. You've taken up far too much of Mr. Huckle's time, today."

"We had a grand time. It's almost like being home other than the unbearable heat." Huckle

laughed with a little wheeze.

"Uncle Wynn read me, um," Jackie looked at the thick leather-bound book.

"Kipling. *Jungle Book*."

"Oh. How Nice. One of my favorites. Dinner is almost ready. Wynn, would like to join us? It's nothing fancy but there's plenty."

Huckle looked around his kitchen. "I'd be delighted."

Jackie ran to get a book after dinner as her mother and Huckle sat on the teak sofa and chair and chatted.

"Can you read to me, Uncle Wynn?"

"Not right now, poppet. I'm talking to your mother."

Jackie lay back on the couch and held the book overhead, flipping through the pages and humming to herself.

Ruth bounced Leah on a knee.

"How is Estelle? It must be so difficult being so far away. At least Rob is only gone three or four weeks at a time and he's a few hours away. Most of the time."

"She's well. The house is still standing. We seem accustomed to the distance. Perhaps it's that British stoicism of which I've been accused by more than one American. I dare say you have some of that same stoicism."

Jackie hummed louder.

"Jackie, please. We're trying to talk."

"What's stosisum?"

"Why don't you see what your brother is doing?" Ruth cleared her throat.

"I don't want to."

Jackie rolled along the couch edge until she bumped against Huckle's leg. She looked up to see him frowning at her. She slid with a thud to the rug and hid her face in her hands.

Huckle bent over. "Now Jacqueline, mind Mummy and let the adults talk."

"Are you mad at me?" Jackie mumbled into her hands.

"No. But I'm disappointed in you. Go on."

Jackie got to her feet, picked up her book and left the room.

"Bye, Uncle Wynn."

"Good night, Jacqueline."

Jackie sat on the edge of her bed, pushing the shutter eyelids of her baby doll up and down with her thumbs.

"Sleep. Awake. Sleep. Awake."

Voices in the kitchen. A man's voice and Mama's.

"Daddy!" she screamed and ran down the hall to greet her father. She caught her sandal on the runner and sprawled on the floor, her doll thudding down with her.

She let out a long howl and called for Ruth. She looked up.

Her mother appeared and behind her, stood not her father but Wynn Huckle. Ruth bounced whimpering Leah lightly in her arms.

"Jackie, what on earth? Are you okay?"

Jackie pulled herself up and Ruth looked her over. Jackie sniffled and added a few weak sobs.

"I fell."

"I see that," Ruth said and kissed Jackie on top of the head.

"Hi, Uncle Wynn."

"Hello, poppet."

"Uncle Wynn is going to watch you for a bit while I take Brian to the doctor."

"Is that okay with you, Jacqueline?" Huckle bent at the waist and turned his head like a bird.

Jackie nodded.

"I've told him a hundred times not to play on these walls. I just pray he hasn't broken anything."

Ruth grunted. "Gracious, Leah, you're getting so heavy. I hate to ask you to do this, Wynn. I'm sure I can handle all three."

"Nonsense. I'm happy to do it. I've missed seeing my sons. It will be a nice substitute. Besides, you won't be gone long, I'm sure. I imagine that doctor will fix the boy up in no time."

Jackie kicked the floor as if kicking away sand.

"You're sure?" Ruth said.

"Absolutely certain."

"Okay then. Let me grab my purse. Jackie, go get anything you need for next door."

Jackie ran through the deep sand of the alley to Huckle's gate and easily scrambled up, unlocked it and plopped back down. At his door, she turned and waited for him to catch up and listened as Crumpet barked on the other side of the door.

Inside the door, after the bright sun of the day, the dark well of the kitchen hid Huckle's expression as he stood still and waited for her to greet the spaniel.

"Can I play with Crumpet?"

Huckle sighed, "Yes, dear."

Jacqueline ran across the kitchen.

"Walk, Jacqueline."

"Sorry." She slowed to a fast walk and climbed on the couch.

Huckle followed. "Your shoes!" Huckle said as he sat next to her. Sand tumbled from her sandals

onto the upholstery.

"Oh! Sorry."

"Never you mind. I'll see to it." He slid her sandals off and gently dusted Jackie's feet clean.

"Raise your legs."

Jackie pulled her knees up.

Huckle brushed the sand off the couch, reaching in up to Jackie's bottom.

"Uncle Wynn?"

"Yes, dear?" The man carefully brushed sand away from the cushion edge.

Jackie stared into his blank face. "Nothing."

"How about some juice and biscuits?"

Jackie nodded. "Can I have milk?"

"May, not can."

"May I have milk?"

"No milk today. I'm out, I'm afraid."

"Okay."

"Can — may Crumpet get on the couch?"

"You may let Crumpet on the couch, yes."

Jackie called the dog up while Huckle disappeared into the kitchen. The spaniel climbed up and rolled onto his back for belly rubs.

"Hi, Crumpet. You're a good doggy. I wish I had a doggy like you. Uncle Wynn is so lucky."

She raked her fingers through the dog's silken fur and felt a pain in her throat. She swallowed it down "I wish I didn't have a little sister."

"Now Jacqueline. That's not at all kind"

"It's true. She took Leah with her and Brian but not me."

"Leah is too little to be away from your mother. You're a big girl. Here's your juice."

Jackie jumped off the couch and stood at the hammered brass coffee table. She took a long gulp of juice and a bit of cookie.

"Juice tastes funny."

"It's not polite to criticize your host's offerings."

"To what?"

"To say bad things about what people give you."

"I'm sorry. It's good."

"It's grapefruit. You get used to it. Drink what you can. It's good for you. You don't have to finish it."

Jackie drank another gulp, shuddered, and ate another cookie.

"If I eat cook...biscuits, it doesn't taste so bad."

"There's a thought."

Crumpet scrambled to the floor and sniffed the table.

"No Crumpet. They're my biscuits," Jackie said and waggled her finger at the dog.

Huckle laughed.

"Can I give him his biscuits? Oh!" Crumpet nudged Jackie's hand that held her juice glass.

"Bad dog! Down!" Huckle yelled.

Jackie put the glass down. Her heart beat hard with Uncle Wynn's loud voice.

"I'm so sorry, child. I didn't mean to frighten you. There's nothing worse than the smell of sour juice in carpet. I should have you in the kitchen."

Jackie blinked tears away.

"I'll just put Crump out for a few minutes so you can finish up, eh?"

Huckle stood, picked up the dog, and nodded at Jackie. "It's quite all right."

Jackie polished off the cookies and had another long gulp of juice. It had almost no taste now. More of a tingle. She looked around the room she'd gotten to know so well. Huckle had bought some books for her but she couldn't see them now.

"Uncle Wynn, where are the books?"

"The books, poppet, are back here in my office. I've made a space for you. Come see."

Jackie smiled and ran to the corner Huckle had cleared for her. He'd added a stack of six or seven books, a couple of soft pillows and a wool throw if she got sleepy, and she felt very sleepy.

Huckle stood at her back, his hands guiding her shoulders.

"There you are. Shall we read?"

"Mm." Jackie nodded. She flopped on the cushions and snuggled into the cover.

"Which one?"

Jackie shrugged. "Um. Something with horses?"

"How about The Turf-cutters Donkey?"

"Okay."

Huckle sat on the floor next to Jackie and pulled a book from the stack, knocking over a stack of magazines next to it.

"I'm so tired." Jackie yawned and closed her eyes.

"I will read and you will fall asleep and that's quite all right. You can sleep until Mummy and brother and little sister get home."

Jackie closed her eyes as Huckle began to read.

She felt a hand on her head and opened her eyes to Huckle stroking her curls. He smiled. "Sweet dreams, Jacqueline."

"Sweet dreams," she mumbled.

Her nap was filled with dreams of Uncle Wynn's mouth on her face. On her tummy. On her

bottom. She dreamed of his hands wrapped around her like a diaper while something slid between her naked legs again and again. She woke up wanting to cry in a silent, hot room. Her clothes were straight and neat. She dozed back off to dreamless sleep.

"She's in here. Sounds asleep last I looked." She heard Wynn Huckle say.

"She had a snack a couple of hours ago. Some biscuits and grapefruit juice.

"Than you, Wynn. We appreciate it very much."

Mama.

"Happy to help. I do hope he's okay."

"He will be. Boys! If his friend hadn't said anything, we'd never have known. A few weeks in an ankle splint and maybe no more climbing on walls."

Jackie stood a little unsteadily and patted down her dress and walked out of the office.

"Hi, Mama."

"There you are. Did you behave?"

"Of course she did."

"Yes, ma'am. Uncle Wynn gave me cookies and juice and read me a book and..."

"That's lovely, sweetie. Wynn, I can't thank you enough."

"My pleasure. Truly. She's a delight to have." He regarded Leah, then looked at Jackie with a funny smile.

Jackie felt a rush of confusion. *No. He's mine.* She ran to Huckle and hugged his leg. "Thank you, Uncle Wynn."

Huckle smiled down at her. "You are welcome any time."

Jackie, Ruth and the baby trooped across the alley.

"He's turned out to be such a nice man."

Nine

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Jackie turned into the driveway at the bottom of the hill. Her headlights swept over the mailbox she'd decorated with a wooden plaque, "Happy Hill Farm." Her SUV crawled up the winding gravel incline, lights stabbing out over the ravine that snaked around the hill and behind the house. When the tires bumped over a pothole, Rob stirred from dozing in the passenger seat.

"Home, Dad," she said and pulled in next to the backyard brick fence. She left the engine running, high beams aimed at the path to the garage apartment where her mother and father lived.

"You need help in?"

"I'll be fine. Night." He rubbed his face a moment, then pushed the door open and climbed out of the vehicle.

"Night, Dad." Jackie sat in her car and watched him walk. Sometimes it dismayed her to see him in such hard light, frail, bow-legged, and tired like every other old man she'd ever seen. Most days, with his strong voice and forthright demeanor, he seemed like the man he'd always been except for his shaky memory.

Rob disappeared into the shadows and Jackie turned off the 4Runner. She lugged herself out of the seat and the pack out of the backseat and crunched across the gravel and through the creosote-soaked pine gate. At the sliding back door she stopped and enjoyed a few seconds of being alone in the dark and quiet, then yanked the sliding glass door open. The gliders scraped and Jackie entered the Tate's two story house.

"Hello," she drew the word out like a dog howl.

From a back room she heard her husband, Will's, tenor, "Hey!" then little Ethan's high piping, "Hi, Grandma."

Jackie walked through the small cluttered kitchen with its brown and gold vinyl floors and dark wood cabinets, past the dining table, and into the sunken living room.

She dropped her bag and herself onto the plump couch and stared above the fireplace at the painting of pintos in snow. The horses faded in and out of the background. She closed her eyes and let her head roll back into a dusky fog.

The sliding door screeched again. "Ruth!"

Jackie sat up and felt something rattle in her stomach.

"Dad?" She walked to the kitchen.

"Where's your mother?"

"She's not in the apartment?"

"No!" Rob sank into a kitchen chair.

"Will?"

Will strode in, rubbing the back of his neck as he pulled off his thick glasses. "What's up?"

"Have you seen Mom?"

"No. I thought she was napping. She didn't come up for dinner."

Rob put his head in his shaky hands. "Oh, Jesus."

The rattle crawled into Jackie's throat and she tasted bile. "Ethan, stay with Papa."

"I'm coming with you," Rob said and stood up.

"No. I need someone to stay with Ethan and you've been sick."

Will put a hand on Rob's shoulder. "Stay put, Dad. We'll find her." He led Jackie outside, ducking to avoid hitting his head on the top of the door.

Jackie pointed to her parents' truck. "She didn't take the truck so she can't be too far."

Will rummaged in his pick-up toolbox.

"Mom!" Jackie yelled.

Jackie grabbed a flashlight from her husband and took off for the back of the property, leaving her husband to go to the front where she and Rob had just been.

Jackie went to the apartment and tried to think of where her mother might go. Ruth's dementia had made her forgetful but she'd never wandered off or gotten lost.

"Damn it. Mom!"

Jackie stomped to her woodshop and circled the brick building. She shined the beam inside and tested the lock and found it fast. She walked back to the apartment yard and stood listening to the night. Head swiveling. Light scanning.

"Mom!" Will yelled as he walked up.

"Shh!"

"What?"

"Shht!" Jackie spat out. She strained to hear and swept the light around the yard.

The raccoon feeder lay on its side.

"Mom!" Jackie ran toward the edge of the hill with Will at her heels. They flooded the hillside with light and heard Ruth's moans. A thin hand, rings glinting, waved weakly at them from twenty-five yards downhill.

"My God. Mama!" Jackie heard her husband calling for an ambulance as she scrambled downhill.

Jackie and Will sat with heads bowed in the cushioned chairs of the ER waiting area. Ethan wiggled in a nearby chair while pushing buttons on a hand-held computer game. Now and then he blurted "Wow!" or "Got you!" Will shook his head, saying, "Ethan! Hush!" and Ethan ignored Will each

time.

Rob paced.

The ER doors opened and Brian burst through them. Jackie frowned.

"What's going on? Is she okay?" Brian's bright tenor smacked Jackie's ears.

The four strangers scattered around the waiting room with their own problems looked up with everything from scorn to concern on their faces.

"She's getting a scan or an x-ray or something. We'll know more soon," Rob tried to match his son's volume.

"Please," Jackie told Will.

Will got up with a sigh. "Hey, guys," he said, "how about we all go over here and take it down a couple of notches."

"Sorry," Brian said and hunched his shoulders.

"Mr. Mu-eeller?"

The three men headed toward Jackie and Ethan.

"Mu-eeller?"

"Dad."

"Huh?"

Jackie pointed to a small, round nurse with big brown eyes. "You're being paged."

"Oh." Rob turned and snapped at the girl, "Mull-er!"

"Christ, Dad." Jackie shrugged. Who was she to talk.

Ten
Ruth
Las Cruces, NM
2010

People of all colors and shapes trundled Ruth from room to room, bed to bed, all the while calling her "honey" and "sweetie" and "shug." She had half a mind to tell them all to go jump in a lake. She had half a mind, she thought. She hurt everywhere, so she let them do whatever they pleased. Mostly.

"Could I have something to drink?" She asked someone pushing her onto an elevator.

"Not yet, honey."

"Maybe some hot tea?"

"Not just now, sweetie."

"Water? I'm so thirsty."

"You've got a saline drip. That will help."

"I want some water."

"Not right now, shug."

"Where are we going?"

"We need to get a something-or-another of your this-or-that."

"Where's Rob?"

"He's waiting for you."

"Can I see him?"

"Not yet, sweetie."

She lay in a quiet cubby hole of a room with more bright lights and something cold dripped into

her arm. The lights dimmed.

"Hi, babe."

She opened her eyes. Rob hovered over her. A giant stood behind him.

"You can call me sweetie."

"Okay, sweetie."

Ruth laughed. She pointed to the giant. "Daddy."

"It's me, Mom," the giant said.

Eleven

Ruth

Clearwater, FL

1942

Ruth lay in the half dark of the little apartment a mile from the beach. The room she shared with Kate faced an alley between the apartments and a row of small bungalows. Some of her classmates lived in those bungalows and made fun of her for living in the building. For being poor.

Walt had built Ruth's bed of cheap wood and simple construction similar to that of his boat's wheelhouse and painted it sky blue, then stenciled her name on it. Ruth ran a hand down the side rail of the bed, feeling the cool smoothness of her father's patient work. Little Kate twitched next to her, dreams flickering under closed lids. One of Kate's hands rested on Ruth's arm, fingers pumping like a trumpet player's.

Ruth moved her little sister's hand and held it lightly in hers, cradling the curled knuckles in her palm.

Her parents talked in the room next to her.

"I've talked to Joe at W-A-C-O in Waco. They need a voice. He's got a line on a studio gig for me, too."

Ruth father's bass vocals carried through the house like a distant rolling storm that never struck. She often listened at night as they talked until she dozed off.

Alma's warm southern drawl grew sharp as catfish spines when angered or stressed though she never raised it. Ruth heard that stress through the thin walls.

"So we'll be selling the boat?"

Silence bunched up, then came her father's answer, quieter than usual. "Yes, Alma, we'll sell the

boat. No use for it in Texas, is there? It'll give us a little extra to put aside."

"Or find a house?"

"Or find a house, darling."

Kate snored lightly.

Ruth released Kate's hand and rolled onto her side to look toward the window. She stroked Kate's hair behind her ears until Kate's snoring softened.

Ruth drifted. Texas?

Ruth followed her father around the apartment, stocking feet on wood floors padding next to his worn slippers. Evening sunlight spread muslin sheet curtains aside to wash out the colors and light her father's frown

Walt picked up a screw driver and put it back in its place. He hefted a coffee tin with nails, then one with nuts and bolts. He returned both to their shelves and shook his head.

In the tight space of the apartment, Ruth bumped into his left or right elbow time and again.

"Don't you have school work, child?" her father asked.

"Done it already. Daddy? We moving?"

Her father stopped with a pair of pliers in his hand.

"How many times have I told you about eavesdropping, Ruth Elizabeth?"

"I wasn't eavesdropping. I was trying to sleep. It's not like you and Mama were whispering."

"The sass! Goodness gracious, girl."

Ruth scuffed her shoes on the kitchen floor and looked up, head cocked to one side at her father, a soft smile on her lips.

He sighed. "Yes, baby. We're moving. Your granddaddy Chambers passed on and we need to go help Granny for a while."

"Oh." Ruth dragged her finger along the seam between draining board and bottom cabinet. "Do I know her?"

"Not much. No. Nobody does."

"You know her."

"Lived with her twenty years and didn't know her. But that's more than you need to worry about. She's a good person. Strong, is all."

"Like you?"

"Oh, much stronger."

Ruth tried to picture a woman bigger and stronger than her father. She almost laughed.

"You don't bother your mama about this," Walt said as he removed a mallet from the kitchen drawer and smacked it into his hand with a wink.

"Yes, sir."

The Chambers' 1925 Chevy sedan sat low on its springs with the load of bags and boxes of clothes and food for the trip to Waco.

"I'll be right back."

"Where're you going, Mama?" Ruth asked.

"To say goodbye to the sea."

Ruth's father bellowed from inside the house, "There's a big storm coming, Alma girl. We need to get on the road."

Ruth ran after her mother. "Can I come?"

"No. This is my goodbye."

"But you hate the water."

Alma bent down to push the hair out of Ruth's face. "Don't say, 'hate.' It's the boat I don't care

for. I love the sea. The beach. Being near my mama and daddy."

Ruth frowned. "Then why are we going?"

Her mother patted her head. "Go get in the car."

Twelve

Ruth

Waco, TX

1942

The Chevy sedan muttered as it dragged through the Waco streets which were wider, it seemed, than those at home in Florida. Busier. So many people. Daddy said Dallas was much bigger.

"Look at that!" Kate squealed.

Ruth turned and followed the line of her sister's arm to a giant soda bottle on a brick wall jutting from a large tan building.

"Dr. Pepper. Is that where they make Dr. Pepper, Daddy?"

"It is."

"It looks like a prison or something. Have I been here before?" Ruth asked.

"You were born here, baby." Walt answered.

"I thought so. I remember that. All those cars."

Alma laughed. "You can't remember that, Ruth. You were two when we left."

Ruth huffed and leaned her chin on her palm and squinted into the setting sun.

Kate imitated her sister's posture. "There's no beach."

"Lake Waco is a few miles that way," Walt pointed west. "There's a beach there."

"Really?"

"Yes, ma'am. Not just exactly like Clearwater but it'll work for you. And we can go there often because it's real close."

Granny Chambers' white house sat at the end of a long dusty driveway. The right side had a tall

peak like a church with two thin windows, their curtains drawn. The left side stretched low and west with a wide porch that ran its length. Plain, narrow columns held up the porch roof. Two white cane chairs and a matching cane table sat empty under that roof. Ruth had an urge race to a chair and survey the surrounding area, but the somber mood in the car held her back.

Several vehicles were parked in the drive and in the grass, two under the spread of a large oak tree on the east end of the house. Walt pulled his jalopy in next to a shiny Ford convertible.

The Chevy doors clunked open and Ruth's family piled out. Ruth threw her weight into shutting her door while staring at the Ford. She shook her head at her father's weathered sedan.

"Why do we have such a dang old car?" Ruth grumbled.

Ruth felt her arm wrenched back.

Her mother pulled her close and got in her ear. "I don't know where you got it, but I never want to hear language like that again."

"Mama, I'm sorry." Ruth whimpered.

"Okay. Now straighten up." Alma walked behind her husband and Ruth and her sister followed.

On the porch, two men in suit jackets stood talking in low voices. Walt walked up and stretched out his hand.

"Clyde, Jr., good to see you. Reverend Wilkins."

The man Walt called Clyde Jr. shook Walt's hand. "Waltham. Mom said she hasn't seen you in ten years. That so?"

"Thereabouts. Maybe I shouldn't keep her waiting any longer?"

Walt walked into the house and Alma followed. Ruth tiptoed by her uncle who at a foot shorter than her father was still imposing with broad shoulders and a face with an odd darkness to it that started at his eyes and spread over his cheeks and forehead like a rash.

Ruth caught Clyde's eye and the man leaned forward just before she reached the doorway.

"Boo!" he said.

She jumped and rushed in, pushing Kate ahead of her.

Clyde laughed but his laugh cut short and Ruth turned to see her mother back at the door.

Ruth knew the look her mother gave Clyde, Jr. That steady, empty stare.

Ruth continued into the gloomy house.

A large black box sat on a special table in the big den that opened before her. She thought for a moment it was the lowest buffet she'd ever seen, then with a twist of her stomach, she saw a man's pale profile sticking out of one end.

"Mama?" she groaned and flailed out for someone to catch her. Alma was not close enough and Ruth went down in darkness.

She came to on a hard bed in a tight, dim room with Alma hovering over her. Hundreds of babies' heads floated on the wall behind her mother. Ruth screeched and buried her head in the covers.

"Ruth? What's wrong with you?" Her mother pulled on her but Ruth refused to look up.

"Ruth Elizabeth!" her father's weight pulled the foot of the bed down hard and she felt herself dragged with it. She heard her mother turn the squeaky key on a lamp. She opened one eye, then another, but looked only at her father's glower. "I know this is scary, girl, but you need to calm down. People are mourning."

Ruth raised her left arm and pointed toward the wall with a shaky finger.

"What?" Alma asked.

Walt lowered his voice, "Now, come on, Ruthie. Behave, please."

Ruth turned back to her mother. In the lamplight the babies' heads became large, pink blossoms floating on a navy blue background.

Ruth flushed and dropped her arm and started to giggle. "I'm sorry. I thought I saw..." she stopped.

"What?"

Ruth shook her head and put her hands to her hot cheeks.

"Is he still out there?"

"Who? My daddy? Yes. And he will be for the rest of the day. You need to show some respect and come back out."

Ruth sniffed. "Yes, sir."

Her parents ushered her off the bed and pushed her to the door where Kate waited, round-eyed and pale. As Ruth walked through the doorway, Kate took her arm.

After the funeral, Clyde, Jr., and Reverend Wilkins sat in the two white chairs on the front porch, squinting in the sunlight that bounced off the white of everything. Ruth's father had moved a dining table chair onto the porch and straddled it like a giant on a pony. Ruth sat cross-legged on the porch floor on her father's left side.

Clyde gulped iced tea from a Mason jar and smacked his lips. "Don't know what kept you from coming around the last few years, Waltham. You should've been here for Mama and Daddy."

Walt Chambers tapped his right foot and gazed across the deep lawn. "Little thing called 'money,' brother. I know it's not something you worry awful much about, but I can't just throw it around on expensive cars and fancy suits. Got to pick and choose how I spend it."

Ruth inched closer to her father and leaned against his leg. She rolled a pill bug in her palm.

Reverend Wilkins pressed his jar of tea to his face, letting the glass sweat drip down his neck. "It's tough times all over, Clyde. You're blessed. Most of us aren't."

"Maybe. But I happen to know little brother here had a boat over there in Florida."

Ruth felt her father's calf muscle tighten.

"Built that boat with my own hands from the hull up. Only piece I bought was the motor." Walt

sat up straight. "That boat fed my family many a week."

Clyde chuckled. "Is that so? What do you say, child? Did your daddy build that boat all by his self?"

Ruth looked up, the pill bug tickling her hand. "No, sir." she smiled as Clyde grinned and leaned back to lace his fingers behind his head. "Mama and I helped."

Clyde, Jr. dropped his hands onto the arms of the chair. "That's mighty industrious of you all. How much all those materials cost you?"

"Oh, Daddy didn't buy all that stuff. We picked through junk and traded for a lot of it." Ruth looked up at her father. Walt relaxed forward and patted Ruth on the head.

"Always have been a horse trader," Clyde mumbled.

Reverend Wilkins swished the ice in his tea and laughed. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Long as it's your horse." Clyde stood and paced to the end of the porch.

"Can you say you earned your own way, Junior? I'll take my horse trading over letting my wife pay the bills." Walt's words dripped out as if the sun had melted them.

Ruth dodged her uncle as he strode quickly back to stand over her father.

"My wife and me have helped Mama and Daddy keep this house while you been playing your horn and catching fish. You haven't had the decency to so much as visit." Clyde wheeled around and stormed into the house.

"My apologies, Reverend. Ruthie." Walt looked down at the porch boards between his feet.

Wilkins nodded, took a swig of tea, and smiled at Ruth. "Funerals can bring out the best or the worst in folk."

Ruth got up and sat in the chair Clyde had abandoned, unfolded her hand, and chased the little gray critter across the lines of her palm.

*

Ruth lay on the hard bed again, listening to the night: crickets, a distant owl, and adults in hushed tones in the kitchen. Kate lay next to her playing with her ragdoll. Their mother moved quietly at the end of the bed, unpacking their clothes from a case.

A lowboy stretched opposite the bed and nightstand. A plain white vase and a wooden jewelry chest sat on the dresser. No paintings or photos broke up the ugly wallpaper, nor a mirror or vanity to dress by.

"Does Granny keep it this way to keep people from visiting?"

"Shh!" her mother said and stifled a chuckle, but she let Ruth see a sly smile.

Ruth thought her mother beautiful in the evening gloom. Alma's short black hair tightly waved against her forehead drew the dregs of light to her sapphire eyes.

"Why do Daddy and Uncle Clyde fight?" Ruth asked.

"He likes him just fine. That's just a brothers trying each other."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Jealousy. Clyde's older but smaller. Your Daddy has to work harder for his living."

"Uncle Clyde's rich. He shouldn't be jealous of Daddy."

"His wife is rich. It's not the same." Alma pulled a sheet up to the girl's hips. "Bell girls don't do that to each other, do they?"

Ruth and Kate exchanged looks, then shook their heads.

"Good," Alma said, "now get some sleep." She switched out the light and stepped whisper soft out of the room.

Ruth heard Kate snuffle.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to go home."

Ruth put her arm over Kate's head and patted her shoulder. "It's okay, Katie. You'll like it here. You'll see." Ruth pressed her free hand to her nose to stop her own threatening tears.

"But Granny is so mean."

"Hush. She's just sad." Ruth pictured the old woman under the stack of gray hair who hadn't even said hello to her or Kate.

"When will she be not sad? She scares me."

"I don't know. Her husband died. It may take a long time."

"She called me 'you' and told me I was dis...dis..."

"Disrespectful?"

"Uh huh. Mama says it's rude to call someone 'you.'"

"Don't worry. Daddy's going to get us a house soon. It'll be okay."

Kate cried quietly into Ruth's shoulder until she fell asleep.

Ruth moved away and wiped tears and sweat from Kate's cheeks and forehead. She rolled onto her side and whispered a prayer.

Thirteen

Leah

South Houston, TX

2010

Every weekday morning Leah Schreiber intended to get an early start entering medical data and woke on the second round of glockenspiel notes from her cell phone at 8:35. Every morning she walked barefoot from empty, quiet master bedroom to empty, quiet master bath, choked down the first handful of medications—breakfast, she called it—and banged her hip on the bathroom door handle as she made her way to the toilet.

Every morning she looked at the clock and the voice in her head said, it's 8:45, you can get breakfast and coffee and get to work by nine if you're disciplined and don't get distracted. But at nine she gave the dogs their pumpkin and yogurt and started her espresso shots, and at 9:30 she read the daily comics on her cell phone.

On such a day in September, Leah looked out her great room window and saw the shadows draped across the yard a certain way, hung from the back fence just so, sifted in the Chinese Pistache like a thousand carpenter bees, all convincing her that fall had slipped in overnight. George and Gracie wrestled their way to the back door and barked to go out. As Leah obliged, she met the steam heat of the lingering summer.

"Stupid crap-ass weather."

The two yellow Labrador-Staffordshire terrier mixes didn't notice the weather. They had play time on their minds. They wheeled and bounced out into the grass.

In autumn cool she could sit in one of the rocker chairs and work under the patio umbrella. But in the Houston mugginess her paper warped and fountain pen ink spread like Mandelbrot's. She blinked

against the morning sun and cranked open the umbrella. It fluttered like a dying bird, then fell still.

She settled into a chair, cushions long dry of the early dew, and drew her thick legs up into a lotus position, thighs pressed into the arms of the chair.

Someone growled. Not her.

"Hey, kids. Watch your language."

Gracie paused and looked away from Leah while George continued to tug on his sister's neck.

Alpha witch! Leah laughed. "I know it was you, Grace. Be nice to your brother."

The female fixed brown eyes on Leah for two beats, then went back to tumbling with George until both dogs tired of the play and began marking the yard.

George finished his fence prowling, wove through the leggy Lantana edging the patio and banged his head into Leah's knee. She grabbed his thick jowls. "Where are you going, you goofy old man?" She kissed him between his ears and brushed away a bit of dirt near his useless left eye.

Gracie plodded in, panting against the oppressive air. She flopped in the shade of the umbrella. George chose to sunbathe.

Leah leaned back, let her head fall slightly and closed her eyes. She mumbled a simple prayer, words born in her youth tumbling in her head, thanking her divine maker for her blessings, asking for peace, guidance, and strength for the day as sweat dripped down her cheeks and neck. The words melted into interior nonsense like the babble of infants. She focused on the tightness of her thighs against the chair until it melted away. The seat cushions softened into clouds barely brushing her skin. She followed a single breath as it entered her nose, her sinuses, dove down her throat, and spread throughout her lungs. She imagined it permeating her blood, oxygen for carbon dioxide, enriching her muscles, her brain, her spirit. She exhaled and followed the scrubbed air back out.

She took another breath and followed it down, chasing it into a quiet corner of her mind where she used the oxygen to awaken the child soul hidden from her in day-to-day activities. Little Leah—a

child she could only imagine having existed—asked acceptance from her and nothing else.

Gracie whined.

"*Shekinah*," Leah whispered her sacred word through salty lips. Sweat dripped from Leah's chin, down her neck, and into her cleavage. She became aware of her body, its proportions, its flaws. The child soul, innocent and perfect in the embrace of the prayer, vaporized.

Leah let go with short sobbing-laugh as she unfolded her legs.

Gracie stood at the back door, looking limp from the heat.

"All right, kids. I should have known better. Let's go."

George licked sweat from her hand as she opened the back door and ushered Gracie inside.

Both dogs pushed Leah into the kitchen as they did after every backyard break. They slobbered treats from her and flopped on the cool tile floor. Leah looked at her damp fingers, shrugged, and wiped them on her yoga pants.

"Right! To work, dude et dudette." She retreated to her bedroom office.

She sat on the bed where a fortress of papers, pens, notebooks, and laptop, surrounded her. She shuffled pages, capped and uncapped pens, trundled about in people's lives, and dug figures from books and the web for almost two hours. She slapped a Vanishing Point on a notebook, sending a little spray of purple ink on to the covers.

"Well, crap!"

She slid out from under her work and, with the dogs twisting around her legs, slumped to the kitchen.

The dogs stood at the end of the counter near the biscuit jar while Leah made iced coffee.

As the shots cooled, she dropped a couple of biscuits on the floor and smiled as Gracie waited for her visually impaired brother to locate his. Leah nodded at the female, who dove after the remaining treat.

Leah found herself staring at the spot on the floor where the treat had been and looking for that peace, that emptiness of the morning.

George nudged her thigh.

She shook her head. "No more." Leah stroked his smooth blond coat. "I swear, Georgie boy, some days it's like God's done wrung me out and tossed me aside. I just can't feel him today."

She finished preparing her coffee and returned to her room. Hands on hips she surveyed her bedroom.

Her cell phone played the opening notes of "Fanfare for the Common Man."

"Oh, Brian. Not now."

The phone played on for twenty seconds and fell silent.

Leah pushed her work aside and crawled into bed. She closed her eyes and took a cleansing breath.

"Fanfare" began again.

"Well, fine!" Leah excavated her phone from under her papers. "Hey, What's up."

"Hi, baby. Has Jackie called?"

"No. Was she supposed to?"

Her brother sighed and Leah heard him take a drag on a cigarette.

"Yeah. Shit. She was, baby. Everything's okay, now."

Leah lay there after Brian's call and begged, reasoned, wrangled with her remote Creator, Father God, Shekinah, Divine Presence, whomever, whatever, to keep her mother well just a little longer so that she might get to her and say hello and goodbye if need be.

In those prayers, she muffled her anger with Jackie for not calling when Ruth fell two days prior. She covered it with kind words in her head about her siblings and all they'd done for her parents in her

absence. Underneath the kindness lay rage and rot and she laughed at herself for even imagining for a moment that a creator of universes could not see her subterfuge.

Travel time came at four a.m. and Jim slid over to jostle her but she hadn't slept. He trailed a warm, strong hand down her back.

"Time to get up, darling."

"I know."

"Do you want to shower first?"

"I showered last night."

"You don't have to snap at me. I forgot. You get a few minutes extra sleep." Jim eased out of bed and disappeared into the master bath.

Leah rolled onto her back, and watched as her husband's stocky form drifted across the room through the light that leaked from the neighbor's security light. She cursed, and got up.

Leah wrapped her arms around George's neck, buried her nose in his fur and breathed in his sweet, corn-chip-like musk. "Be good. Eat properly this time, like your sister."

"We have to go, darling. He'll be fine. Rick'll take good care of them."

"I know. Doesn't mean I can't worry about them," Leah said.

"Right now you need to worry about your mom."

"I can worry about both at the same time." Leah snatched her travel mug off the hall tree and stomped out the door.

The drive from South Houston to Las Cruces began in silence. Leah turned away from their cookie-cutter house and stared at the curb rushing past. She sighed and dropped her shoulders. Jim

stayed quiet.

"Let me stew and cry and agonize and pray," she'd told him on a previous trip when he'd tried to ease her anxiety. Or maybe she'd said, "Leave me the hell alone." She couldn't remember.

Each time Leah and Jim dog-legged up Interstate 45 and out I-10, Houston had digested more land and regurgitated a strip mall, subdivision, or apartment complex in its place. The amoeboid city surrounded every small town, every incorporated neighborhood, every farm it touched.

"Concrete must be the single most important commodity in southeast Texas."

"Progress."

"If it's progress, how come our infrastructure sucks so much?" Leah snapped.

"I'm just saying. You're right. We could stand to fix what we have before building new."

"We could stand to use what we have. Half of the strip malls out there are empty. Why build more just for those to be half empty?"

Leah rested her head on her hand so as not to look at the city passing by. She hated this in-between. Take her to the beach where she could see the sea or to the country but not this paved purgatory. She held her breath a moment, afraid she would actually scream.

They punched through the amoeba's wall about ninety minutes after leaving home, past the last stuttering subdivisions of Katy, Texas that claimed independence from Houston but in fact, had an intimate relationship with the city, past the last major truck stop, and over the Brazos river into green pastures.

Leah breathed.

Leah waited in the cab for Jim to fill the truck's gas tank near Comfort, Texas. She kept the windows up, hoping the cab would hold the lingering whiffs of cool, conditioned air. She watched the pump counter race and the dollars creep up. She thought she might tolerate a few more minutes when

the pump stopped and Jim cranked the cap tight on the tank. She let out a soft sigh and turned forward when Jim tapped on the driver's side window and made a drinking motion with his curled hand to his mouth.

Leah nodded and smiled.

After a minute, the cool faded, Leah's face bloomed red, and her back and chest dripped with sweat.

Leah remembered stretching, stomach down, across the laps of her sister, Jackie, and her second cousin, Terrie, in the back seat of Dorothy Parson's 1965 seafoam Chevy Biscayne. Vicki Parson, twelve, sat in the front seat, dangling her glossy, red nails in Leah's face. Leah, seven, turned her head to look at the green carpet.

Vicki had strange powers over Jackie and Terri, each a year younger than she, and Leah trailed the preteen clique. The older girls teased Leah with Ouija board predictions that frightened her, ghost stories that gave her nightmares, gory Halloween pranks that sent her home without candy in bag or gut, and disappearing acts that left her abandoned in the overgrown field behind the Piggly Wiggly. Yet Leah continued to turn to them for company.

Sweating in the oven of the Chevy, Leah waited for promised fun on a sun-dulled August day in Waco.

Jackie and Terrie held Leah lightly.

"Scream like you're really scared," Vicki said.

Leah giggled and squawked, then laughed again at the funny noise she'd made.

"Not like that. A real scream."

"I can't. I don't know how," Leah said and shifted on the pairs of knobby knees under her.

Jackie gripped tighter and leaned in close, "Scream like you're being attacked," she hissed.

Leah tried again but only eked out a gasp.

"You'll never be an actress." Vicki tossed her head.

"Who said I want to?" Leah wriggled. "Let go."

Jackie loosened her grip.

"No. Don't!" Vickie held her hand out to stop Leah's sister. "Let's try something else. Turn her over."

Sweat soaked Leah's clothes and dripped in her ears. "It's hot, guys. Let's get out of here."

"Shut up," Jackie said.

"Mama says never to say that."

"Mama says, wah, wah. Maybe she'll scream for a rape scene," Jackie said.

Leah didn't know what that meant but the older girls grew still. She heard Terrie's high twang, "I have rubber bands. Let's use those."

Leah imagined being stung with rubber bands the way her brother, Brian threatened in his bad moods. "No!"

Jackie gripped Leah's shoulders and arms tight. Leah felt Terrie pulling down her knit shorts and panties. Their breath came tight with little nervous chuckles.

"Stop it!" Leah cried.

Fingers and something Leah vaguely recognized as a rubber band went inside her bottom like when her mama had put medicine in her for throwing up. She felt like she needed to use the bathroom.

Leah kicked hard.

"OW!"

She hit someone hard in the shin with her left foot. Whoever had put their fingers in her pulled out. Jackie let her go and yanked her shorts up. She shoved Leah away.

"Go home. It was just a stupid game. Don't you dare tell Mom."

Leah pushed the car door open and jumped into the quiet suburban street. She heard the car door close behind her but didn't remember closing it.

Leah looked at the little gray house with its frilly mimosa spreading over the front lawn and the inviting brown church pew on the front porch. Her feet wouldn't obey. She could only stare and think about walking to the curb, up the two steps, then the long walkway to the porch. The car held her in place like a magnet.

A white car turned from Edmond Avenue onto North 60th. The driver saw Leah rooted to the road and stopped to allow her to cross.

Behind her Leah Vicki yelled, "Go home to Mommy, you little baby."

Leah's body jerked free. She ran up the sloping yard into the house into a blast of central air conditioning.

"Where'd you go?" Jim asked.

"Go?"

"As in, what planet were you on?"

"Just chasing memories."

Jim pulled out of the gas station onto the sizzling blacktop. "Good or bad?"

"What's your guess?"

"I'll say bad based on the look on your face when I walked up."

"Ding! Ding!"

Jim laughed. "What's my prize?"

"I promise not to tell you what I was reliving."

"Works for me."

Leah patted his shoulder. The solidity of him, the heat radiating from him, the sweet scent of his

cologne, all pushing the past back into the cluttered, dirty box in her mind.

"Have I heard it before?" Jim asked.

"Yup." She looked across the land that bumped and rolled north of the road.

Comfort fell behind and the land rose. Creosote bushes and squat mesquite dominated the view out the window and mile after mile of low barbed wire fence proclaimed, "You are not welcome here." Green gave way to beige, sage and gray. Stone dominated concrete. Leah tossed off the cover on her anger and dwelled on the painful games of sister-strangers.

"You want to talk?"

Leah stared out her window. "She should have called that night. They should have called. Brian's not off the hook, either."

"I know. In his defense, you know she told him not to bother. That she'd do it."

"Heck, she probably told him she did do it. He probably wondered why I hadn't called him but was kind enough not to say as much." Leah took a breath and clenched her teeth until her jaw hurt.

"Why's she got to be such a controlling witch?"

"You're too kind."

"Only on the outside. Something is wrong with her. All these years I've put it off to selfishness and anger with my folks and I don't know what. But who doesn't call her siblings when their mother is in the hospital? Who does that?"

Leah searched Jim's face. He concentrated on the sunlit road wavering before him, peridot eyes reflecting her attempts to look into his head. She knew him well enough to know he wanted to find an answer that helped without being cruel.

"Maybe she felt guilty?"

"About?"

"Not being there when Mom fell?"

"So? That doesn't mean you don't call."

"It's just a theory. Don't shoot the engineer."

Leah reached over and patted his thigh. "I'm not. I'm just so baffled and pissed. Even if I was feeling like hell because something I did caused Mom or Dad to be hurt, I'd call her and Brian as soon as possible. Besides, it isn't her fault. From everything Brian said, Mom just fell. Shit happens."

Jim shrugged and dropped his right hand to pat the one on his leg. "When the world revolves around you, everything good is your doing. Maybe everything bad is, too?"

"That'd be a first. She's never taken responsibility for a mistake in her entire life."

"Maybe she has, maybe she hasn't. In her head, she probably blames herself for a lot of stuff."

"That would imply growing up. I don't see it."

"Okay, darling, you beat me again. I can't figure her out either. I'm just an engineer. Not a therapist. I don't know why she didn't call other than she's selfish and self-centered and just generally messed up."

"Something made her that way. Something made me the neurotic mess I am and we basically know what it was. I know I haven't bought into the Evil Granddaddy Chambers story but it must have been something horrid."

"Everyone is sure he couldn't have—you know?"

"How sure can you be? I just know he never came near me like that. Or Mama. He lived in the country with his wife. He had a fling with a grown woman. When we visited, he spent all his time with my folks, not us. Actually, most of his time on his radio. That said, I can't help but think she conflated some event with his presence because children do that. They have a trauma and blame someone because that's the most available person."

"Like?" Jim raised his eyebrows.

Leah sighed. "Yeah, like how I blame Jackie for some things she was only tangential to. Some things!"

The road hummed and the dash rattled and Leah's eyes watered from staring too hard at the mile markers jumping by. She blinked and dozed.

Jim cleared his throat. "What did Dad say?"

"About what?"

"When you told him we were coming."

"Just that Mom would be fine and we needn't bother. Which tells me that he thought I'd ignored Mom's fall entirely."

"She will be you know. Fine."

"Probably. But I can't forget when grandmama fell. These falls can be just a speed bump or a dead end." Leah fell back against the bucket seat. "Enough. Let's listen to Annie."

"Isn't that a little dark for this trip? Okay. I can see you're set on it."

Leah slid a CD from its case and the player gobbled it up. Annie Lennox sang of "a thousand beautiful things" and propelled the couple down the dust bedeviled I-10 highway.

Jim gripped the wheel like a first-timer on a roller coaster when they scrambled through the El Paso freeways. He didn't relax until they were in their hotel room seventy miles on in Las Cruces, luggage on the bed to unpack, diet soda on the nightstand.

"Twelve and a half hours. How'd we do that?" He lay on his back on the bed, crossed his feet at his ankles, laced his fingers over his stomach, and closed his eyes.

"Less time in Stockton?"

"Maybe."

Leah called her brother. "Hey Bri, we're here safe. Jim's exhausted. As am I. We're going to

nap."

"You up for dinner in a while?"

"We can do dinner but it needs to be in walking distance or something. Not really into driving anywhere. The hotel restaurant's a bit pricey. Place down the street is okay if a bit bland."

Brian grew quiet for a few seconds. "Why don't you guys nap and do your thing and we'll try for tomorrow. Ellen's hungry right now and you know teenagers. You going to call Jackie?"

"No."

"Want me to?"

"Don't care. I'd say don't go to any extra trouble, but don't lie on my account. If she asks, we're here. If not, fine. I told Mom and Dad we were on our way out, but with their memory they probably won't think to say anything or will get the time wrong. So it's all a big who-cares to me. Not sure what she can do this time."

"Still..."

"It's not like she can take them off to Socorro like the last time we came out. Later." Leah hung up.

"Such machinations," Jim mumbled from his near-sleep.

"Ridiculous. I hate that we're reduced to playing her stupid games."

"What are you going to do? You don't play. You pay."

"Ha! Cute. I'm tired, Mr. Schreiber. Let's unpack and go to bed."

"Way ahead of you, Mrs. Schreiber."

Fourteen

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Jackie drove to the hospital alone on the third morning after checking Ruth into Mountain View. Tired, she dragged along the broad, open road just below the speed limit.

The valley narrowed and the trickle of the Rio Grande threaded through Las Cruces. The highway fed Jackie and her brown Pathfinder into the north side of town. In minutes, she pulled into the hospital parking lot on the east side.

Inside, she neared Ruth's room and heard laughter. For a moment, the laugh struck Jackie as odd, so like her mother's and yet so much stronger.

Jackie turned the corner and entered the room. Her little sister Leah leaned against the foot of the bed, her reddish hair shorn short at the shoulders, making her round face rounder. Jackie felt a jolt, a tiny bolt of electricity through her like when caught passing notes in grade school. Leah's husband, Jim, stood in a corner smiling, arms loose, ever-present soda can in hand.

"Hey, Sis!" he said.

Leah smiled and said nothing to Jackie but continued listening intently to Rob who sat next to his wife's bed chattering about something or another.

Jackie lifted her shoulders.

"Hey there." She spread her arms wide and strode in to hug Jim, then reached for Leah who offered a stiff embrace.

Jackie, still holding her little sister, leaned back and took a lock of hair in her fingers, "Your hair looks great. You look ten years younger."

Leah grimaced. "Thank you. I like it."

Jackie let go. "Hi, Mom. How you feeling this morning?"

Her mother lifted her right hand, bruised and taped with tubing and a catheter. "Okay I guess. Ready to get out of here. Where've you been?"

"I had to get Little Bit to school this morning. Put me a little late." Jackie glanced at Rob. "Has the doctor come in?"

Rob shook his head. "Don't think so."

"Not since we've been here," Leah said. "Nine-ish."

"When did you guys get into town?"

Jim answered as Leah bent to help Ruth with her oxygen line, "About six last night. Brian said he might call."

Jackie shook her head just slightly. "No. Nothing from Brian. Guess he got busy."

Leah smiled their father's smile. The same condescending one that preceded, "Now, Jackie..." in Jackie's childhood and now. She looked down at her hands, and rubbed the thick, red skin over the first two fingers of her left hand.

She looked back to Leah, now perched on the window sill and pulled back into the conversations of the other adults in the room.

There were moments Jackie carried her comforting isolation with her, when she stood among others, looked at them, heard them, but felt as if she were back in her room or on her balcony, staring at the desert spread before her. She could not conjure that peaceful bubble now. She felt a snarl rising to her lips like a cornered dog.

"Mom, I'm going to get something from the cafeteria. Can I get you something?"

Ruth looked up, befuddled.

"You just got here," Leah said.

"Yes. But I didn't have time to eat. I need something. Dad?"

Rob nodded. "Yeah. Bring me back a blueberry muffin."

"You guys?" Jackie asked.

Leah shrugged. "We need to get lunch actually and Mom's is on the way. Maybe we can join you."

Jackie felt her stomach tighten. "That sounds great. Let's go though." She whirled around and headed off down the hall.

Muted shades of the Desert Southwest decorated the hospital cafeteria.

Jackie had fallen in love with the Southwest in her twenties. Surrounded by it now, she hardly noticed it. Kokopelli Koffee Kups and Spirit Bear doorstops blended into the landscape. She did notice the blaring fluorescent lights of the café.

So did Leah. "Bright enough in here?"

Jackie nodded and led them to the deepest corner of the café she could find after they got their plates.

"I thought you were going to eat?" Leah pointed to Jackie's coffee.

"Nothing looked good. I'll get something on the way home. You guys didn't need to come out here, you know. Everything's fine. Mom will be home soon."

Leah waved a plump hand at her, "We know. We planned to come out this month anyway. When we heard from Brian, it just made sense to come now. Better safe than sorry."

Jackie stirred her coffee slowly. "I guess."

Leah continued, "We go back Monday so it's only four days, barring catastrophe. Just wanted some time with family. Although it's hard to split up the pack."

Jackie raised her eyebrows.

"The dogs," Leah explained.

"Oh. Your babies." She saw by Leah's quick-passing frown that her tone didn't escape notice.

Jim brightened at mention of Gracie and George and he launched into a story of the two perfect mutts' perfect behavior, clearly missing Jackie's contempt. Leah grinned between bites as her husband chattered.

Jackie oohed and ahed at the appropriate times. She made her sister and brother-in-law small like bobble-head dolls while she listened. Their voices were hot summer puffs of air that barely stirred her heavy bangs. She became lost in the conversation as she waited for an exit. When the two went quiet, Jackie drained her coffee cup noisily and took a deep breath.

"It was great seeing you. I have to get home and do some housework before Ethan gets out of school."

"You're not going back to see Mom?" Leah didn't look at her.

"I'll come back later with Ethan. I just wanted to hear what the doc had to say."

"And you haven't. You just got here. The doctor should be here soon, if he's not already." Leah clenched her fork in her fist on the edge of the table.

Jackie chewed her lip. "Yes, but..."

Jim smiled at her and bounced his bushy gray eyebrows.

She sighed. "Okay. I'll be up in a minute. Jeez! But I need to make a pit stop first."

"Say no more." Jim waved.

Jackie turned her phone off, slid it into her back pocket, and walked out of the hospital where she lit a cigarette and took a deep drag.

So they'd already had a couple of hours with Ruth and Rob. Telling stories, no doubt. Some that probably put Jackie in a bad light. Probably made plans. Why did they have to show up? Jackie had

things under control.

Jackie extinguished the cigarette in a nearby sand tray and headed to the ladies room, then back to her mother's hospital room.

In Ruth's room, conversation had gone cold. Rob nibbled his muffin. Ruth had pushed aside her lunch tray to doze. Leah and Jim spoke in low voices.

"Hey," Jackie said softly, "Ortho come yet?"

Leah shook her head, "Nurse assured us he's on his way as we speak."

Jackie clicked her tongue and crossed her arms, then paced out into the hall.

She turned to pace back into the room and saw Leah tilt her head to whisper something to Jim. She spun again and walked down the hall, head down, studying the white, pink, and gray flooring.

A tall man brushed past her. He smelled of soap and disinfectant and his shoes squeaked on the polished tile. She kept walking away from Ruth, Rob, her sister, until she heard a loud voice.

"Mrs. Mueller. How are we today?"

Jackie turned around and trotted back to the room.

"Dr. Baumgarten."

"Yes? Oh, hello. We passed each other in the hall." The young doc in lab coat over suit pants and dress shirt held a patient's chart against his leg.

"We did. I'm sorry. I was in my own little world. This is my sister, Leah." Jackie swung her hand, palm up, to Leah. "Her husband, Jim."

"I see the resemblance. Nice to meet you. "

Leah smirked and Jackie cringed. Since childhood people had made such claims, yet Jackie saw no such thing. Leah's round face and heavy nose mirrored Rob's German heritage while Jackie shared Ruth's defined jaw and sharp nose. They shared freckles, prominent eye teeth, and wicked tempers only.

"What's news, doc?" Rob asked.

"I've talked with the on-call orthopedist and I'm totally in line with his assessment. No surprises here. The pelvic break is, as he told you, common and the severity of it, Ruth, is not such that surgery is of any value. So we need to let it heal and get you physical therapy as we discussed before. How you do that is up to you. You'll need some time in rehab, irregardless."

Leah shot a look at Rob.

"But that's not to say you'll be stuck there. If you can manage rehab and get back on your feet, you should be able to go back home in a few weeks or so. Any questions?"

Ruth frowned. "What about my knee."

"Your knee?" The young doctor opened the chart.

Jackie patted her mother's foot. "Your knee is fine, Mama."

"But it hurts."

"It's hurt for a long time. It's not injured." Jackie turned to the doctor. "She has a bad knee from when she was overweight. That's all."

"I am not overweight."

"Was, Mama. Was!"

The doctor nodded at Jackie.

"We'll look into the knee another time, Mrs. Mueller. We can do something for the pain for now. Right now we need to fix your pelvis."

"Why?"

Jackie and Leah both shook their heads at him but he continued.

"Because you broke it in your fall."

"Oh. Okay."

"I'll check in next rounds. Nice to meet you." Baumgarten gave Leah and Jim the slightest tilt of his head.

Everyone said their goodbyes and thank-yous.

Jackie looked at Ruth, who trembled and sniffled. Tears hung at the rims of her mother's eyes.

"Mama?" Leah asked.

"I just can't remember things. It's so f..."

"It's the stress of the hospital, Ruth. When you get settled back into familiar surroundings, you'll be fine." Rob held his wife's hand tightly.

"I hope so." Ruth dabbed at her eyes with a shaky hand.

"Hey, at least you didn't say, 'irregardless,' Mom. I thought Dad was going to burst for a second," Leah said.

Even Jackie laughed.

Rob reached out his free hand toward Leah. "I'm so glad you two came. It's important."

Leah took his hand.

Jackie looked at the floor. "I just needed to talk to the doctor and that's done. I should go."

"Can't you stay a while," Leah said.

"Yeah. Okay."

Fifteen

Leah

Mesilla, NM

2010

Monsoon clouds darkened Ruth's hospital room. Leah stretched and yawned and patted her father on the shoulder. "Three-thirty. We need to get going."

"Same here. I have things to do before I pick up Ethan." Jackie picked up her bag. "Do you guys want to have dinner on the hill, tonight? I can stop and get pizza or I can whip something up."

Leah leaned against Jim. "We appreciate it but we've already made plans with Brian and Annie for dinner."

"No biggie. I'm out of here. You guys have a good evening. Love you," Jackie bent down and kissed Ruth on the cheek.

"Bye, Mama. Pop." Jackie twirled and exited in one breath.

Leah moved away from the window ledge. "Guess we're out of here, too, Mama. We're meeting Brian and Ellen in Old Town Mesilla for some shopping."

"That sounds nice."

"I suppose. It will be good to visit, but we need to go before they roll up the streets." Leah kissed her mother goodbye. Jim followed suit.

Rob stood with a groan. "I'll walk you out."

"No need, Dad. You take care. Love you." Leah hugged her father. "We'll see you tomorrow."

Rob shuffled behind them to the door and waved. Leah turned and waved back as they rounded the corner to the elevators.

"Dad needs sleep."

"And food. He's thin." Jim added.

Leah, Jim, Brian, and teenage Ellen sat close in a corner of the restaurant while Mariachi played from a speaker overhead.

Leah squinted as she dipped a corn chip into a bowl. "Who needs to see their food, anyway?"

"You wanted to come here." Brian jostled her elbow. "And you wanted to sit with your back to the wall. What is that about? From your gunslinger days?" He stretched his long legs and rattled the bowls and glasses on the table.

"Dad!" Ellen grumbled.

Jim sat on the other side of his wife. "That's what I always wondered."

Leah shrugged. "I have no idea why I do it. On the other hand, I get migraines if I face a window on a sunny day. Some days I just have to take the risk that someone might sneak up behind me and stab me in the back."

"Random!" Ellen shook her head.

Leah studied her niece. "Says she who just bought Kachina coasters with the intent to make giant necklaces out of them."

Ellen blew her long bangs out of her eyes. "Made sense at the time."

"You have to admit it's odd, darling." Jim nudged Leah.

"Odd, yes. Not sure it's random. I was bullied all through school and have a basic distrust of others. It's not so much random as—"

"Paranoid."

"Thank you, dear brother. Where's your wife?"

"She'll be here soon. She works hard."

"Another one?" Jim scooped a glob of salsa into his mouth.

Brian raised his eyebrows.

"Workaholic," Jim said with his hand covering his mouth.

Brian nodded

Brian and Jim yammered about work work work.

Ellen ate plain chips, breaking little pieces off and popping them into her mouth. Leah tapped the table to get the teen's attention. Ellen looked up.

Leah pointed at the tiny flake of corn chip between Ellen's fingers.

"Random."

Ellen laughed, grabbed two chips and shoved them into her mouth.

"What?" Brian asked.

"Nothing. You had to be there," Leah said, putting a chip to her nose and inhaling.

"I am. I'm right here."

Leah patted her brother's arm.

"What? Don't do that!"

"I'm just teasing." Leah fixed her eyes on Brian's as Annie Mueller walked up behind him.

"It's nothing. I'm just harassing your child."

"How long have you guys been here?" Annie asked, her voice loud in Brian's left ear.

Brian jerked in his chair. "Jesus! You scared the crap out of me."

The rest of the group burst into laughter.

"And that is why I sit with my back to the wall." Leah waved the chip at Annie.

"Christ! Did you guys plan this?"

"Pure, beauteous synchronicity. Ellen, have you studied Jung?" Leah popped the chip in her mouth and crunched.

Ellen shook her head.

"You will. You should."

"So did you find anything on your shopping trip?" Annie asked in between enchilada bites.

"A few little things. Some nice spirit bear coasters. A tee shirt for me. I don't have enough good tees," Jim said and gulped soda.

"Doesn't sound like much."

"It was more about visiting with Brian and Ellen than shopping." Leah waved a bean-laden fork.

Jim laughed. "My wife pretty much hates shopping."

"Why?" Brian put up a hand to ward off flying bean bits.

"Sorry." Leah put her fork down. "Mom and Jackie and my bad back made shopping pretty hellish for me when I was a kid. I'd be in pain and they didn't believe me so they'd drag me all over the damn place and accuse me of being difficult when I complained."

"That's not the way I heard it from Jackie." Brian pushed onions off his burrito.

Leah pushed her plate away. "I'm sure I made it miserable for them, too. How fun can it be, dragging around a ten-year-old who says, 'my back hurts' every fifteen minutes? In my defense, after the first couple of expeditions, you'd think they'd have stopped making me go or, at least, shorten the suffering for all of us and limit it to a couple of hours."

Jim snarled. "Shopping trips were the least offensive things she did."

"Let's not go there, tonight." Leah mumbled.

"What's that?" Annie tilted her head. Her long, heavy brown hair fell off her shoulder and looked as if it might weigh her head down.

Leah picked up her glass of water and hid behind it. "Just Jackie stuff. You know, random." She winked at Ellen. "I'm thinking flan about now."

Sixteen

Leah

London, England

1973

Leah curled into her father's side on the long, gold sofa while he stared into the television, seeing but not absorbing the content. Rob's hand fiddled with her eight-year-old hands as if they were knobby pink lumps of clay. His graphite- and tobacco-stained nails clicked her little half-moons. He pressed his finger tips against hers and bent her fingers back and forth in distraction the way one might bend a soda straw. His free hand tapped a cigarette in an ash tray and let it hover near his lips. Between drags, he sipped a scotch and soda.

Leah, afraid to break the spell, stayed still and silent.

The Greek amphora lamp lit the room. Artwork on it echoed two brass platters Rob bought in Athens on one of his many trips away from the family. A hodge-podge similar knick knacks: clay elephants from India inlaid with tiny mirrors, Dutch figurines, German pottery, and displays of coins from dozens of nations, decorated the sixth-floor London flat.

Leah's mother kept all of these things free of dust and in their place.

With Rob at work all day or on travel for weeks at a time, Ruth kept sixteen-year-old Brian in calories and out of jail. His long hair alone, invited police attention.

She occupied Jackie with various obsessions: swimming lessons, art lessons, singing, horseback riding.

Where Ruth and Jackie went, searching for that One Thing in London that made Jackie happy, Leah went, as well. Ruth soothed Leah by saying, "Maybe later minute, honey," a great deal and buying her "The Beano" or "Cor!!" to pore over.

And at times, Leah's mother sat down with her and stared through the big thick windows into the St. John's Wood gray and looked terribly sad and Leah went off with her crafts or comic books or chores and felt guilty for wanting more.

Old friends from Libya came to visit. Ruth served couscous with lamb and dark, sweet tea. Rob greeted them with, "Kayfa hālak!" After those words came laughter and lengthy conversation.

Ruth put two black marbles in the couscous to give the guests a giggle and make Leah cringe at stories of sheep's eyes in their dinners, Scorpion fights, and ghiblis that half-buried their father's desert camp.

Their mother rolled her eyes, "Sand. I could never get the sand out of the house. Out of our clothes. It was everywhere. I don't miss it."

"Now you just have rain every day," someone said and laughed.

Ruth smiled the tight smile she wore when Leah danced in the English drizzle. Leah stared at her feet and tried to picture them in sand instead of a puddle and could not.

The conversation wore on and Leah floated off to bed while Brian retreated to his room and his drum kit.

Jackie walked ahead of Leah with another romance novel to bed. She drank one down every night. When the Muellers first moved to London and the girls shared a room in a smaller, temporary flat, they argued over the sleep-stealing glare of Jackie's bedside lamp many times. Leah gave in but tried to split the room in half, declaring her half, the half with the door to the hallway, off limits to her older sister. They tussled each time Jackie wanted to exit or enter the room.

Leah had her own room in the new, big flat and in the darkness she created her own stories. Dragons, witches, sun gods, and magical musical instruments populated her tales. She followed these beings into forests that stretched above the London skyline, into thickets so dense she could swim on top

of them as if on gelatin. She found her own true love in her stories and he wouldn't be "cynical but passionate" or "domineering but gentle" or any of the other nonsensical things that Jackie's paperback lovers were for her. He would just love her. Nor would he travel the world over without her or give her gifts in exchange for his heart.

"I can't sleep."

Leah felt a cool, thin hand tug her from sleep. "Mmph."

Jackie stood next to her in the city glow that bled through her cotton duck curtains. "Come sleep with me."

"Why?"

"Because I can't sleep with Daddy leaving again tomorrow."

"So you want me to come not sleep, too?"

Jackie let out a sigh that sounded like a threatening hiss.

"Please. If you're in there I might be able to sleep."

"Why would—"

"Please." She dragged the word out in a puppyish whine. "Come on. You're going to make me wake up Mom and Dad."

Leah grabbed the pink satin and down pillow her father brought her from Germany and trudged behind her sister. Sharing a bed with Jackie seemed an even worse idea than sharing a room but she couldn't figure out how to argue with Jackie so late at night.

In the dark, empty hall, with its high ceilings, gave Leah chills.

Jackie had a double bed. Brian had requested it but Jackie talked her way into it. The larger bed fit into her larger room, she'd pointed out. And Brian had back trouble and needed the firmer small bed, didn't he? So Brian, taller and heavier than Jackie, ended up with a single in a cramped study off of the

kitchen.

Leah crawled into the bed on the left side near the bedroom door.

"Get on the other side. I need to sleep on that side." Jackie commanded.

Leah rolled to the other side of the bed. Jackie lay down between her and the doorway.

Jackie's curtains were open. They always were. Their mother had complained about Jackie changing clothes "for all the world to see." Leah looked out into the night. The city glow washed out the stars. Leah scrunched her pillow under her head and lay on her left side to face the window wall.

Jackie fluffed her pillow. "Don't hog the covers!"

The energy crisis around the world meant that the apartment stayed cool much of the time. The warning increased Leah's anxiety and she squished down deeper into the bed.

Jackie rolled away to face the door and in minutes she breathed deep and slow.

Leah looked out the window and waited for sleep. Jackie rolled over toward her. Leah looked at her. In the low light she looked peaceful and sweet. Leah relaxed, closed her eyes, and drifted.

Leah startled when a foot hit her leg. She slid from under it. Jackie responded by rolling toward her. A long arm flopped on her back, a bony elbow against Leah's equally bony ribs. Jackie's draped her hand on Leah's chest. Leah stuffed down something ugly that she couldn't place and pushed Jackie's arm off. Jackie grunted and rolled again, this time pushing her body up against Leah and wrapping her arm around Leah's waist.

Leah couldn't breathe. She wriggled to try to get out of Jackie's grip. "Jackie," she croaked.

"Relax. Just go to sleep." Jackie held tight. "This way we stay warm." Jackie reached her hand down to Leah's hips and pressed them harder against her own. She shifted her crotch several times against Leah's backside. "See. Aren't you warmer?"

Nearing tears, Leah lay still until Jackie's body relaxed and her breathing grew steady. She pushed against Jackie's arm and squeezed out of her sister's embrace, and slid off the bed, putting a leg

down to soften the thud onto the floor.

Leah stood up. Jackie snored.

Leah retreated to her own room where she doubled an old doll pillow under her head. Awake, angry, and afraid that Jackie would come back to get her again, she lay breathing tight, little breaths for a long time before she finally fell asleep again.

The argument at the breakfast table came after Rob left for the airport the next morning. Leah hunched over her cereal when Jackie stormed in.

"You are so selfish," Jackie cried and smacked Leah on her head and shoulder with her open hand.

Ruth came from her bedroom, hair in a head band, mascara in hand. "What's going on in here?"

"All I asked was for her," Jackie jabbed her index finger about an inch from Leah's face, "to spend one night with me so I could sleep, and she couldn't even do that."

Leah, with a mouthful of Wheatabix, brought her hands to her head, spoon dripping milk, cheeks dripping tears.

Mama dropped her arms to her sides and turned away. "I'm sure you two can work this out later. Get ready for school."

Leah's head stung.

Jackie leaned in to her ear. "This is why you don't have any friends and you'll never have any friends. You're selfish and a know it all and thoughtless."

Ruth's voice prompted from the hallway, "Jackie! Finish getting ready for school."

Leah didn't see Jackie leave through her tears, only felt the anger trickle out of the kitchen as her sister left.

Brian shuffled in, half awake.

"Christ Almighty! What's the deal?"

Leah rushed to the kitchen sink and spat out the food in her mouth and emptied the mushy wheat and milk from the bowl, her shoulders shaking in sobs. She tried to run past Brian but her big brother grabbed her. "Baby? What's wrong?"

Giant tear drops burst from her eyes and she collapsed on him. His waist length black hair fell around her like a shawl. Her hippie brother. Her knight.

She pulled herself up.

"I'm okay." She squeezed out of his grasp and ran out of the kitchen and down the hall.

In her room, she thought through the night before, the breakfast attack, the feel of shredded wheat still clogging her throat, and the indignation building in her chest. She heard Jackie close her bedroom door and walk down the hall. She waited for the sound of the front door closing to entered her sister's room.

Jackie had placed the pink pillow under the sheets and bedspread of her well-made bed.

Leah dug it out like a precious stone. She brushed it off as if she could brush off the previous night and the morning's rage. Giving up, she ran from the room and put it back in its place on her own bed, then dashed out the door to school.

London taught Leah to love rain and solitude. She could wander the streets and no one seemed to notice a nine-year-old redhead in plimsolls. She made regular trips up and down the stairs of Eyre Court apartments, flight after flight of all six floors. She tested her bravery by jumping four or six steps at a time to the landings. She sat on the fire escape outside the apartment and dangled her feet while trying to see far below and imagine what it might feel like to drop down down down. She played statue on those iron steps, hoping to attract pigeons to her hands—all activities Jackie would not want to share.

Leah walked the apartment commons wall, a red brick wall with white concrete top that outlined

the grassy areas of the apartment grounds, that at two feet high and a foot wide allowed Leah to imagine being a Wallenda. She walked atop this wall and sang on a cool afternoon when Jackie appeared with her friends.

"You sound awful," Jackie said.

Her friends laughed.

"Do not!" Leah stuck her tongue out.

Jackie's friends laughed again and hovered for a moment but soon chattered and drifted away. Jackie watched them with narrow eyes. "You look stupid, too. You'd better get down or you'll get hurt," she said.

Leah made a two-fingered gesture she'd learned from watching the English boys in the neighborhood.

The pack burst into guffaws and whistles.

Jackie swung her Italian leather purse, bought on her birthday trip to Portobello Road. The purse flew past Leah.

Leah lips curled into a smirk. "Now who looks stupid?"

Jackie's friends backed up as she charged Leah, knocking her off the wall and onto her side on the ground. She wedged Leah under her and threw her full weight onto her chest.

Leah felt a sharp sting in her neck as her shoulders folded together. She screamed that little girl scream she couldn't do back in Waco a couple of years before and started blubbering. Someone pulled Jackie off of her. A boy. Boys always followed Jackie around after that.

"She started it. She flipped the bird at me." Jackie flushed bright red and shook.

The boy looked at Leah for a long moment. He frowned at her like she was a cheap broken toy not worth salvaging. He and Jackie walked off together and Leah lay alone in the grass, staring up into flat gray sky.

Leah tried to move her right arm but a needle stabbed her shoulder and neck. She struggled to her feet and went to the concrete basement stairs to get to the lift. She pushed the button hard but nothing happened. She tried to crane her neck to see. It appeared the man on the fifth floor had left the gate open again, taking the lift hostage for his personal use. With one arm held tight to her side, Leah began the climb, stopping every few flights to keep from being sick. The lift went past her as she reached the fourth floor, filled with voices in proper British mutter.

Leah told her mother she fell off the wall.

"Maybe you won't take that gymnastics class after all," Ruth said, and marched her youngest two blocks to the hospital, frowning the whole time.

"Broken collar bone," the doctor said after the x-rays.

"I'm sorry," Leah said, on the walk back home.

"I hope you'll be healed by the time your father gets back from his trip."

At home, Jackie came out of her room like a cat coming out of the shadows into the light, blinking and slow. She studied Ruth and Leah, her eyes wide.

"Did you eat anything at Rusty's?" Ruth asked her.

Jackie nodded.

"Good. I'm not up to cooking dinner tonight. You," she waved at Leah, "and your brother will have to have sandwiches or something."

Jackie's shoulders relaxed. She flipped her long hair over her shoulder, and turned back to her room.

"Jackie!"

She stopped and turned back, coiled.

"Did you finish your homework?" Ruth stared at the romance novel in Jackie's hand.

"Yes, ma'am."

Leah knew that sideways drift of her sister's eyes. Surely her mother knew it, too.

"Fine. Leah, let's get you a sandwich."

Leah glared at Jackie. Leah hadn't told the truth about the broken collar bone, and if she had it would only come back on her. Leah made Jackie hurt her, just like Jackie told the boy.

Leah spent the night trying to get comfortable with a fractured clavicle (a new word to add to her vocabulary) needling her and growing spite boiling in her gut.

Seventeen

Jackie

Houston, TX

1968

Jackie swirled the water in her mother's fish pond under the heavy post oak in the back yard of the house on Shady River Road. Little black floating pebbles exploded from under the safety of lily pads.

Jackie squealed.

Four-year-old Leah, squatting in a red checkered dress on the opposite side of the pond, looked at her sister, wide-eyed.

"Mama!" Jackie yelled.

"What's wrong?"

Jackie pointed at the water. "There are little black things in the pond."

Ruth bent down and stirred the pond and jumped back when the burst of dark nuggets raced across the pool to Leah's side.

Leah laughed and scooped up several.

"Oh! Tadpoles!" Ruth said.

"What are tadpoles?" Jackie asked.

"Baby frogs. Here, let me show you."

Jackie eyed Leah who pushed a tadpole around in the cup of her hand, then threw it back in the pond only to scoop up another.

"They'll grow legs and lose their tails and live out of the water."

"Why?"

"Because that's how God made them."

"God's weird."

"Jacqueline!"

"Well, he is. Why not just make them like frogs?"

Ruth sighed and dropped the creatures back in the pond.

"Do they bite?"

"Of course not. Leah and I are holding them. You two stay here. Keep an eye on your sister, Jackie. Brian and I have more to do before the storm gets here."

The previous day's heat had faded and loose bands of puffy clouds slid over the house and between the two lanky old pines in the front yard. The wind pushed at Jackie's hair as it hung in her face while she splashed. Fish and tadpoles swam away and took refuge under the rocky overhang at the back of the pond near the fence.

Jackie watched her mother and brother rush and run about the yard moving furniture and potted plants into the garage.

"This would be so much easier if your father were here," Ruth said as she and Brian carried a bench by the pond.

A lot of things happened without her father. Jackie wiped her hands on her shirt and stood up. She marched away from Leah and the pond and found her Shetland sheepdog, a gift from her father, on the back patio.

"It's okay, Peanut. Everything is going to be okay." She stroked the dog's fur and pressed her cheek to Peanut's head. Peanut tilted her head back and licked Jackie's chin.

"Ew! You have bad breath."

A cry came from across the yard.

"Oh, God! What now?" Ruth ran down the driveway.

Jackie sat still, petting Peanut, eyes shut.

"Jacqueline Rae!" Her mother's voice drew close and Jackie opened her eyes.

"What's wrong, Mama?" she blinked.

"I told you to watch your sister."

"I can see her from here."

"You cannot." Ruth held Leah's hand.

"Looks okay to me."

"Both of you, inside. Now. To your room and do not move from there until I say you can."

"But—"

"Go! Take your sister."

Jackie grabbed Leah's hand and walked toward the house.

"What did you do?"

Leah sniffled and pointed to a scraped knee.

As they reached the house, the wind lifted and threw pine needles and oak leaves across the drive. Jackie heard excitement in her brother's and mother's voices as they prepared for the storm.

Heavy mission woods, wrought iron, and few small windows gave the house a gloomy look most days. Tropical Storm Candy made dark as night as the wind slung rain, leaves, and small branches across the back yard. Jackie's little sister huddled in her mother's arms.

Jackie stood by herself, staring out the window, chin out, head up, hands behind her back.

Jackie looked around the room. She gasped. "Peanut! Where's Peanut?"

"Oh, Dear Lord!" Ruth said. Lifting tearful Leah onto her hip, Ruth wandered the house, calling for the dog.

"She's got to be outside still," Ruth said after they came up empty.

"She'll die."

"Now, honey. She'll find shelter. She's a smart girl."

"Why didn't she come to the door?" Brian asked.

Ruth glared at her Brian.

"I'm just asking," Brian said and hung his head.

"I'm going out there." Jackie turned for the door.

"You are not. No one's going out. When the storm's passed, we'll find her."

"Poor Peanut," Leah said.

"If anything happens to her, it's your fault."

"Jackie!"

"It is! If she wasn't such a klutz, I could have stayed outside with Peanut instead of having to come in with her."

"It's no one's fault. We were rushing to get things done. Let's calm down."

"No. She's my dog. You just don't care because Daddy gave her to me." Jackie ran to the back door and flung it open. Rain and leaves flew in her face. The chill of it shocked the air out of her and she stood frozen in the doorway.

Brian rushed to the door and pushed her aside to close it.

Jackie fled to her room and collapsed on her bed in tears.

Candy limped out of town, no longer carrying her tropical label, on through East Texas into Oklahoma and Arkansas and later into the Midwest. She left behind, in rain-soaked Houston, downed limbs and heart-broken Jackie Mueller. The mission gates on Shady River Road held firmly but Peanut had wandered outside them earlier in the clean-up. Jackie never saw her again.

Four days later, Rob Mueller returned from Japan with a pair of mechanical birds for his

daughters. As he pulled them out of his bag, Jackie snatched at one.

"The blue one is mine!"

"Just wait a minute, Jacqueline." Ruth placed a hand on Jackie's shoulder.

"I'm the oldest. I decide."

Leah wide-eyed, hands behind her back, shoulders swinging, said, "I don't care."

Jackie sucked her teeth.

"Here you go." Rob handed Jackie the blue bird and Leah the red.

Jackie tucked the bird under her arm like a football and left.

Leah trotted behind her. "Daddy said they sing, Jack."

"Did you think they would bark?" Jackie snarled and shut their bedroom door in Leah's face.

Eighteen

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Jackie slid into the driver's seat of her SUV and let the coming evening balloon in her mind's eye.

Leah and Brian were close. God only knew what bullshit Brian would tell Leah when she and Jim went to visit. All negative about Jackie, certainly.

She stared at her hands resting on the steering wheel and admired the youthful skin and graceful lines, ignoring the two foreshortened fingers. She dug in her purse for a compact. She flipped down the rear view mirror, blinked away the few crow's feet and stray gray hairs, and rubbed some pressed foundation on her chin and nose. She swiped lip balm on her lips, imagining it smoothed the smoker's pucker lines there.

She turned the engine over and drove out of the hospital parking lot but rather than turn north out of town to pick up Ethan from school, she turned south.

At the Rocking Horse bar, Jackie ordered a pinot grigio and pulled her smokes out of her bag.

This time of year she'd rather have gone off by herself to Socorro or even El Paso for shopping, but time ran short these days. She lit her cigarette in the low light and enjoyed the rush and heat of the drag followed by the slight burn of the wine.

"Hello." The liquid voice, dark and deep, came from a Hispanic man in a cheap suit, average height, clean-shaven, a little soft in the face, like he ate well, and a good ten years younger than Jackie.

She smiled. "Hello back."

"Enrique." He held his hand out. "Henry, if you like." A blocky ring of silver and turquoise glinted on his right hand.

"Enrique's nice."

"I like to think so," he chuckled and bumped his shoulder against hers as he sat on the stool next to her. "You local?"

Jackie frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Local. From around here."

"Criminy! I thought you said—sorry. No. Albuquerque."

"What brings you to the Crosses."

"Family."

"Good. Good." Enrique lit a cigarette and blew the smoke away from her.

"I guess." Jackie tilted her head to one side.

"You guess?"

"I'm kind of the black sheep." She looked in the bar mirror to study his reaction and saw only relaxed jowls and round eyes. "It doesn't matter. I'm not crazy about them either."

She saw him glance at her ring-free left hand though she guessed it didn't matter much to him either way.

He leaned in close. "So what are you doing this evening, chiquita?"

Jackie laughed. "God, it is dark in here isn't it?"

"You're an attractive woman. I can see that in any light."

"That's sweet." She patted his arm, felt it soft under his jacket sleeve.

He snatched at her hand as she drew it away. "Why don't we get out of here?"

Jackie let him hold her fingers for a two-count, then wiggled them free. "I can't. But I'm flattered. Really."

"So, what's your name?" Enrique tapped the bar next to her arm.

"Rae," Jackie said with a swallow of wine.

"Rae? Like sunshine or ray gun?"

Jackie snickered. "More the gun than the sun, I'm told."

"Aw, you seem pretty sweet to me." Enrique leaned against her.

Jackie felt the heat in her gut sink into her groin. The sudden flush of excitement shocked her and set off tremors in her legs and arms.

"You cold?" Enrique downed his shot and put his arm around her shoulders. "So skinny. I bet you're nice and tight."

Jackie jerked. "Whoa! You've had way too much. I have to go. My family's expecting me." She pushed him off. Why hadn't the school called to tell her Ethan was waiting for her?

"Damn, girl." Enrique leaned away and hunched over a beer chaser.

Jackie stood from her stool, swigged more wine and pulled her phone from her back pocket.

"Shit! See!" She flashed the screen at the man. "Three missed calls. I forgot I turned the fucking thing off again."

Enrique glared at her and snarled, "Prick tease."

Jackie swung her purse onto her shoulder. "I just wanted a goddamn glass of wine."

"Whatever, puta."

Jackie ducked out of the bar into the still-bright evening. She tapped the screen with trembling hands.

"I'm on my way. Sorry I missed your message. Hope you get this and haven't left work. My—I ran out of gas and when I went to get help I forgot my phone in the car. It's all good now. I'll get Ethan. I'll call the school. I'm so sorry."

Will pushed his thinning hair back and leaned against the kitchen sink. "How the hell did you run out of gas?"

"It's all this driving back and forth to the hospital and all the stress and seeing Leah upset me. I wasn't paying attention." Jackie leaned against the kitchen island opposite her husband, toweling off her hair from a rushed shower.

"Where did you break down?"

Jackie had thought this through on the way to pick up her grandson. It hadn't been easy with wine and ego wrangling for control of her head.

"Just a few blocks from the hospital. It wasn't so far so I didn't call for help. I just walked the mile or so to the Shell station and got enough to get me home."

"Well, never hurts to have another gas can."

Jackie blinked. "No. No, they were real nice and let me borrow one and once I used it I took it right back to them. I promised I would. They took me at my word."

"That's nice." Will shook his head. "Pays to be female, I guess."

"Yeah." Jackie smiled.

"So you have a full tank, now? I don't have to worry?"

"Not exactly. I was so upset about Ethan I just dropped off the can and bugged out. I'll fill up tomorrow. I promise. I'll even go to that same station. I owe them." Jackie winked.

"I guess you do. I'm glad you're okay but please call next time. We have Triple A for a reason."

"It was nothing." Seeing him frown, Jackie added, "but yes, I will."

Will reached out and pulled her into his embrace. "Be more careful, please."

"Mm hmm."

He squeezed her in his arms. "I love you."

"You, too." Jackie's breath came shallow.

Will stroked her wet hair and cradled her head.

Jackie yawned. "I am so tired. Kind of a rough day and that was a tiring walk. I think I'm going

to hit the hay."

Will's arms dropped. "I understand. I'll be in later after I get Ethan to bed."

Jackie smiled and shuffled out of the kitchen. She passed Ethan in the dining room.

"Night munchkin."

"Good night, Gramma."

Climbing the spiral staircase to the loft bed lifted her spirits. The Rocking Horse and Enrique vaporized like a dream. Tomorrow she would do just as she'd said, patronize the Shell station that had come to her rescue without knowing it. She was Gramma again. Loved, trusted, protected.

She sat on the edge of her bed and opened her nightstand drawer. She plucked a small pill bottle from within and tapped a blue oval into her hand which she washed down with cold coffee. She lay back onto her down pillow, stuffed plugs into her ears and listened as Ethan's little voice and the grumble of the swamp cooler flowed into the blood murmur in her head.

Nineteen

Jackie

Spring, TX

1976

Jackie raced down the curve of stairs, long, strawberry blond mane flying. She passed past Ruth in the foyer, who stood with her hands on her hips, her eyes wide.

In the kitchen, Jackie snatched the phone off the counter top. "Hello? Yes. Yes. We'll be there." She thanked the caller and put the receiver down, letting it rock into its cradle.

"Saturday at ten a.m. He wants three hundred for her."

"His ad said two fifty."

"But, Mom!"

"We'll go look at her and see. Don't get your hopes up. But I'm holding him to the two fifty."

Jackie squealed, ran by Ruth, ran back and hugged her, bounded up to her room where she put on her Seals and Crofts album and sang until her throat hurt.

She ran her hands over the English saddle her parents gave her for Christmas.

Alton Blacksher, everyone called him Bubba, had a horse to sell. Jackie didn't really see Bubba though he stood between her and the horse he called Brownie.

Brownie stood only thirteen and a half hands, a dark bay mare with strongly contrasting black mane and tail.

Blacksher patted the mare's shoulder with a deeply tanned hand. "She's five, as I said. Healthy as you can see. Good temperament. You going to be her only rider?"

Jackie threw a quick glare at Leah. "Yes. Just me."

Bubba smiled. "She'll be good for you, blue eyes. But she'll be fine for the young one too, if things change."

Jackie edged up to Brownie, forcing the man to step aside. She picked up a hoof, found it clean and trim, opened the animal's mouth and checked her teeth, and pulled the horse's head down and looked in her ears.

"She's part Morgan, part Shetland. That's why she's a bit small. But she's plenty sturdy."

Jackie looked at Ruth for approval. Her mother nodded.

Bubba saw the signals.

"I'm wanting three fifty for her."

Ruth unfolded the newspaper with the advertisement highlighted and held it out to the man.

"Getting forgetful in my old age, aren't I? Probably thinking of another horse I have for sale."

Ruth smiled her tight little smile and nodded.

Jackie faced Brownie's neck and rolled her eyes so Ruth couldn't see her disgust with both adults.

"Where's your trailer?" Bubba asked.

"We don't have one. We were hoping you could take her out to the stable for us."

"Sorry. Can't do that. Don't have mine today. My boy's got it down south. How far away'd you say you live?"

Jackie turned and took a breath.

Ruth cut her off. "About seven miles."

"Oh, she can do that on her own legs easy," Bubba said. "Don't suppose you brought your bridle."

"We weren't sure we were going to get her. I should have known better. May we come back and pick her up next weekend?"

"Mom!" Jackie clenched the pony's head halter as her face grew hot.

"Jackie, please."

"In a week, I might be able to get a better price for Miss B."

Jackie swallowed a lump. "Momma, we have to take her today."

"You'll just have to walk her home. You can bring that halter and lead back to me later. She'll be fine."

"That's an awfully long walk, Jackie."

"I can do it."

Ruth shook her head and sighed. She dug her checkbook from the navy blue purse hanging in the crook of her elbow.

Jackie stroked Brownie's cheek and neck and whispered to her. She glanced up at Bubba, who watched her without blinking.

Ruth handed over the check and guided Leah ahead of her. "Go get in the car. Thank you, Mr. Blacksher. We'll get the rope and halter back to you as soon as we can."

"Thank you, ma'am." He nodded at Jackie who smiled back. He disappeared into his barn and returned with a small brown sack. "Some grain in case she gets belligerent on the walk. She might if she gets tired of the traffic."

Jackie mumbled thanks and wadded the bag under her arm, wrapped the lead around her hand, and walked the pony away from the stalls toward the road.

"We'll follow you to make sure you're safe," Ruth said.

"I'll be fine. It's only seven miles." Jackie snorted.

"We'll be right behind you."

Jackie ignored the Buick station wagon rumbling on the shoulder behind her, its hazard lights scattering yellow flashes on the blacktop and grass on the overcast day.

She tried to guess how fast she walked and calculate how long it would take her to get Clover (not Brownie anymore) to Cutler's stable. She came up with too many guesses, few of which seemed right. Might it really take seven hours? She clicked her tongue and tugged on the halter and horse and girl trotted through the knee-high weeds on the side of the road.

Jackie alternated between walking and trotting. When walking, she took in the familiar flat pasture land and isolated lots of pine, oak, and dogwood until trees and land blended together into a bland swath of green.

The gray sky kept Jackie from overheating but the heavy air soaked her long pony tail, her clinging jodphurs, and the cotton shirt that accented her narrow waist.

"Jackie!" Leah yelled from the passenger side of the car.

Jackie kept walking, staring at her boots sliding through the weeds, kicking up leafhoppers and gnats.

Ruth called out, "Jackie, stop!"

Jackie threw up her hands, brought the horse to a halt and turned to glare at her mother who pulled the car off on the shoulder fully out of traffic.

Ruth walked up to her Jackie, looking sideways at the horse. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine. Why did you stop me?"

Ruth pushed a Tab into her hands. "Because you've been walking for a long time and you need to take a break."

"Are you going to walk for me?" Jackie took a long gulp of the soda.

Ruth looked down the road and took a deep breath.

Jackie studied the halter. "I'm going to tie the lead on the halter like reins. See if I can control her like that and ride for a while."

She didn't see but heard her mother suck her teeth.

"It's okay, Mom. I've done it with Chris's horses before. How much further?"

"Farther," Leah barked from the passenger window.

"Shut up," Jackie snarled. "Well?"

"About four miles." Ruth touched Jackie's shoulder. "It's looking like it's going to rain so if you're going to do that thing with the lead, do it now."

Jackie shoved the drink back at her mother and knotted the lead into the halter. She led Clover to the back of the car, climbed on the bumper, and threw her right leg over the horse's back.

Clover shied, but Jackie held her seat.

"Okay!" Jackie barked and set off down the road.

Jackie relaxed in the long straight-away. When she urged the horse into a trot or pulled back on the makeshift reins to a walk, Clover obeyed. Jackie felt safe. Cars whizzed by, but Clover remained steady.

Jackie relaxed into the motion of the horse as if she'd been riding trails all her life. Jackie stared down drivers who seemed annoyed at the distraction of a girl and her horse. Men in pick-up trucks grinned and waved, but she tilted her chin up and looked straight ahead, jaw set. One young man rolled down his window, whooped, and yelled, "Bare back! Yeah!"

Jackie turned to look into the trees lining the road and hid a blush. She clucked her tongue and pushed Clover back into a trot.

She didn't know how long she'd been riding when the sky cried in torrents. Jackie slid on Clover's back and clutched at the horse's mane.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Jackie jerked on the lead and the little horse came to a quick halt, sending Jackie over her right shoulder.

"Shit!" She looked around. The station wagon pulled up behind her.

"Come get in the car," Ruth yelled.

"No! We'll never get home."

"Jackie!"

"I'm fine!" Jackie screamed. Clover pulled hard down the embankment away from the road and took Jackie off her feet again. She picked herself up, brushed wet hair out of her eyes and gathered in Clover. Stroking the horse's cheek to calm her, she led her back to level ground.

Jackie saw Leah staring from the passenger side while Ruth concentrated on the traffic.

Jackie flipped the bird at Leah.

Leah smiled.

Rain still fell, though it had slacked off. Jackie knew she couldn't stay on a wet bare-backed horse in the rain so she alternated walking and jogging beside Clover again.

Then they were there. She'd made the trip in five hours despite the rain. Jackie stood in the stall, rubbing down Clover with a blanket, ignoring the chill in her bones, the burning in her legs and feet, and the building headache. Ruth and Leah had driven the additional mile home. The rain had long turned to mist. The pony munched hay. Jackie had her own horse. She was a smallish horse because her parents didn't want her having too big a horse if Leah got to ride. Who said Leah was going to ride anyway?

Jackie spent the rest of the day at the stable. She found things to do: stalls to muck out, grooming to do, hay to distribute. When she got home after dark, Ruth had that look on her face that Jackie hated, the one with her lips pursed and brow furrowed. But the words that came out of mother's mouth pretended to be concerned, not pissed.

"I've been worried about you. Have you had anything to eat?"

"I'm not hungry. I've got a headache. I'm going to shower and go to bed."

"You have a headache because you haven't eaten."

Jackie stopped in the foyer and looked up at the dusty chandelier above the marble flooring. "I have a headache because you won't leave me alone."

She went upstairs. She noted Leah's closed door. Brian, practiced on his snare drum in his room. Jackie slipped into the bathroom and shut the door. She peeled off wet jeans and tee shirt and stepped into the shower to wash off Cutler's muck, Clover's sweat, and Ruth's clinging oppression.

Jackie led Clover into the paddock after a hot ride. The little horse had white streaks of sweat on her shoulders and flanks. Jackie tied her loosely to the paddock fence and removed her saddle and pad and threw them onto the upper fence rail.

As she pulled out a water hose to rinse Clover off, she heard a man's voice behind her.

"Hey there, young lady."

Jackie jerked around.

"Hello." She took a beat to remember the man's name. "How are you, Mr. Blacksher?"

"Good. Your mama said I'd find you here."

Jackie turned the hose on Clover's feet and began to work her way up to rinse the pony.

Bubba stood at Clover's head. "How's she working out for you? Behaving?"

"She's good. A little barn sour but nothing I can't handle."

"Really? Never noticed that in her. Maybe she figures she can get away with that with you."

Jackie shrugged and ran the water over Clover's haunches, chasing sweat away and down her legs.

"Got a proposition for you," Bubba said.

Jackie didn't respond but came back to Clover's head, nearly splashing the man and forcing him out of the way as she crossed under the horse and washed her right side.

"So," Bubba continued, "I have a filly that might be good for barrels and I'd like to see her race,

but my woman, Viv, ain't got time for her right now. Think you'd be up for training her?"

Jackie let the hose hang at her side and looked over Clover's back. "I don't know much about barrels. Beside, I wouldn't want her to figure she can get away with something."

Bubba pointed his hand at himself like a gun and pulled the trigger with a click of his tongue. "Got me, smarty pants." He leaned on Clover's wet hide and played with a lock of mane near her withers. "Bird's not a big girl. Bigger than Clover, though. Why don't you come see her and try her out. You two can learn together. Gotta start somewhere. Can't pay you, but it don't cost you nothing neither. Stable fee, I guess. Get me a trained filly. You get experience and a free horse. On loan, that is."

Jackie finished rinsing Clover and turned off the water. She picked up the scraper and whisked off excess water.

"I'll think about it." Yes!

"Okay. You know where to reach me." Bubba winked at her and turned away. "Think I'll take a look around some more. See where we might set up some barrels."

The light sorrel mare, Bird, dark red mane and tail grown long and unkempt, arrived at the stables late on a Sunday morning. Jackie led her toward her stall but Bird leaned back against the tug of the halter.

Bubba looked. "Just stay with her. Show her who's boss."

Jackie clucked her tongue and pulled harder and still Bird planted her hooves in the dusty ground with no sign of budging.

Bubba let out a shrill whistle and yelled, "Get on!" The horse jumped forward and pushed Jackie ahead of her and the two moved toward the stalls.

Jackie caught her breath and got a tighter grip on Bird's halter. "Come on. You're making me look bad."

The horse tossed her head, but followed Jackie into the stall and settled in. Jackie stroked Bird's cheek, unclipped the lead, and stepped out.

"That her?" Leah popped up out of nowhere.

Jackie started but recovered. "It's her."

"You don't seem too happy."

"I'm great. She's a great horse," Jackie dropped an armload of hay into the trough, not meeting her little sister's gaze.

Jackie and Bird trotted the clover-leaf around the barrels in the Cutler stables arena several times, then steered off to do figure eights and circles.

"Looking good, girl."

Jackie looked up from concentrating on Bird's neck and head.

Bubba leaned on the paddock fence, a cigarette stuck between his lips, his beef-jerky arms dangling from the top rail, and one foot on the bottom rail. "You'll have her in good shape to show in February."

Jackie waved and turned her attention back to the horse and barrels. She pushed Bird into a lope around the course. Right turn, left turn, left turn, out. Stop. Rest. Again.

"Come on up," Bubba called and waved her over.

Jackie sighed and trotted Bird over to the fence.

"Hey, girl," Bubba said and stroked the horse's cheek and nose. "Looking real good. Match made in heaven, I think. You?"

Jackie shrugged. "She's a good horse. Strong."

"Strong willed."

"I guess."

"That's why I thought you'd be perfect together. Seemed to me you two were one and the same."

He moved down the fence and looked at Bird's flank.

"She's got a good sweat going. Maybe time to quit? Cool her down and you and me go talk in the barn."

Jackie sat back in the saddle. "About what?"

"About how long you get to keep her."

"I thought until the livestock show at least."

"That's the idea, sweetheart. But let's talk, okay?"

Jackie slumped. "Okay." She rode Bird to the arena gate where Bubba let her through to the paddock. There she slid onto the muddy ground and tied up to a post to wash the horse down for the evening.

Bubba came up behind her as she worked the cinch. He wrapped his left arm around her narrow waist. "Let me help you with that."

He pressed his right hand to her belly and guided her away from the horse. He smiled his tobacco-brown grin and turned back to the horse. "Let's get this off you, Red Bird." He uncinched the saddle and hefted it off and onto the fence rail. "She's all yours."

"Thank you," Jackie muttered.

Jackie worked the hose up Bird's legs a couple of inches at a time, keeping an eye on the filly and tuning out Bubba's rambling about rodeo days gone by. She felt his eyes slithering over her, worming into her. Her stomach knotted as she worked. She finished washing and scraping the horse and put her up in her stall. She rounded the corner to the tack room and Bubba stepped in front of her.

"Let's go talk."

"We can talk here."

Bubba scanned the stalls and tilted his head to listen.

"I suppose we can." He took Jackie's arm and led her deeper into the tack room.

"Bird's young. So are you. I think you're doing a fine job getting her ready. But," he released her arm and snaked his hand around her middle, "you know you don't get something for nothing these days. Take my Viv, she gets to stay at my house rent-free because we have an understanding. Now, you and me, we can have a similar understanding."

Jackie's heart felt like a mouse running in a wheel. "But that wasn't our deal."

"That's the deal now. How bad you want to ride that filly in the show?"

Jackie's hand fell on a pommel. She gripped it, knuckles going white, fingers aching.

"I got some other gals interested in racing her. I can just come pick her up this weekend. What you say?" He leaned in close to her ear. "How hard are you going to make this?" He pressed his groin against hers.

"I want to keep Bird."

"Of course you do, honey. Let's go for a ride in my truck, now."

"Now? I promised my mom I'd be home by six."

"Girl, it's barely five. I'll get you home in time. Don't you worry."

Jackie released the saddle and threw up her hands. "But I have to feed Clover and..." And what?

"I'll help you with that. Won't take but a second."

Jackie squeezed out of Bubba's grasp.

"I have things to do."

"Yes, you do. Let's get to work." The cowboy rubbed his hands together and grabbed a block of hay. "I'll get this to Brownie."

"Clover!"

"Yeah."

Jackie picked up a bucket, measured oats and sweet feed and swirled it around. She stared into

the mixture, wishing she could dive into it and disappear.

She heard Bubba whistling and talking to Clover down the stall row. She put the lid back on the feed can, leaning hard on it until a hurricane couldn't knock it open, and trudged down to feed the horse.

Her boots lifted straw and dust from the ground with each step. She hefted the bucket and dumped the mix into Clover's feeder.

The horse thrust her head in and shoveled up grain with her lips while Jackie played with her forelock.

"She's a good little gal."

Jackie nodded.

"What else you got?"

Jackie twisted and knotted the thick black lock again and again "Bird needs dinner, too."

"Alrighty."

"And I should check the other horses."

"Fine."

Jackie fed Bird and, carrying the empty the bucket, walked down the hall and looked in at each horse or pony. After several minutes she ran out of horses and looked down the hall to see Bubba, hands at his waist, standing at the tack room door.

"Let's get a move on, Jackie Blue."

She swung the bucket in big, lazy arcs and sauntered back, humming.

"I'll just put this up," she said and veered around him into the feed room. She picked up a rag and dusted out the bucket, still humming, stacked it with other buckets, then straightened them all next to the oat can.

"I bet all the boys call you a prick tease." Bubba growled.

Jackie jumped and whirled around at the same time.

He stood at the feed room door, arms crossed on his chest, feet splayed to block the door. "You want that filly or not?"

Jackie kicked the buckets over and stomped up to Bubba, face to face with him.

"Well?" he glared at her.

"At least let me think about it?" Jackie whirled away and back to the buckets.

"Go right ahead. I'll be back with a trailer next Sunday if I don't hear from you."

Jackie walked into Cutler's at five o'clock Monday morning before school. Someone banged around in the feed room, but Jackie, in sneakers, went by unnoticed. She slipped into Bird's stall and in the sticky morning warmth she leaned into the filly's shoulder and scratched her withers.

Bird turned her head, nibbled Jackie's hair, stomped and blew a hot breath through her nostrils.

Jackie clutched a hank of mane, tugged the horse's head down, and wrapped her arms around Bird's strong neck.

Bubba parked under towering pines down a dead-end country road. Miles of the Texas Piney Woods lay in front of them. Cicadas clung to the trees and screamed.

He wasn't ugly. He didn't smell any worse than half the boys she knew in high school. Horse sweat and hay. He had that cowboy attitude she liked and would have looked for in someone her age but sun and cigarettes creased his face and yellowed his teeth. His wiry body pressed against her in the pick-up cab and his hard knees demanded she spread her legs.

She kept her legs tight.

Bubba leaned back. "How about you drink some more of that beer."

"God, it's awful!"

"Ain't you never had beer before?"

"I haven't had that beer. That's gross."

"It's cheap, but it'll put you in the mood. Smoke?"

Jackie nodded and accepted a cigarette. She took another swig of beer and shuddered. She closed her eyes and ran the barrels: right turn, left turn, left turn, out, stop, again.

"Oh, hey, listen to this." Bubba turned up the radio.

Jackie laughed, the beer fizzing in her head. "What is that?"

"That's Hank. Show some respect."

"Sorry, Hank."

"Can't expect you kids to understand good music. You like that disco crap, I bet."

Jackie looked straight ahead into the darkness of the woods and listened to the singer's lament.

"It's okay. I like any music except that E-L-P shit my sister listens to."

Jackie felt Bubba's strong hand move up her back.

"Come on, blue eyes." He wrapped his hand around her neck and guided her head toward his as he leaned in.

Letting him kiss her went easier than she expected. But her heart, God, her heart. The mouse scabbled to escape her chest.

Bubba's tongue surprised her with little pecks and tight French kisses, not slobbery and wild like a teenage boy. But his hands slid everywhere at once, under her shirt to her small breasts, down the back of her jeans to her crack, up front to her zipper and pushing at her fly.

Bubba sat back again, red faced.

"For God's sake, girl, would you help me here?"

"What?" She belched and the scenery swayed.

Bubba looked at his watch. "Just get those off." He nodded at her pants.

Jackie wriggled out of her jeans while Bubba pushed his down to his knees. She stifled a giggle.

Wiry man. Wiry dick.

She stretched out on the bench seat, spread her legs, and leaned her head on the open truck window. She looked up through the summer evening haze as Bubba pushed into her and began thrusting.

The trees swayed and waved to her. She stuck her arms out the window and waved back.

Bubba latched onto a nipple and sucked hard.

"Ow!" Jackie jerked her arm back in and pushed his head away.

He grunted and pulled out.

She leaned back again, back to the cheerful, waving trees. "Hi, trees." She felt a light slap on her thigh.

"I said, come on, girl. It's time to go."

She pulled her jeans up, and combed her sweaty hair with her fingers while the cowboy buckled his belt.

"Guess you've done this before." Bubba cranked the truck engine.

Jackie watched the trees wave goodbye and swallowed bile. "No."

"You ain't no virgin."

"Who is?"

Jackie led Bird toward the Arena, her boots scuffing next to Bird's neatly shod hooves. A cool breeze slipped in and cleansed her lungs with each easy breath. Bird tossed her head against the bit.

"Calm down." Jackie pulled Bird's head down.

"You riding barrels again?"

Jackie ducked under Bird's neck.

Chris Cutler saddled his black gelding, Six-Pack.

"That's the plan."

"You think that's a good idea?"

Jackie stopped and pushed Bird back a step. "Why not?"

"We've had a lot of rain. Pretty muddy out there." Chris looked at her through long brown bangs.

"That was two days ago. Looks fine to me."

Cutler shrugged.

Jackie walked around Bird, trailing her hand over her rump. Bird stamped her rear leg.

"Looks het up, today." The young man led Six-Pack up to the fence between the two horses.

"She's fine." Jackie cinched the saddle tight. "Let it out, bitch." She kneed the horse's ribs lightly.

Bird let out a gust of air and Jackie took another notch on the cinch. She stepped into the stirrup and landed softly into the saddle. "Instead of lecturing, how about getting the gate for me?"

Chris, reins in hand, grinned at Jackie. "I wasn't going that way, but sure." He tied off the gelding and climbed between the rails to walk beside Jackie and the filly to the arena gate.

As the gate closed behind her, Bird swung her hindquarters.

"She's going to be a fun ride, today."

"Stop. You're stressing me," Jackie snapped.

"Sorry. Say, you want to go out sometime?"

Jackie trotted Bird away, off-center in the saddle, hands shaking. She pulled up, turned the horse and trotted back to Chris. "Yes."

"I'll call you." Cutler winked and walked away.

Jackie trotted Bird halfway around the arena and urged her into a lope. The filly's hooves sunk into spongy ground. Jackie brought her back to center to face the barrels. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Bird champed and shook her head. A horse whinnied somewhere in the back pasture and the filly stretched her neck and answered.

Jackie pulled Bird's head in and turned in her in a tight circle. "Pay attention to me, not your boyfriend."

She straightened the beast and Bird swung her rear left, throwing Jackie off balance.

"Damn it, horse!" Jackie reined her left, forcing Bird's rear to the right, and forced her to trot.

They took the barrels in loose turns to warm up. The filly continued to chew the bit but responded to the reins and Jackie's leaning. With each pass, Bird's hooves dug large, wet divots in the sparse grass around the barrels. After a few easy jogs, Jackie took the barrels faster, pushed Bird into a lope, and turned tighter at the barrels.

Bird fought the turns, pushing away from the barrels in wider arcs each time, despite Jackie leaning back harder in the saddle and pulling tighter on the reins.

Jackie took her off into a walk around the arena. "What the hell is wrong with you? Cooperate." She wiped sweat from her neck and forehead, and patted Bird's neck. Horse sweat splattered Jackie's arm and leg. They trotted around again and went back to center.

"Okay, bitch, let's try this again." Jackie nudged Bird into a lope.

On the first run, they moved together. Jackie leaned right, Bird leaned, they circled the barrel, crossed, leaned left, circled clean, turned, leaned left, circled clean, and out.

"That's what I wanted." Jackie whooped and smacked Bird on the neck. "Good girl. Let's do that again."

She wheeled Bird around and tapped her heels against the filly's ribs. The horse didn't move. Jackie clicked her tongue and tapped again. "Come on."

Bird threw her head up. Jackie felt the sting of the horse's coarse mane against her face, then the blow to her nose as Bird's neck made contact.

"Shit! Bitch! I said, go." She kicked the horse hard with her heels and aimed her for the first barrel.

Bird sprang forward. As they neared the barrel, Jackie leaned and pulled, and Bird fought the turn. They came out wide and loped to the next barrel. Jackie leaned and again Bird shied, swinging far wide. Jackie spun the horse around.

"You are going to do what I say."

She kicked Bird into a canter and attacked the last barrel, leaned left, and pulled the filly's head hard.

Bird turned tight.

Jackie whooped.

Bird continued her turn, slamming Jackie into the barrel, and came to an abrupt stop.

Jackie screamed and fell forward onto Bird's neck, tears flowing. She struggled to free her left leg from between the half-ton horse and the steel drum.

Bird swiveled her head and looked at Jackie out of her left eye. She snorted and stepped away from the barrel.

Jackie looked down at her torn pants leg.

"What happened?" Cathy Cutler ran to her side from the barn.

"This unholy bitch tried to scrape me off. I think my leg's broken. Oh, Christ, it hurts. Can you get your brother?"

"He's right here."

Chris and Cathy eased Jackie out of the saddle. Bird wandered off and nibbled winter grass.

"The barrel should have gone over," the young woman said after Jackie explained what happened.

"It didn't budge."

Chris got up and tried to wobble the barrel. It held firm. He threw his weight into it and heard a slosh. "Rain water."

Jackie pulled her jeans' leg up.

"I've seen worse on horses," Cathy said, "but you've got to get to a hospital and make sure it isn't broken. Could just be a nasty bruise. I'll call your folks."

Jackie grabbed her arm. "If I can walk, it's not broken, right?"

"Even if it's not broken, a bruise like that needs to get checked out. Besides, it's got to hurt like hell. Much as I'd like to give you tranqs, I think the doctors have better things for that."

Chris watched with hands in pockets. "Sissy'll call your folks. I'll take you to the hospital and they can meet us there. How about that? At least delay the lecture."

Jackie smiled at him through her tears.

Cathy laughed. "He would know."

"Who's going to deal with Bird?"

"I'll take care of her after I call. She's fine cooling down for a few minutes."

Chris folded his long legs into his brown Honda. "Sorry about the barrel."

"It's that damn filly's fault. She's always been a pain in the ass." Jackie clenched her teeth against the throbbing of her leg.

"Why are you riding her, then?"

"I wanted to barrel race."

"Still want to?"

Jackie bent her head to the dashboard and growled. "Still want to go out with me?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"My parents are going to freak out."

"Can't be the first time they've had an injured kid."

"Not that." Jackie sat up. "You're twenty-one, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm not." She watched his face.

"Oh. A lot not?" Chris tapped the steering wheel.

"Sixteen." The pain in her leg blossomed into wet heat in the warm car. "Changing your mind?"

"So what about you and that Bubba guy?"

"That's a business relationship."

"You spend a lot of time with him."

Jackie looked out the window and watched the fields slip by. "He's an old lech. I guess he likes to hang around young women. It's nothing."

"So if I go out with you, am I an old lech?"

Jackie sighed.

"I'm joking, Jackie. No. I haven't changed my mind, but maybe we shouldn't tell your folks just yet. Still want to ride barrels?"

"I'm done. How much further?"

"About five miles."

Jackie looked down at her leg. Magenta and purple hues flowed in a bloated butterfly pattern over her shin. She fell back against the seat and groaned.

"She didn't want to turn on the wet ground," Chris said.

"Yeah. I got that."

Twenty

Ruth

Waco, TX

1949

Ruth, seventeen, sat next to her father in the First Baptist Church sanctuary, her pale blue shirt dress covering her knees and calves. She fanned herself with her bare hand as the pews creaked with the crowd of parishioners.

Ruth's petite grandmother sat at the center of the pew, a noticeable space between herself and her family as well as the strangers on her left. She held her back monument-straight with child-sized hands clenched in her lap, her lips pressed hard together until her mouth almost disappeared into the wrinkles on her face. Gray hair blossomed on top of her head in a round pompadour chignon that did little to soften the old woman. Instead, the contrast brought attention to her grimace.

Ruth rolled her eyes at thirteen-year-old Kate who snorted, then coughed to hide her laughter.

Ruth's father leaned over and whispered into her ear, "Behave, you two," he said, "or I'll take you out to the woodshed when we get home."

Ruth straightened and took her sister's hand. "Yes, Daddy." She looked at her mother who focused on the preacher. Ruth drooped. She turned her attention to the sermon.

First Baptist's new preacher, his voice like rusting leaves and light wind, spoke of grace and trust in a loving God.

Ruth nodded and jerked awake. She looked around the sanctuary. Men dabbed sweat from their brows, women waved fans at their cheeks, and children slumped in their pews. Her friend Janet sat catty corner smiling and upright, as if not fazed by the summer air.

Ruth leaned forward and caught Janet's eye. The other girl smiled, all teeth and dimples, and tilted her head toward a young man sitting beside her.

Ruth couldn't tell much about the boy from so far away. He had a nice profile: a strong chin, strong nose, and thick dark hair. Janet nudged him and he turned to look at Ruth. He grinned and Ruth's gut somersaulted. She looked away and squeezed Kate's hand tight.

"Ow!"

Ruth reddened as her mother, father, and grandmother glared at her. She mouthed, "I'm sorry," and hung her head. She peeked through her auburn hair and saw that the young man had turned away.

After the service, the pastor stood at the communion rail with his family and invited the congregation to join him, his wife, and two sons after the benediction. The boy that sat next to Janet throughout the service, the older of Pastor Mueller's sons, stood next to the Reverend's wife.

Walt headed for the narthex but Ruth grabbed his arm.

"Daddy, we should welcome Pastor Mueller."

Granny Chambers nodded. "We should, Waltham. I'd like to give him my regards."

"All right. Alma?" Ruth's father held his right hand out to his wife and bent his left elbow for his mother. Ruth gathered up her pocketbook, tugged on her younger sister, and followed the three adults up the aisle.

"What are you up to?" Kate asked.

"I just want to meet the preacher," Ruth said.

As they neared the rail and the line of congregants, Kate said, "Oh," the word drawn out and down like air out of a balloon.

Ruth cast her eyes down as her father introduced her family. Her gaze fell on the tips of the older boy's shoes. They were clean and polished but the soles were worn back from the edges so that he

appeared to be leaning forward on his toes, ready to run for the sanctuary doors. The younger boy, also in well-worn shoes, shifted uncomfortably as if they pinched. Ruth looked up and met his pained expression.

The older boy cleared his throat as he shook Ruth's hand. His voice leapt out. "I listen to your dad's radio show sometimes. Although I don't have much time right now with college and work. I'm Robert Mueller. I go to Baylor. You?"

"I'm...I've still...I'm a senior. I start at Mary Hardin in the fall."

Robert snorted, "Hmph! Just a kid. That won't do. Well, my little brother, Jonathan, here is only a few years younger than I—"

"Hey!" the younger boy yelled.

Ruth blushed.

The Reverend's wife put a hand on the Robert's arm, pulled him close, and whispered in his ear. He gave his mother a peck on the cheek, turned back to Ruth, and winked.

"So, you know my father's show?" Ruth asked.

"I do. He plays a lot of good jazz."

"He records his own, you know," Kate added.

"I've heard. Good trumpet player. I love the horn."

"Hmph! He's great," Kate turned away from Ruth and went to her father's side.

Ruth face felt hot.

Rob smiled. "Hope I didn't offend."

Ruth shook her head.

"Thank you, Mrs. Chambers. I'm sure there will be a series on the commandments in the future," Reverend Mueller said.

"Soon," Granny Chambers said. "Good day." She turned toward the narthex to leave.

"I have to go." Ruth nodded at Robert and fell in behind her family. Her heart beat too fast. She struggled for breath. At the narthex door, she turned to see Robert deep in conversation with another parishioner.

Kate turned and winked at her. "Are you going to sing in the church choir again this summer?"

"Yes, Ruth Elizabeth. You must share God's gifts with the church." Granny Chamber said.

Ruth clenched her hands together yet they still shook. "If I must."

Ruth sat with Rob in the back of Freddy Marshall's '47 convertible, top down, late spring breeze comfort, stars overhead, Lake Waco shimmering, almost pretty in its dammed river sprawl.

"Swim?" Rob asked, misreading again.

Ruth smirked. "I don't exactly have a suit on under this dress."

Rob grinned, his teeth a white fence in the low light, "You sure don't."

"Behave."

"Mm."

Ruth looked over her shoulder. Freddy and Barb were kissing in a shadow somewhere. Ruth rested her hand on Rob's arm.

"I'm leaving seminary, Ruth."

Ruth jerked away. "What? Why?"

"If we're going to get married and have a family, I need to be able to support you."

Ruth's mouth went dry.

"Well?"

She shook her head.

"You won't marry me?" Rob hung his head.

"Nothing would make me happier." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. They

held onto each other several seconds.

He pushed her away.

"Why did you shake your head?"

"Did I? I guess I don't know why you'd leave seminary. Haven't you always wanted to preach?"

Rob turned straight in the seat and rested his elbow on the driver's side car door. "My folks have always wanted that. I didn't want to disappoint them. Or you."

"But you're a good preacher, Robert."

"You can't support a family this way, Ruth."

Ruth chewed the side of her thumb. "Your parents did."

"No, they didn't. You don't know what it was like relying on handouts from parishioners.

Scrimping and saving on every last dime. Everything went to the church first and if we wanted anything, shoes without holes, a stick of gum, we had to work for it ourselves from the time we were small. That's why Lawrence left ten years ago. He'd had enough."

"I've been poor. I do know."

"I know. I didn't mean it that way. I just mean—your dad always made you feel rich, somehow. I think my folks go out of their way to make us feel poor because they think that's what God wants. I don't want my children to feel like that. You do want children?"

"Oh, yes." Ruth felt warm all over.

Rob sighed and rose in the seat. "Then I have to change my plans. It's okay, Ruth, it's what I want. It's not just the money. I've not been happy in seminary. The more I learn..."

"What?"

He dropped his head and took her hand. "Nothing."

Ruth brushed Kate's long black hair smooth and pulled it back into a soft bun at the back. "Like

that?"

Kate turned her head and looked sideways into the mirror. "Mm. A little higher, maybe."

Ruth drew the brush through several times and tried again. "I could do this all day. Your hair's so lovely. That?"

Kate examined the look. "That's nice. I'm glad you're having fun. I'm nervous as a cat—"
"—in a room full of rocking chairs," they said together and laughed.

Ruth sighed.

"You okay?" Kate handed her sister bobby pins to fix her hair in place.

Ruth shrugged. "Mother Mueller hates me more than ever."

"This move to California?"

"Oh, that's not the half of it."

"The seminary thing again? Gosh, that was years ago."

"She was over it until he announced he didn't even believe in God anymore. He only did it because she kept badgering him to give a guest sermon at his dad's church, for pete's sake."

Kate's big brown eyes were wide in the mirror. "Does he mean it?"

Ruth paused, bobby pin poised, caught in Kate's enormous Irish moss eyes. She felt a lump in her throat. She blinked.

"He thinks he does. It's this geology and stuff he's doing and the scientists he works with. All the science he learned at college. He said if I learned what he did about the Bible at seminary, I wouldn't be so sure about God either."

"Hmph!"

"My thinking exactly."

"And his mother blames you." Kate shook her head.

"Hold still." Ruth laughed. "He blames her for feeding her lard and bread all his life and making

him wear his big brother's hand me downs. Which is true, really." Ruth put in the last bobby pin. "There. You will make a beautiful bride."

Kate's eyes glistened.

Ruth pretended to straighten her blouse.

"Thank you, Ruthie. I hate that you're leaving."

"Don't say, 'hate.'" She pushed a tendril of silky, black hair into place under Kate's bun.

Twenty-One

Leah

Spring, TX

1977

Leah patted a tree trunk in her front yard in Spring, Texas and looked up into the branches to watch squirrels skitter in the needles and cones. She flinched at hard sunlight and dropped her gaze.

Jackie walked in the street away from the house.

"Hey!" Leah pushed off the tree, dug her Keds in to the St. Augustine, and ran to Jackie's side.

"I'm going with you, remember?"

Jackie swung her arms and looked ahead. "Wasn't my idea."

Leah dropped back. "Mine either, but they don't want me 'underfoot' during the move."

"When Bubba gets there, don't be stupid. Just stay out of the way and let us take care of the horses."

Leah watched the concrete street fade out and blend into a dirt and oyster shell road beneath her feet.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes, your majesty." Leah made a shallow bow.

"Don't be a smart ass."

"Don't be such a meanie."

"What are you doing?"

"Looking at something." Leah examined pillbugs under a rock on the side of the road.

"Well, stop. Keep up. Bubba's going leave."

"No, he won't. You're the reason he's there."

"He's got other things to do than wait around on us."

Leah put down the rock and drifted in Jackie's direction, toeing a small flower.

"Now what are you doing?"

"What?"

"Why can't you stay by me instead of wandering way the hell over there?" Jackie flapped her arms.

"Why do you cuss so much?"

"Get over here. You're turning one mile into six."

"I'm coming." Leah hopped through the tall grass back to the dirt road. "I just wanted to look at a plant. It's pretty. Some kind of aster."

"It's a fucking plant."

"It's still pretty. You didn't answer my question."

"Because it relaxes me and if you did it, you'd understand."

"Nope. I said a bad word the other day in my room and I felt despicable." Leah leapt over a pothole in the road.

"You get over it. Trust me. Besides, Daddy does it all the time."

"Mama never cusses."

Jackie snorted. "Mama's a goody-two-shoes bible thumper. Just like you. Most people cuss. It's normal. You'll do it when you get older. Shit! I don't see Bubba's truck. I told you."

Leah craned her head around her sister as they walked through the stable gates. "Wouldn't he take it around back with the trailer?"

Jackie stomped ahead for a few seconds. "Guess you're not so stupid after all."

Leah sat on the top rail of the paddock fence as Jackie led Clover to the trailer.

"Come up!" Jackie called and the pony loaded, round belly swinging, into the trailer.

"Could you move any slower you fat cow." Jackie smacked the pony on the haunch, jumped out of the trailer, and swung the doors shut. "God, I hope I don't ever get pregnant. What a lazy old woman! Leah! Get in the truck."

Leah climbed into the '69 white Ford pickup on hot vinyl, her shorts and tee shirt exposing her bony legs and arms to the sizzling seat.

"I'll be back in a few," Jackie yelled from behind the truck.

Bubba walked to the front of the truck and, back turned to Leah, shoved his left hand in his pocket. The other swung a Marlboro up to his mouth, down to his hip, and back. He wiped his hands on the white tee shirt clinging to him under his denim jacket.

The horseman opened the passenger door. "Slide on over, girl. I need to set down. Your sis will be here soon."

Leah held back a protest as she moved onto fresh hot vinyl.

Bubba took his ball cap off, squeezing the grimy bill over and over and rubbing the "B&B Feeds" logo. He bobbed his head looking through the windshield for Jackie. "Don't look like she's coming real quick does it?"

Leah's pulled her arms in close.

Bubba smelled of hay and manure and sweat. His leg pressed against hers. "Nope. I'd say that girl's preoccupied about now. Let's see what we can do to pass the time."

Bubba turned slightly toward her in the seat. He slid his right hand under the bottom hem of her shirt and up her belly. He touched her growing breasts, pinching her nipples.

He moaned as he backed his hand out.

Leah stared ahead as blackness filled her peripheral vision, blotting out the blunt-nose and ragged-jaw profile of the man so calm next to her. Through the high whine in her head that drowned out

the cicadas in the sycamores, Leah heard a voice honey sweet.

"What?" She asked.

"Here comes your sis. Don't you forget what I said." Bubba gripped her knee and let it go.

Jackie hopped in the truck. "Okay. Let's go. Peck, Texas, here we come."

Jackie's bare leg pressed sweaty and dirty against Leah's left thigh while Bubba's leg still touched her right side.

"Let me out." Leah squawked.

"Huh?" Jackie put the truck in gear. "No. We're leaving."

"I'll go back to the house and go with Mama."

"They don't want you."

"Let me out, Jack. Please." Leah clenched Jackie's arm, "I need to go."

"Can't you hold it? Christ!"

"Aw. Let the girl go. We can handle this." Bubba fluttered his right hand, dismissing Leah.

"Fine." Jackie kicked the door open. "But Mom's going to be pissed. You better tell her it isn't my fault."

Leah jogged away, the whine in her head receding with the distance from the truck.

"You hear me?" Jackie called after her.

Leah raised her hand without looking back, ducked under the paddock fences, and ran past the stalls. She watched only the dusty earth on the long walk home.

Leah walked past her parents as they argued with each other over how to load the moving van. In the backyard, she sat under the young pines next to the Golden retriever pup, Dusty, and let the dog crawl on her lap.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be going to the new house with your sister."

Leah wiped her eyes and looked up at her mother. "I didn't want to."

Ruth sighed, "But I've packed the car tight."

"Can't I ride with Daddy and Brian?"

"They're full up, too."

"Just leave me, then." Leah got up and ran into the house. She lay on the deep pile carpet of her empty room, staring up at the textured ceiling.

Ruth appeared in the bedroom doorway. "Honey, we'll move things around. I just don't understand why your sister sent you home."

"She didn't."

"Are you certain?"

Leah nodded. "I didn't want to go with them. I'm sorry."

"We'll manage."

"Is Daddy mad?"

"He's not upset with you. Your mother has too much stuff. Just don't—"

"Get underfoot. I know."

Twenty-Two

Leah

Peck, Texas

1978

Leah pressed her palm and finger tips to her bedroom window and found it cool.

She dressed in jeans and tee shirt and tennis shoes and made her way to the bathroom. She passed Jackie's room and saw the door open, the bed made.

Leah grimaced at herself in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. She tossed the toothbrush on the vanity and went to the kitchen where her mother clanked a teaspoon in a coffee cup. She slowed her steps and rounded the corner of the kitchen bar.

"Good morning."

Ruth looked up for took two beats. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"That's okay. I'll have cereal."

"Sit down. I'll fix you something"

Leah sat at the breakfast table and propped her chin on her hand. "Where's Jack?"

Ruth, eyes closed, holding her breath. "Your sister didn't come home last night."

"I'm sorry," Leah mumbled into her fist.

"Goodness! Why should you be sorry? You're always sorry for what she does. I'm always sorry for what she does. When the heck is she going to be sorry? Excuse my language." Ruth slammed a frying pan on the stove.

Leah suppressed a smile.

"Two eggs?" Ruth asked.

"Yes, please. Do we have waffles?"

Leah bounced to the barn that sat one hundred yards from the house on the five acres the Mueller family occupied in Peck. She swung the four-by-eight plywood door open and grabbed a can of feed for Clover. She spun back out of the barn and headed for the single-stall stable where Jackie kept Clover and her foal, Bree.

Leah drew up fifteen feet from the stall.

"Clover? Where are you, you chatty old witch?" Leah shook the can and smacked it with the palm of her hand. "Clover! Breakfast!"

Leah rushed to the stall. The mare stood at the back of the enclosure, her head hanging low. The four-month-old filly nudged the mare for milk and got none.

"Clover?" The horse did not respond. "Oh, God!"

Leah sat in tears on her swing set two hours later when Jackie and Chris pulled up in Chris's Honda.

Jackie, Ruth, and the vet yelled and gestured in the paddock as Clover lay dying. Bree whinnied in the stall for her mother.

Jackie screamed at Ruth to shut up, walked by the stall and kicked the boards and screamed at the filly to shut up and stormed up to Leah.

"Why weren't you keeping a better eye on them?" Jackie stood over Leah, hands on her hips.

"Me?"

Jackie leaned down, her face inches from Leah's. "They wanted to cut her head off to see if encephalitis killed her. What killed her was you didn't take care of her last night."

"Me?" Leah gripped the chains of the swing until her fingers ached.

Jackie whirled around and stomped off with Chris behind her.

Brian threw the back door open, yanked his boots off on the iron bootscraper, and walked into the den. He threw his down coat at Leah.

"That damned horse of yours."

Leah bent her head, stuffing the last of a Pop-Tart in her mouth. "I'm sorry," she mumbled through crumbs.

"You've got to do something before I get killed or I kill her."

"She's just playing."

"She's too big to play. I can't fix the back fence with her trying to jump on me like an overgrown puppy."

"What's going on?" Ruth entered with a basket of laundry.

"Bree tried to break my back. I waved the shovel at her and she just tried harder."

Ruth wagged a finger at Leah. "You need to talk to your sister."

"Okay." Leah stuck her nose back into Pasquier's Watching Birds.

"I mean it, Leah. If you're not going to ride her, she needs to go."

Leah stared at the page in front of her. "Jackie says I'm too fat to ride her."

"Nonsense. You're not fat. You're getting a figure."

Leah slammed her book shut and stared at the floor.

"Talk to your sister." Ruth walked away with the laundry.

"Yes, ma'am."

Leah held the book to her breast and went to her room where she crawled into bed under soft sheets to read in peace.

Leah slid a head halter onto Bree and led her to the paddock through rain-softened earth. She tied

the pony to a post while Jackie readied a d-ring snaffle she'd borrowed from Chris.

"Looks big." Leah stepped aside.

Jackie draped the bridle around Bree's neck behind her ears. "What do you know?"

"Nothing."

Bree flashed the whites of her eyes at Jackie.

Jackie brought the bit to Bree's lips and pinched the corners of her mouth.

Bree opened her mouth and Jackie shoved the bit in, fastened the bridle over Bree's ears and tightened the throat lash.

"I need to adjust the cheeks but let's give her a second," Jackie said.

Bree champed and chewed and slobbered.

Jackie leaned backward, hands on hips, smiling. "How do you like that?"

Bree's eyes rolled and she tossed her head, jerking on the fence post.

Jackie reached for the reins. "Settle down! I'll make it better."

Bree pulled hard and veered toward Jackie, planting her left front hoof on Jackie's right foot.

"Ow! You stupid bitch!" Jackie pushed on the filly. Bree splayed her legs and dug into the dirt, pressing her hoof harder and Jackie's deeper into the mud.

"Goddamn it! Move, you fucking cow!" Jackie pushed and pummeled the horse's neck.

Leah clenched the paddock fence. "Jackie!"

Jackie yanked the lead knot off the post and the lead fell loose. The horse came off Jackie's foot but with the bit still clanking in her mouth, the filly threw her head, grunted, and fought for control.

Jackie grabbed the rope and slung it like a whip.

"You goddamn stupid fucking horse. I hate you. I hate you. You should have died. You go to hell, you bitch!" She beat the horse on the face and neck again and again until Bree ripped free and ran away, the rope dragging behind her.

Leah sobbed.

Jackie stomped past Leah. "She's your problem now. That's the last favor you'll get from me."

Leah wrung her hands and waited at the fence with feed in the coffee can until Bree calmed down. The horse approached slowly, dragging reins and rope lead alongside, shying slightly when the rope caught on something on the ground.

The bit had worked its way out. Leah leaned over the fencing, barbed wire poking through her shirt and jeans and scratching her skin. She eased the bridle off and stroked Bree's cheek. She checked the horse's eyes and skin and brushed away dried sweat. She rested her forehead on Bree's.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry. She won't ever touch you again."

She cried into Bree's forelock, crouched nose-to-nose, and exchanged breaths with her. Bree nibbled Leah's hair.

Twenty-Three

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Jackie leaned against the screen door of the garage apartment patio while Rob sat in a short bench glider chatting with Leah and Jim.

Jim sat opposite Rob, resting a soda can on his stomach which overlapped his belt. Leah pressed herself into a corner and crossed her arms over her stomach roll.

Rob nodded at Leah's arms. "So what are you doing to lose that weight?"

Leah grimaced. "All the things the experts tell one to do, Dad."

Jackie looked down and held her breath.

"Leah and I walk two miles a day at least five days a week, Dad. And she eats sensibly. It's those meds she's on. Besides, she looks fine to me."

Jackie exhaled and turned to her father.

Rob looked around his son-in-law and pointed past him. "See that red planter out there?"

Jim twisted in his seat. "Yep."

Jackie sneaked a glance at Leah, who stared unseeing at the patio floor.

"That's where Ruth fell trying to feed her raccoons. Baby? Jackie?" Rob snapped his fingers.

"Yeah, Dad."

"Do you think we should move that thing?"

"The planter? If you think so." Jackie laced her hands behind her back and bounced against the door frame. "I'll get Will to take care of it."

"I just don't want your mom getting hurt again."

"I know, Dad."

"Is Will picking up Ethan today?" Leah asked.

Jackie nodded. "You guys staying for dinner?"

Jim slurped his soda. "We can't. We want to go by the hospital again and that will put us back in town. I don't like driving out here after dark. We set up to have dinner in town."

"In town. With Brian," Jackie said.

Leah smiled. "Et. Al."

"Jackie? Do you think we should move that feeder for the raccoons?"

Jackie moved nearer to her father and put her hands on her hips. "Yes, Dad. If you want to move it, we can. It's pretty heavy, though. I'll get Will to move it later. I promise."

"Oh. Okay."

"It's not going to get up and walk away, Dad." Jackie waved her hands in front of his face.

"I know. I'm just worried that your mother will try to feed them again when she gets home." Rob pouted.

"So how's Lyssa?" Jackie moved between Rob and the view of the planter, her back to her father.

Leah grinned. "She's great. They're great. They live too far away for my liking, but baby's growing up fast and healthy and Lyssa's a wonderful little mama."

Rob got up, put his hand on Jackie's waist.

"Where are you going?" Jackie stood firm.

"I was thinking we need to move that planter."

"Damn it, Dad. I said we'd take care of it. For God's sake! Sit down and shut up about it."

Jim scraped his chair and got to his feet. "Let me go move it now. Dad, why don't you come with me so you can tell me exactly where you want it." Jim patted Jackie's shoulder as he walked by her.

"Thanks, Jim." Jackie sighed. "I'm going down to the workshop."

"May I join you a moment?" Leah put her hands on the arms of her chair to push herself up.

"I'm just doing some clean-up. Not much to see, but sure." As she walked beside her little sister, Jackie watched the two men discussing the finer points of relocating the large rectangular planter. She chuckled. "Just ignore Dad's bullshit, Lea. You know how he is. You look fine. So you're not rail thin. It's not all it's cracked up to be."

"If I'm ever rail thin, I'll reassess and let you know if I agree." Leah laughed. "You're looking good."

Jackie tossed her hair. "Thanks, but I'm going way gray and I feel old some days."

Leah sighed. "We all do. Sometimes just waking up is a challenge. At least we still have our minds."

"Speak for yourself."

The workshop sat at the edge of the property looking as if it might slide onto the road one hundred yards below. Jackie pulled the steel door open and waved Leah in. She slammed the door shut behind them, startling her sister. "Got to close it tight. Sand can ruin a project."

Jackie put her hands on her hips and smiled at the seven-hundred-plus square feet of woodworking and rock cutting tools, storage, and bench space.

Leah tapped on a heavy glass wall that separated them from the main space. She raised her eyebrows.

"Keeps this area dust free-ish. So I can shellac and paint," Jackie said.

"You have some impressive tools in there."

Jackie picked up her backpack from the State Park trip and pulled out three stones. "I got a lot of it second-hand from auctions. Some of it was Will's"

"Really? He did this stuff?"

"No. His dad did contract work."

Leah squeezed through the interior door into the main room and walked around the spacious building, touching a table or standing equipment here and there.

Jackie leaned on the door frame, arms folded across her chest.

"So which beast snacked on your hand?" Leah asked.

Jackie led Leah to a portable table saw.

"This one. I was cutting a small piece and it got stuck. I tried to push it through—"

"You couldn't use a push block?"

Jackie stared at the saw for a breath, "No, the piece was too small. Anywho, next thing I knew it caught one finger, then the other and I had a mess. It left me with this." Jackie thrust her stumpy middle finger at Leah with a broad grin. "And this." She extended her first finger, also missing its tip.

Leah didn't flinch. "Ouch. Sorry you had to experience that. No task complete until a Mueller bleeds on it, eh?"

Jackie nodded. "Yeah."

"Can I see some of your latest stuff?"

Jackie led her back to the isolation room where several geodes sat polished and ready for findings or mounting.

"Wow. Those are lovely. Can't tell can you?"

"What?"

"What they'll look like inside. You can't know until cut them open, right?"

"Right."

"Do you just toss stuff that's crap?"

"No. Even crap has some color usually. Enough to make a keychain or a coaster or something."

Leah picked up a piece with short cloudy crystals and stretched her arm to find her focus.

Jackie tapped the bench with her nail-less index finger. "I need to get some work done, babe."

"I have to ask you, what if Mom isn't coming home?"

Jackie studied Leah's eyes, mossy-covered stones in deep sockets. Thundereggs.

"Why wouldn't she?"

"I'm just saying, sometimes a break like that just doesn't heal." Leah glanced toward the two men at the raccoon feeder. "Who'll take care of Dad?"

"I will, of course."

Leah put the geode down as if setting down a raw egg. "He's struggling, Jack. You have a grandson to raise and a business you're running and you're sick, so you keep saying."

"Dad's fine. He just forgets little things now and then. He's not crap. I'm not going to toss him."

Leah mumbled, "Can't turn him into a coaster."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

Leah examined her plump but intact fingers. "I mean you can't shut him up every time he gets on your nerves."

"You try living with him. Both of them! Babbling on and on. I love them but for Christ's sake."

"What would you do, anyway?" Jackie asked.

Her sister shrugged. "I just want them to know if they need to come to Houston, we can make it work. That's all."

"Dad would hate it."

"Mom wouldn't."

"Mom doesn't make the decisions." Jackie clamped her mouth shut.

"I'm well aware of that." Leah sneered.

"So you'll make the decisions?" Jackie shook a metal pick at Leah.

"God, no!" Leah took a step back and put up both hands. "Chill out, Jackie. I just want them to know they have options. I'm sorry but the hospital here isn't exactly the Texas Med Center, you know?"

"It's better than you think. You're just being a snob. As always."

"I didn't intend it that way. They can remain here in their little cocoon. It's not up to me and never has been. If it had been, they'd never have left Houston. But we can arrange transport there if they want it. We have space and I have time." Leah dusted her hands off and walked toward the door. "It doesn't matter. Do you think anything I say or feel will alter Dad's course? He's never heard me before. He won't now."

Jackie glowered at the bench as Leah walked out and slammed the workshop door.

Leah slapped the expansive window of the isolation room and smiled her big moon grin at her sister. "Sand!" she yelled and pointed toward the door.

Jackie smirked and resisted displaying her shortened middle finger again.

Jackie plopped a pizza box on the Tate dining table.

"Yum! Pizza," Will said and his puppy-brown eyes warmed her.

"Stop. It was a crappy day. My sister gave me shit."

"What did you do with it?" Ethan asked and started giggling.

Will patted his grandson's head. "Get in your chair, Ethan. Grandma shouldn't have said that, should she?" Will frowned at Jackie.

Jackie shrugged. "Another dollar for the swear jar."

"Is Dad eating with us?"

"I don't know."

Will cleared his throat.

She sighed and flipped her phone open to call the garage apartment.

"Hey, Dad. We're having pizza if you want to join us." She gave Rob only a second to respond before she slapped the phone shut.

"Happy?" she asked Will.

"No. I wouldn't put it that way. Do you think you can tell me about today without making multiple donations to the swear jar?" Will slid a slice of pizza onto Ethan's plate.

"Really, Grandma."

"Hush, Ethan. Eat your dinner."

Jackie sat down and put her head in her hands. "No. I don't think I can. She wants to take my parents from me. That's all."

"We should talk about this later. Little ears, big mouth."

Jackie glanced at her grandson and nodded.

Ethan looked up, a pizza-smear grin on his face, "Me?"

Jackie rolled her eyes.

They heard Rob fighting with the sliding door and Will got up to help him into the house.

Twenty-Four

Leah

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Jim turned the truck onto a quiet road in northwest Las Cruces driving north. To the west, pastel adobe homes built in the fifties lay scattered in the dust, their sprawling yards butting up against each other with chicken-wire boundaries.

"It looks like God rolled painted dice."

"I don't know why I have so much trouble finding this place every year," Jim said into his shoulder as he glanced down a side road.

"Because we come out once a year and you're paranoid that your memory is shot, even though it isn't?"

"It's not paranoia!"

Leah looked east. "They tore up the onion field."

"Harvest time?"

"I don't think so. It looks more dire than that."

"Dire? Oh. Here it is." Jim pulled into the driveway that curved around and behind the pink house and its large stand-alone garage. He killed the engine.

"Shall we?" Jim asked.

"Just a few seconds." Leah opened her door and listened.

"What is it?"

She resisted the urge to shush her husband, closed her eyes, and leaned her head back. She took a deep breath to draw out the moment. A mockingbird sang in a far-off yard and traffic from the distant

main road whispered.

Jim shifted, his keys rattling.

Leah let the heat build, felt her skin tighten around her mouth and eyes. A grasshopper buzzed in a juniper. A truck roared by on the blacktop. The breeze, wind really, blew her hair against her cheeks.

"Okay." Leah released her husband from her thanksgiving prayer.

Jim fled the truck.

Leah shook her head.

The fifty-foot walk to the door followed a path of desert plants that Annie had planted and tended over the years. Leah aimed her camera at blossoms and greenery of catalpa, Spanish broom, globe willow.

"Should I knock?" Jim asked.

"Certainly!" Leah stuck her head in the willow branches.

"Are you about done?"

Leah looked up from her camera and glared from behind her sunglasses.

"I can't see it but I know the look I'm getting."

"What look? I'll be in soon." Leah grumbled.

"I think your brother would like to see you."

"Pfft! He knows what I look like. He just saw me last night."

"Darling."

"Fine." Leah pocketed her camera. "But I want to come back out in a few minutes and get some more pictures."

Jim reached up to rap his knuckles on the screen door frame just as the interior door opened.

"What's wrong with you people? Are you coming in or what?" Brian's voice burst out of the house.

"Not if we're going to be abused like that. We'll just get back in the truck and go back home."

Leah grinned as Jim held the door open for her.

Brother and sister hugged.

"Hi, baby," Brian said. "There's coffee on and Annie's making chesses bread."

Leah squeezed through the utility room and into the spacious kitchen. Her flour-dusted sister-in-law hugged her. Annie's thick Boston accent, despite decades of living anywhere but, mixed with the kitchen smells and lifted Leah out of weariness.

Jim and Brian walked past the two women. Brian led the way, his long arms and legs swinging as if the main of his body had no say. His voice pushed the air before them like a prow, the wake hitting the adobe walls and sinking to the wood floors.

Leah peered around the corner after them, shook her head, and turned her attention back to Annie. "Where's Ellen?"

"What?"

Leah noted the absence of Annie's hearing aid. "Ellen?" she asked.

"She's cleaning the bathroom which she was supposed to do last night."

Leah laughed. "Well, it's not necessary. You should see my house. Cheeses bread, eh?"

Annie had that blank look on her face when she tried to fill in gaps in a conversation. She opened the stove. "Not done. Can I get you something?"

"Nah. I'll have coffee in a while."

Leah sat in one of the three metal-frame dinette chairs and leaned against the wall next to the dinette table. She ran her hand over the table edge. Her eyes stung. She shook the emotion from her head.

"That's your grandmother Chamber's table," Annie said.

"I'm glad y'all have so much of her stuff. It's nice to know it's not in a dump somewhere."

Annie laughed. "Who says this isn't a dump?"

"I love your house. I'd love to live in an older home. It's got character. My house looks like my neighbor's house which looks like the house three houses down which looks like the house a street over—"

Annie put her hands up in submission. She moved in the kitchen in a way that appeared wasteful at first blush. She transferred items from one part of the kitchen to another, rinsed this or that, and filled something for no obvious purpose with extra dance-like steps in between. In the end, she announced that she'd started dinner, and on the stove top a pot of something cooking that smelled wonderful, and Leah had chattered the time away about nothing of value.

"That's got to simmer," Annie said. "Why don't you go visit with Brian?"

"I can tell when I'm being dismissed." Leah retreated to the den where the two men talked.

Brian sat in a battered easy chair, one leg stretched out. "Baby, would you go ask my wife for the ice pack?"

Leah doubled back. "I'm to ask you for the ice pack."

"What ice pack?"

"Beats me. 'The ice pack.' For his knee, apparently."

Annie growled, reached into the freezer without looking, and grabbed a solid block cold pack.

"I'll take it to him."

Leah followed.

Annie thrust the block toward her husband.

"How in hell am I going to wrap that around my knee?"

"I'm busy! Get it yourself. If you can pace around the house all evening bitching about your family, you can get your own ice pack."

Jim looked at Leah.

Leah shrugged.

Brian disappeared into the kitchen. Several minutes later he returned and wrapped a soft pack around his knee.

"Sorry. I knew better than to interrupt her when she's making dinner. She doesn't mind it when others do it but Ellen and I damn well better not."

"I probably should have warned you. I just got tossed out of the kitchen, albeit it gently."

Leah sat down next to Jim on the sheet-covered sofa and leaned against him. "He'd get in trouble if he interrupted my work for something he could do for himself."

Jim nodded. "Likewise if she interrupted in the middle of a major coding effort. We'd be polite but we'd be pissed at each other."

Brian smirked. "No one is polite in this house."

"I am!" Sixteen-year-old Ellen entered and flopped into the other easy chair in the room. She pulled her bare feet up under her backside and leaned on one elbow. "I'm very polite."

"Bullshit," her father said.

"Dad!"

"Some example you set." Leah laughed.

Brian turned to Leah. "Are you kidding? She's been chastising me since she was this tall." He held his hand out two feet off the floor. "So how was your trip to the Hill?" Brian leaned back in his chair.

Jim gripped Leah's leg.

"About what you'd expect. Dad fixated on the planter. Jackie was a—" Leah looked left at her niece, "—unpleasant person."

Brian waved at his daughter. "She's heard it all. She's experienced it all."

"Still. Ellen doesn't need to listen to me disparage her aunt. Besides, I gave as good as I got."

"It's okay," Ellen said. "I'm reading anyway." The teen flashed a book of German folklore she'd tucked into her lap.

"Yes, I've noticed sound is attenuated when I'm reading, too." Leah winked.

Ellen rolled her eyes.

Leah looked out the broad bay window that framed a view of the Organ Mountains, Organ Needle and the lesser peaks clear and bare against the deepening evening sky.

"That's peaceful."

Brian followed her stare. "What did Jackie do?"

"We had an argument of sorts. My fault. In the end it doesn't matter. It's Dad's decision and Dad won't leave Jackie and Jackie won't leave New Mexico. So, Mom and Dad are going to die here and that's their, well Dad's, choice and I've got to accept that."

Brian sat forward and pointed toward the dining room wall. "If Mom and Dad won't move down here right next door, they sure won't go all the way to Houston. Jackie made sure of that. Had that place right over there for rent. Jackie had them convinced they'd be babysitting Ellen every day."

"When was this?" Jim asked.

"Two years ago," Ellen answered. "But pretend I didn't say that."

"Hm. Babysitting a fourteen-year-old? So the six-year-old they were already babysitting at the time wasn't a factor?" Leah shook her head.

"You know how it goes. Jackie's little angel grandson is one thing but our heathen teen with her art books and laptop. Get thee behind me, Satan. Never mind that Ellen could have helped with Ethan."

"She can sure come up with some doozies, can't she? I've told coworkers some stories. They think I'm making it up." Jim chuckled and patted Leah's leg.

"Like?" Brian leaned back and flexed his aching knee.

"Like when Leah and I first started dating Jackie came to me and asked for a five-K loan. She

said she'd won a six thousand dollar cash prize at her bank and as soon as she got paid she would pay me back."

Brian and Ellen sat with mouths hanging open.

"And you still married into this family? You *are* a brave man. Or stupid." Brian shifted the ice on his knee and grunted.

"I just knew Leah well enough to know she wasn't like that. She's crazy in a whole different way."

Leah slapped Jim's thigh. "I'd pinch you if it weren't true."

"Then there was the alien abduction." Jim took a long drink of his soda.

"Ah, yes. We've all heard that one." Brian rolled his eyes.

"I haven't." Ellen dropped her book on the arm of the chair. "Does Mom know this one?"

"I think so. Can't say I recall the details."

Leah cleared her throat. "Jackie was whisked away and probed and dropped off at the stables. Remarkably, that same night she was told she couldn't ever go out with this fellow Chris Cutler again because he was too old for her."

"Scared the shit out of your grandparents." Brian nodded at Ellen.

"Probably the aliens, too." Ellen picked her book back up. "She's not a very good liar."

"And, I've been told countless times how Jackie raised my stepdaughter." Jim took Leah's hand

"Oh, please." Brian waved at his daughter. "She supposedly raised Ellen, too. Shit, she barely raised her own daughter."

Annie walked in and presented a spoon of sauce to her husband. "Taste this. Don't worry, Leah. No one believes that stuff."

Leah rubbed her eyes. "It used to bother me. It doesn't anymore. I only care that my daughter knows the truth. If anyone helped me raise Lyssa it was Mom. Mom has always sacrificed for us. She's

still sacrificing for us. Sitting in a piddly-ass hospital in this equally piddly-ass town rather than a state-of-the-art medical center because Dad wanted to drag her out to the desert to retire. Everything is always about Dad and Jackie."

Brian took a long pull off his beer. "Oh, you never suffered, baby."

"I didn't say I did." Leah clenched her jaw. "If we're being honest, all three of us took advantage of Mama's good will over the years as much as Dad did."

"Excuse me! I worked my ass off helping pay for that damn house in the country she loved so much."

"In Peck? Yeah, you worked hard. You played hard, too, as I recall. And tore her up pretty damn good hanging out with some bad dudes and getting into serious trouble. Had the Cutlass stolen. Wrecked the truck. You weren't all help to Mama."

"Well for Christ's sake, Lea. I did my best."

"Guys, chill." Jim put brought one hand up.

"That's kind of my point, Bri." Leah drew out the truncated name. "Our best was almost irrelevant compared to what Mama did for us and now it's just too damn late because everyone always made her decisions for her and what pisses me off most of all is she let them."

Leah took a breath.

"I miss her, and she's half gone. I can blame all kinds of things: God, fate, time, the universe, shitty luck. But, I blame all of us for not taking better care of her and most of all that lying nutcase sister of ours. I don't have a single kind neuron left in my body for her and I hate that." Leah stood up. "I have to take a break."

"Darling..."

"I'm just going to step outside. I'm sorry, Ellen."

"Lea." Brian called out behind her.

Leah stopped and looked at her shaking hands. Without turning around she added, "Everyone in this family only calls me Lea when they want to remind me I'm the baby of the family and should shut the hell up."

"Where's all this anger coming from?" Jim walked beside Leah on the dirt path along the irrigation ditch behind the adobe house.

"Right where I said. I'm losing my mother. I never had my dad. He's Jackie's parent. I suppose I had him some back when we were kids but not really. I was like the dog that sleeps in your lap when you watch TV. But Mama was always my best friend. When she's gone, they're both gone. When they're gone, my family is gone." Leah shoved her hands into her jeans pockets.

"You'll still have Brian."

"Will we come out to visit? No. We only come out here now because we want to get in time with Mom & Dad before they die. Will Brian and Annie come see us?" Leah spoke over Jim's protest "No. They don't have the resources to just get in a car and drive a thousand miles every year."

"Well, I lost my family years ago the same way. We're scattered all over and it doesn't bother me."

"I'm not you. It's killed me to be so far from them all these years. I've been furious with Jackie ever since she lured Dad out here and you know that. The idea of never seeing Brian again breaks my heart."

Jim stopped walking and crossed his bare arms. "Fighting with him won't help. Hell, fighting with me won't help."

"Maybe it will. Maybe if I piss him off enough we won't miss each other as much. It worked for Dad and Uncle Jonathan. After their fight they never had to worry about driving across Texas again."

"That's silly."

Leah put her head in her hands. "I just want to turn the clock back right now."

"At least turn it back about fifteen minutes and go in and set things right with Brian."

Leah sighed. "I just keep screwing things up, today."

Jim tugged on her sleeve.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm coming."

"Can I talk to you?" Leah settled onto an old teak loveseat in the study. "I'm sorry about that."

"You did warn me." Brian sat in his desk chair, cocked his head to one side, and grinned.

"I'm still sorry. This is a stressful trip. I'm angry already and we talked about the absurd things Jackie's done. All minor infractions in the long run. Not life altering. But, it made me think of the major events and the rage just came bubbling up. I meant everything I said, mind you. I just didn't mean to be so harsh."

Brian rubbed the palm of his hand with his thumb. "Not saying I agree with everything you said, but I do understand. I love both of my sisters but I know she's been hard on you."

"She hasn't been hard on you?"

"Sure, she's been very hard on me. But I'm a guy. I can handle it. I hate what she's done to Ellen by taking her grandparents away from her. That makes me want to string her up. But her lies about me? Fuck her. I don't care. Not like Dad and I have ever gotten along anyway." Brian leaned onto his knees.

"What major events?"

Leah shook her head. "Two conversational calamities a day is my limit, thank you."

"Okay. But if you ever want to talk, I'm here."

"A thousand miles away." Leah grumbled.

"One phone call away."

Leah hung her head and blinked at a burning sensation behind her eyes.

Twenty-Five

Leah

Peck, TX

1979

On an early fall evening, Leah came into the house from a long walk with Bree on halter in the neighbor's pastures and felt, not the comfort of the warmth of home or love of family, but the sudden dissolution of the abiding presence of the Texas thicket. She pulled on her Mueller suit, the face and posture of someone trying to mesh with those four other.

Brian sat on the den couch, tapping a cigarette into a large black ashtray and staring at a football game.

Leah flopped on the loveseat and considered her homework, the coming week, and the clatter of dishes from the kitchen.

"Baby, turn that up."

Leah slapped her hands on the sofa. "You couldn't have asked while I was still standing?" She got up rolled the knurled knob. "Satisfactory?"

"Yeah."

She sank back down into the cushions and after a moment of silence said, "You're welcome."

Brian picked up a wadded piece of notebook paper and threw it at her. "Live with it, brat."

"Love you, too."

"I should have made you get me something from the kitchen, too."

"Made me?" Leah stuck her tongue out at her brother.

Leah felt a draft and turned her head to see Jackie walk behind her on her way to the kitchen.

Minutes later, Jackie walked by again with a wadded piece of bread and tapped Leah's shoulder,

"I need to talk to you."

Leah glanced at Brian.

Jackie stopped at the hall doorway and waited.

Leah heaved herself off the couch and followed Jackie to the little bedroom that faced the front yard.

Full pines, a covered front porch, and dark oak furniture gave the room a cave-like feel.

Jackie sat on her bed and patted the mattress next to her.

Leah sat, leaning slightly toward the door.

Jackie pointed to the wall on the left side of her accordion door closet.

Jesus hung there in a four-inch by six-inch print pinned to the plaster without. He gazed toward the bedroom window as if pleading for release.

"This morning the light came in the room and fell on that picture as I was waking up. It was beautiful." Jackie sighed and leaned her head to one side.

Leah couldn't recall Jackie having been to church since their great grandmother's funeral when Leah was still in her mother's arms. She'd assumed the picture meant nothing more to Jackie than a pretty man with long hair and a beard, or represented a concession to Chris's parents and their Evangelical blather.

"I'm pregnant," Jackie said picking at the damask threading of her maroon comforter. "He," Jackie nodded at the Christ image, "told me I'm meant to have this baby." She took Leah's hands.

Leah looked at their interlocked fingers. "Does Chris know?"

"That I'm pregnant or that I'm keeping it?"

"Yes." Leah looked back to Jesus on the wall.

"I'll tell him tomorrow. He's a good Christian. Abortion is a sin. We've been talking marriage for a while. We're moving in together."

Leah jerked around to stare at her sister. "Isn't living together a sin?"

Jackie's eyes widened. "Shit! Don't tell Mom. We haven't talked to them yet."

"Do Mom and Dad know about the baby?"

"I'm eighteen. It's not their decision."

"So. No." Leah pulled away.

"I thought you'd be happy to be Aunt Leah."

Leah shook her head. "It's a lot to think about."

Jackie's shoulders fell and she turned to shift a picture of Chris on her nightstand.

Leah pressed her lips together and took a breath. "It's great, Jack. I'm happy for you. It's just a lot to think about, like I said."

Jackie smiled and pulled both legs up onto the bed into a lotus position. She rambled about babies and names and getting married.

Leah looked back at the picture of the pretty man on the wall.

On a late afternoon a week later, Leah punched gray clay into a ball.

Jackie knocked on her door and entered without waiting for an invitation.

Leah glanced at her sister and returned her focus to the wad of clay, picking it up and slapping it down on the desk.

Jackie sat on the bed behind her. Jackie's charm bracelet on her left wrist jangled.

"Are you going to talk to me?" Jackie asked.

Leah didn't answer but scooped a tiny bit of water onto the clay to keep it damp and began to pull away lumps.

"You don't understand. You don't know what a choice this was. Chris was so scared. We're too young. The doctor said I probably would have miscarried, anyway." Jackie touched Leah's shoulder.

Leah jerked away. "How convenient for you." Leah pushed and pummeled the clay and pictured the minuscule life now removed from her sister's womb. She slammed her fist into the clay harder.

"You're not being fair, Lea!" Jackie's voice cracked and she slapped her legs.

Leah held her hands up and stared at them, letting the clay dry on them like thick, days-old scabs. The material burrowed under her nails until the quicks ached. "I guess Jesus changed his mind, eh?"

Jackie shuffled from the room, crying.

Leah sat hunched over her desk and clawed the clay until she began to see a sleeping pony that lay within.

Twenty-Six

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Jackie sat on the hospital room's deep windowsill, weak morning light at her back, and listened to her parents chatter.

"When is he supposed to come?" Ruth asked

"Barba? About eleven, I think, babe."

"This morning?"

"Of course, this morning."

"Oh. Okay. What's he going to do?"

"I imagine he's going to tell us your test results."

"When can I go home?"

"You have to do rehab first, Ruth."

"When do I do that?"

"Soon."

"When is the doctor due?"

Jackie closed her eyes, brought both hands up to her head and rubbed her scalp. She hadn't shampooed in a couple of days. Her skin felt pebbly and greasy but somehow pleasant, a tactile distraction from her confused parents.

"Where did you say she was going, Jackie? Jackie?"

Jackie dropped her arms and looked at her father. "Sorry?"

"Where is it Mom is going?"

"The rehab place? Um. I can't think of the name off-hand, Pop. I'll look it up later."

Her mother's internist arrived for rounds in relaxed attire, pleated-front brown canvas pants and white safari shirt. His voice commanded attention but had no edge of arrogance. The desert had drawn many lines on his forehead and cheeks.

Jackie looked out the window, while Barba spoke with Rob and Ruth.

"Ms. Tate?"

Jackie turned back to the doctor and raised her eyebrows.

The doctor waved at her to join him in the hallway.

"Your mother's dementia worsened some with this fall. She may recover and stabilize. Dad's is a little shakier from the stress. He'll bounce back in all likelihood once things calm down and he's getting more rest. But you and your brother need to consider getting some legalities worked out if you haven't already."

"Legalities?"

"Power of attorney. DNR. End of life care."

Jackie stared at the doctor, caught up in the salt-and-pepper waves of thick hair.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." Barba patted her arm. "I know it's hard to face these inevitabilities but we must."

She looked down at his hand as a warm current ran through her. She jumped as Brian rounded the corner.

"Hello, sir!" her brother bellowed and thrust a broad hand out to the doctor.

Barba looked up. "I'm glad you're here. I was just explaining to your sister that in light of your parents' ages and health, you need to get straight on Power of Attorney and whatnot so they and their assets are taken care of if they need to be in a nursing home or hospice or...well."

"Yes, sir. I've been trying to get Dad to take care of that for a couple of years, actually. It's hard to push him to do anything he doesn't want to do. He did finally locate his will but that's as far as we got."

Jackie leaned against the wall and thought about a cigarette and coffee.

"You'll need to push him again. It's harder on the family to have to do these things without their loved one's consent. You don't want that. Courts and all that."

"Understand and agree." Brian rocked on his heels.

"There are people here to help you get started."

"In the hospital?"

"Yes. And in the rehabs usually. Social workers and legal consultants for just such things. Ask at the front desk and they'll get you connected."

"I only have a few minutes before I have to get back to work," Brian said.

Jackie nodded, turned and wandered away until she found herself downstairs and out the door. She stood in the parking lot under a desert willow, trying to suck all of New Mexico's air through one cigarette.

"Hey!" Brian barked at her back.

"What?" She spun around and blew smoke.

"Caught you. Don't worry. I won't tell Will. So let's get together with the social worker on that Power of Attorney business. I can do it after work Wednesday, I think. Maybe sooner. We should call Leah and get her to come as well. She may not want to be involved since she lives so far away but she should get a say."

"Sure," Jackie said.

Jackie watched her brother fold his long legs into his car.

He rolled down the window. "Got another one of those?"

Jackie hesitated.

"Come on. You're just going to tell Will you smell like smoke because of me, anyway."

"No, I won't. Here." She plucked the pack from her purse. "Take the whole pack. I'm not going to smoke ever again."

Brian laughed, took two cigarettes and handed the pack back. "Call me later." He drove out of the hospital parking lot.

Jackie stubbed her cigarette out in the dirt and walked back into the hospital where she stopped at the desk.

"How do I reach the social worker?"

Jackie walked into the hospital room two hours later. Leah sat on a rolling stool borrowed from the nurses' station while Jim leaned against the window sill.

"Where have you been?" Rob growled. "We've been trying to call you."

"Nice to see you, too. I had some things to take care of. My cell's dead. Can't seem to keep the battery charged." She avoided her father's eyes.

Jackie tucked the papers in her hand into her shoulder bag.

"Dad said you talked to Dr. Barba," Leah said.

"I did."

"That's a question, really."

"Mom's healing but slowly. We've got to figure out some things." Jackie sidled up to Ruth's bed.

"Brian was saying last night that the apartment is nigh unlivable for someone with a fractured pelvis. Can't get a wheelchair in there. We're here for a few days. We can help get things in order, you know." Leah crossed her arms.

"Will and I will figure it out. Mom isn't coming home for a while anyway. She'll need rehab."

"I understand that," Leah's voice could have cut steel wool, "But the more we get done now, the easier it will be later. Take advantage of our being here, that's all I'm saying. We don't get to help much."

"Where'd you say Mom is going?" Rob asked.

"I don't know yet, Dad." Jackie leaned on the bed rail.

Jim stood straight and put a hand on Leah's shoulder. "We can talk about this later. How are you feeling, Jackie, you look a little pale."

"A little bucket?" Rob quipped.

Jackie smirked at her father's favorite one-liner but looked back at Leah who fixed her gaze on her.

"Did you bring my glasses?" Ruth asked.

"I brought some glasses. There were six pair in the apartment. One of them ought to work."

"Good. Ellen, El," Ruth huffed and pointed at Leah. "*She* brought pictures of the little one."

Leah flinched as if she'd been slapped, then blinked rapidly.

Jackie smiled. "You brought pictures of the grandbaby? That's great."

Leah kept her eyes on Ruth as Jackie pulled the reading glasses from her bag and helped her mother try them on.

"So what are your plans for the evening?" Jackie asked.

Jim shuffled a moment, "I guess same as last night. Brian's for dinner. Evenings work well for them and days for y'all."

Anxiety tickled Jackie in the gut.

"You could have dinner with Will and I on the hill."

"Me," Rob said.

"What?"

"Will and me."

"Seriously? Shut the fuck up, Dad."

"Jackie!" Leah dropped her hands to her thighs as if to push herself up.

Ruth looked up. "What?"

"Jackie's just teasing Dad." Jim chuckled and reached to still his wife again.

"Chill, Lea. It's a joke." Jackie snorted but trembled as she handed Ruth a different pair of glasses. "How about these, Mom?"

"Crappy-ass joke," Leah mumbled. "I think we'll pass on dinner. Thanks bunches."

"Sarcasm noted."

Leah pushed herself up. "Mama, we're going to take a break, go for a drive and get a snack. That will give you some time with Jackie. Back in an hour or so."

Ruth waved with the pictures in her hand, smiling.

Jackie stared out the window as the two walked past. "Thanks bunches," she muttered. She closed the door behind them and pulled the stool up beside Rob's chair. "Got something for you to fill out, Dad. I've done what I could but I need a few things from you and Mom."

Twenty-Seven

Leah

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Leah walked like she was stomping cockroaches.

"I can see the smoke coming out of your ears." Jim grumbled behind her.

"What do you expect? I never talked to Mom and Dad like that. Joke or no joke. And believe me that was no joke. That was her being cruel and making light of it so I didn't walk over and slap the crap out of her."

"Her time will come."

"You mean Judgment Day? Please. God will just say, 'Let's not cause a scene, Jackie'."

"You don't give God much credit, darling."

"She hasn't given me much to work with today," Leah said. "Can we go somewhere? Like the river or something. I'm going to scream if I don't get away from this place."

"I don't know this town very—"

"We'll get a map. Please! I'm coming out of my skin."

They drove to La Llorona park on the east side of the Rio Grande. Flat valley lay before them and cottonwoods and elms stretched tall to welcome them. The path led them under a bridge and past a mural of a woman whose body snaked along the wall. Her eyes cried dark tears into long, black hair.

"What's her problem?" Jim asked.

"She drowned her kids so she could be with a man. Afterward, she felt bad about it."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously mythologically." Leah stopped, stared at the image, shook her head and walked on.

"Women do dumb shit to be with men."

"Cuts both ways."

"Too true. You and Will put up with the psycho Mueller sisters."

"It's not so bad. Under all that bluster is love and kindness when no one else is looking."

Leah slipped into the open from under the bridge and the sun crashed down on her. She blinked and frowned.

"It's so open here and yet I feel, what? Claustrophobic? Something like that."

"Are you claustrophobic or homesick?"

"Homesick, maybe. I need green. I need water. I mean water that isn't only thirty yards wide."

She nodded at the river.

"Oh, that's fifty yards easily."

Leah stuck her tongue out at her husband who moved in behind her and wrapped his arms around her.

"Too claustrophobic for a hug?"

"I'll manage," She watched tiny swirls on the top of the sluggish river. "Desert dregs."

"It's still pretty."

"It's nice. But it would drive me over the edge. Not that Houston isn't making me nuts. When we get home, I need some beach time. Even if it's just a day at the jetties."

"Sounds great. I could stand to go fishing."

"Fishing, wading, sitting, staring at water. Anything but concrete."

"Gotcha." Jim's voice grew sharp.

"This is beautiful but it's nature's version of concrete. Without green it just leaves me numb."

"I get it, darling."

"Sorry."

"This is green." He reached out and tugged at a shore plant's leaves.

"Okay, you're missing my point. So there's sort of water here and there's sort of green here. It's not the kind of either that I like. And I hate all this sand."

"Beach has sand."

"You know, you're starting to sound as bloody contrary as your wife. And you're ruining my mad." Leah laughed.

Leah took a deep breath and the desert air slipped in like dry wine. She exhaled. "Thank you. I needed clarity. What time is it?"

"Time to make a decision. Go back to the hotel for a nap or go back for another hour or so with your folks."

"Or thirty minutes with Mom and Dad and a short nap. A little time off our dinner with Brian won't hurt either. You know him. As long as he gets a heads up, he doesn't mind."

"Sounds like a plan."

Leah and Jim walked into an empty hospital room.

"Are we on the right floor?" Leah looked at the door. "Mom's name is still here."

"She's probably getting some tests run." Jim paced into the hall.

"But none of her things are here."

"There is that."

Leah whirled out and marched down to the nurses' station.

"Ruth Mueller is no longer in her room. Can you tell me where she is?"

The nurse looked at her computer screen. "You are?"

"Her daughter."

The nurse frowned. "Her daughter is a blond with blue eyes."

"That's my sister."

"Are you on the list?"

"List?" Leah jerked her arm away from Jim's calming touch.

"The list. Your name?"

"Leah Schreiber."

"Sorry, you're not here."

"You've got to be kidding. You can't tell me where she is? She's just in another room, right?"

"Ma'am, if she were in another room, I could tell you that."

"The one time someone actually pays attention to HIPAA. I swear to God."

"Come on, darling. Let's just step outside and try to call her."

They rode the elevator in silence. Leah held herself taut and narrow as three strangers got on at the next floor down. From the lobby, she burst out of the building and flipped her phone open.

"Voice mail! Jacqueline. What is going on? Where's Mom? Where are you? Please call."

They marched on across the concrete, Jim's voice calm at her shoulder. "Call Brian."

"I know." She paced away several feet, phone pressed hard to her ear. "Hey, have you heard from our dear sister? Well, mom's not here. I don't know. That's the problem. I'm guessing rehab. Do you know what rehab she was going to? Great. There aren't that many in Cruces are there? I'll get back to you in a few. Let me talk to my husband." Leah snapped her phone shut.

"Apparently she called him but didn't leave a message. Damn damn damn her. Why does she do this crap?" Leah's throat ached. "I'm going to have to shoot her. That's all there is to it."

"Now, darling."

"Right after I strangle her, poison her, and stomp on her."

"Remind me not to get on your bad side again."

Leah sank down on the bumper of their truck. "How did she do that so damn fast?"

"Obviously, she's been working on this for a while," Jim said.

Leah's head swam. "Too much sun today. I need to go back to the hotel and get some air conditioning and lower my blood pressure."

"I'm all for that." Jim ushered Leah to the truck.

"If she was working this already then she lied right in front of us and to Dad." Leah propped her elbow on the truck door and rested her head on her right hand.

"That surprises you?"

"No. But why do this? Control?"

"Because it's Jackie?"

Leah grunted and threw her head back.

Leah's phone buzzed her left hip in the hotel elevator.

"Brian," she told her husband.

"Hey, big brother. News?"

"Jackie called back. She gave me the name of the place. Got pen and paper?"

"We're on our way to our room. Guess she didn't want to talk to me, eh?"

Her brother chuckled on the other side of the city. "Probably not. She said they're still settling in and are tired so they won't want visitors tonight."

"I can imagine. That's fine. I have no desire to see her. I don't need to go non-linear in front of the folks."

"Let it go, sweetie. Mom's safe. It's all good."

"I just get so sick of her games."

"This could have been unexpected. She might have had to rush things."

"She told us just this morning she didn't have any idea where Mom was going. Even if it was

unexpected, she has a phone, Brian. She can call. Not wait until I'm panicked and furious." Leah waited through her brother's silence. "My husband's reminding me that I need a nap. We'll see y'all for dinner in about an hour and a half."

"Looking forward to it. If you calm down."

"I'll try. No promises."

The Muellers and Schreibers flopped around in the family room after a dinner of vegetarian lasagna and red potatoes lulled them into passivity.

Brian tipped his beer back and took a healthy swig. "Hey, did Jackie talk to you about the Power of Attorney thing?"

Leah sipped hot tea and shook her head.

"I was hoping we'd get it taken care of with you before you leave but she hasn't made any progress, I guess."

"What's it all about?" Jim asked.

"Just gives us all the ability to help Mom and Dad with medical decisions if things get tough."

"And dollars?" Leah put her mug down on the old teak table.

"I don't think so. I don't know. Not that they have any."

"Someone will need to help them with bills and stuff if they end up in a home. I'm going to be a thousand miles away before it's done so I guess it doesn't matter. Kind of expected. If you'd managed to get Dad moving on it before now I wouldn't be in on it anyway. Out of the loop again."

Brian's head bobbed. "I'm sure this rehab thing was out of Jackie's hands."

Lean leaned her head back and stared at the stucco ceiling, feeling the muscle under Jim's forearm. "You're feeling very generous tonight, big brother. How many beers have you had?"

"Two. Exactly as many as I needed. Maybe you need a beer."

Leah sat up, brought her hand down on Jim's thigh with a firm pop. "Excuse me a minute."

"Lea, come on." Brian flung an arm out as Leah walked past. His hand just missed her leg.

"I'm fine. Just got to make a pit stop."

Leah went to the bathroom, washed her hands and sneaked through the study into the kitchen.

She grabbed her sweater from the utility room and slipped out into the cool desert night.

She walked the narrow stone path through globe willow, catalpa, and Mexican elder and down to the mailbox where she could smell the sharp tang of juniper and the deep musk of lantana.

She looked overhead at the dense stars and black dust lanes of the Milky Way. She stretched her arms up and dropped them at her side.

"I know what my problem is, God. I haven't prayed since I got here. I'm flinging all this crap out into the world and living in the world and living in my own selfish head. Here I am in this beautiful place and I feel utterly disconnected from anything remotely spiritual. Is it just coincidence or has she always turned me away from you? It seems that every time I'm here, I'm left adrift in old hurt and anger. Any semblance of faith or forgiveness I'd cultivated back home just melts away.

"I want to be better than this. It's not her fault I'm not. But she sure as hell isn't helping."

"Always talk to yourself?"

"Geez! Ellen! You scared the crap out of your poor old aunt. Yes, I do. I'm the only one who listens to me half the time." Leah linked her arm in Ellen's as the teen drew even with her. "How is it you don't clomp around like your father?"

Ellen kicked out a foot into the starlight. "Bare feet?"

"Never stopped your dad. Should have heard him in our three-story house when we were kids. Gracious! Your papa was always talking about the herd of elephants upstairs and it was just your dad up there tromping around. Never met anyone so heavy-footed. You're like your uncle Jim. He walks around the house like a cat and frightens me all the time. Comes in the room while I'm working and I don't even

notice him until he says something. About come out of my skin."

"Like just now."

Leah snorted.

"You okay, Aunt Leah?"

"Yup. I'm okay."

"Mad at Dad?"

"Nope. Not mad at anyone but myself for letting things get to me. I have lots of flaws but the one I like least is my inability to forgive. Your dad is very forgiving. It's a good thing. I am trying to get better at it. It's harder than I thought."

"Who are you trying to forgive?"

Leah caught her breath.

Twenty-Eight

Leah

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Leah tugged on blue jeans. "Son of a...this damn city puts three pounds on me every time."

"All that good Mexican food," Jim said from the hotel bathroom.

"All the damn tortillas. Me and my addiction to bread."

The slashing, shrieking tone of *Psycho* played from Leah's nightstand.

"Oh, goody. Jackie's calling. Hi, Jack."

Jim walked into the room, naked, half his face smeared with shaving cream.

Leah smiled and leered at her husband. "Let me call you back on that. He's indisposed but I'll ask. Don't know what he has planned for the day." She paused and listened. "You, too."

Leah closed her phone and followed her husband back to the bathroom. "Jackie's invited us to lunch with them on the hill. Noon-ish."

"Sucking up after last night. You want to go?"

"No. But in the interest of family harmony and all that crap, we probably should." Leah reached down and patted Jim's backside.

"Careful there." Jim grinned. "Call her back. We can drop by and see Mom for a while before and after."

Leah turned away and opened her phone.

"Say, darling? You might want to change your ring tone for Jackie."

"Why?"

"She'd flip if she heard it."

"How's she going to hear it? She'd have to call while sitting next to me."

"You don't think she would for that very reason?"

Leah stared at her husband. "Geez, I don't know who's more diabolical."

Jim splashed his face. "I'm just trying to keep up with the Mueller sisters."

"Speaking of keeping up," Leah leaned back into the bathroom, "how about a quickie?"

As Leah and Jim pulled into the driveway on the hill, Rob Mueller climbed into his Toyota pickup.

Leah walked to the driver's side door.

"Hi, Pop. Where you off to?"

"Going to see your mom."

"You're not staying for lunch?"

"I've already eaten. I'll be back in a while." He patted Leah's arm, revved the engine, and drove away.

"Whatever," Leah said to the empty space where the truck had been.

She and Jim stepped inside the creosote-pine gate. She frowned at the state of the back yard. Sand and withered willow blossoms filled the stone pond. Leaves from an elm tree decayed on what little natural grass grew there. Four statuesque cypresses had faded to brown skeletons.

Leah tapped the glass of the sliding door.

"Has anyone ever used a front door in a Mueller house?" Jim asked.

"Strangers." Leah rapped her knuckles on the door.

Will came out of the black hole of the hallway and into the thin light pooling at the patio door.

"Hello there! Was wondering if I'd see you guys out this trip. Come on in."

Leah accepted a quick lean-in hug from her brother-in-law and walked ahead as the two men

shook hands and made welcoming small talk. She passed through the empty kitchen, sniffed and detected no scent of a meal, then went into the dining area, also uninhabited. She continued to the den with the men behind her.

"Hi, Ethan. How are you?"

The eight-year-old sat on the floor with a pile of Legos and toy soldiers strewn around him.

"Say hello, Ethan," Will said.

"Hello." The boy spoke into his chest.

Leah smiled. "I'd rather be playing with Legos, too."

"How are you guys?" Will settled into a recliner.

Leah and Jim sat on a sofa catty corner to him.

"We're good, all things considered. Rather be here under better circumstances." Leah looked around the dark room. Two old chairs from her childhood sat in a corner, still upholstered in the high quality gold material Ruth chose in 1974.

The two engineers talked business. Leah moved to one of the chairs and faced a book shelf across the room. Romance and fantasy novels dominated the space. A handful of mechanical engineering books sat on the highest shelf.

"Darling? You okay? What are you doing?"

"Sitting in this old chair." Seeing Jim's knitted brows, she smiled. "I was trying to remember something about the chairs. What color they were before Mama reupholstered them. Too long ago. Maybe they were green. Everything was either avocado or harvest gold in those days. Where's Jackie?"

Will looked skyward. "Upstairs. Lying down, I think. She'll be down in a while, I'm sure."

Jim raised his eyebrows at Leah who shook her head.

"Grandpa, I'm hungry." Ethan flopped on his back on the floor.

"Is that how you ask?"

The boy sighed and kicked one leg out. "May I have lunch?"

"You may. If you will excuse me. I need to make him a sandwich."

With Will and Ethan out of the room, Jim threw his hands up. "What the hell, over?"

"You got me, my love. Maybe we should leave soon. I think we're interrupting Will's afternoon."

Leah returned to Jim's side. "This is bizarre." She leaned on his shoulder. "I never know what to expect up here. You doing okay? Hunger wise?"

Will clattered a plate on the dining table behind them. "Can I get you guys anything?"

"You know, Will. I think we'll head out. You're busy and Jackie's sleeping so we'll do this some other time." Jim stood.

"Don't you need to speak to Jackie?"

"That's okay." Leah tugged on Jim's arm.

"What's going on?" Will guided Ethan to his chair at the table. "Sit down and eat."

"It's just a miscommunication, I'm sure." Jim smiled. "No problem."

"Why don't we step outside a minute." Will nodded at Ethan.

"Little ears!" Ethan squeaked through sandwich crumbs.

"Too smart for his own good, isn't he?" Leah said as the three adults trooped onto the patio.

"It's no big deal. Just confusing. Jackie called this morning and invited us to lunch," Leah said.

"Today? Are you sure?" Will turned his head like a curious bird.

"I didn't imagine it," Leah snapped.

"Of course not. It's just that she didn't say anything to me and she rarely cooks these days. This is easy to fix. We can go get lunch or I can order a pizza. Please don't leave. It's just a misunderstanding. Come back in. I'll go talk to Jackie."

"I'm not sure about that, Will." Leah held a hand out as if to stop him.

"Nah, it'll be fine. She probably just forgot. Mornings are a bit unclear for her sometimes."

*

"I must have sleep dialed," Jackie sat on the step between the dining room and living room.

"Sleep-dialed?" Leah paced in the living room, looking at polished thundereggs and small Santa Clara pots.

"When I called you this morning I must have been dreaming."

"So you dreamed of calling us?" Jim stretched and yawned over his growling stomach.

"I did actually call you, but I wasn't really awake when I did it."

"That means you had to be sleep-talking when I called you back and confirmed we were coming." Leah pivoted on one heel and studied her sister.

Jackie stood up. "I think the pizza's here."

"Is it weird to be a grandma?" Jackie leaned over an empty plate.

"No more so for me than for you. It's pretty great." Leah pulled another onion off the pizza slice and put it in the pile on her plate.

"Sure, but you're so young. What with you having Lyssa when you were like, twelve."

Will's mouth fell open. "Really?"

Leah grimaced. "I was eighteen. Too young, no doubt. It was okay, though, and now I have an amazing daughter and granddaughter. I love being Grandma." She wiped the last bit of pizza grease from her hands. "As much as I love being Mom."

Jackie watched Ethan bang robots together and make crashing noises. "I guess I can't tell the difference."

"What does that mean?" Will started clearing the table.

"You're still in mom mode, aren't you?" Jim stood and picked up his plate.

Jackie laid a finger to the side of her nose. "You nailed it."

"Too true." Will picked up Jackie's plate.

"How is Nikki? Leah handed her plate to her brother-in-law.

Will, dirty utensils in hand, shook his head and pointed a fork at Ethan.

"As if he doesn't know," Jackie said. "She's off gallivanting around with some guy or another doing God knows what. As long as she's on the you-know-what, I don't care what she's doing." Jackie followed Will into the kitchen.

"Fruit. Tree. Trajectory," Leah whispered as she and Jim trooped back to the den sofa.

Ethan spoke into a rolled up comic book aimed at Leah. "What's a traj-uh-tee."

Leah chuckled.

"Let me see your airplane, Ethan." Jim pointed to the plastic plane on the floor.

The little boy retrieved the toy and gave it to Jim.

Jim held it up, poised to fly. "If I throw it, it will make an arc and fall down to the floor. That path is its trajectory."

"Or tragedy," Leah mumbled.

"Throw it!"

"Throw what? We don't throw anything in this house. You know better, Ethan William Tate."

Jim laughed. "It's okay, Grandma. I wasn't going to. Here, Ethan. I was explaining trajectory to him."

Jackie rolled her eyes. "You and Will. Trying to turn my grandson into some kind of engineer or something."

"It's not so bad." Leah patted Jim's leg as they squeezed close together. She watched fruit generation number two threaten to throw the plane across the room. His sharp, hard little eyes met hers and she narrowed her gaze.

Ethan lowered his eyes and plunked the plane at his feet.

"I want him to do something creative," Jackie said and sat on the den step again.

"He'll do what he wants to do with his life no matter what we say." Will stepped down into the den from the foyer. "Just like his mother."

"It's a Mueller tradition. In fact, push a Mueller one direction," Leah said, "and she'll go the opposite. Trajectory is physics. Life is something else. Not a one of us has taken the path our parents would have chosen for us."

"Is that so?" Will sat next to Jackie and wrapped an arm around her waist. "Sweetie?"

"I think that's true." Jackie rubbed her scalp.

"Not to say those paths would have been better. Just that they were different. I'm not talking about our marriages. I'm talking about our educations, our careers or lack thereof."

"Your kid." Jackie spat the words out.

Leah leaned her head back and closed her eyes, saw flashes of Lyssa from towheaded toddler to teen to responsible married mother. "Yes, my kid. I'm very proud of her. She was worth the pain of being a single mom."

"She wasn't what Mom and Dad wanted for you."

"Once she came along, they loved her dearly. Just like you love him." Leah tilted her head toward Jackie's grandson.

"Speaking of him." Will clapped his hands together. "Time for a nap, kiddo."

"Aw! Grandpa!" Ethan dropped his toys and stuck out his lower lip. "Please, can I stay up?"

"Come on." Will led the child out of the room.

The three in the den listened for a closed door.

Jackie stretched her legs. "Of course, we love him. But it was Hell to watch Nikki throw away her education and get harassed by the father's family and get sick with pre-eclampsia. All because she

couldn't remember to take a pill once a day."

Leah clenched her jaw.

"But the alternative wasn't really an option. I couldn't let her do that. Anyway, she wouldn't have. She wanted him. She thought she did."

Leah pressed her thigh against Jim's.

Will returned and sat in his recliner. "Now that the boy is down, what's this about taking Ruth and Rob to Houston?"

Leah glared at Jackie then at Will. "No one is taking them to Houston."

"That's not how I understood it."

"Then let me elucidate. I expressed to Jackie that if Mom and Dad wanted or needed transport to or residence in Houston, we could accommodate them."

"They're hardly being held against their will, Leah." Will crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair.

"Of course not. But all their savings are gone. Even if they wanted to leave, they couldn't. We're offering resources to them if they need to or want to." Leah took a deep breath and pressed herself tighter to Jim.

"What makes you think they'd want to?"

"It's not that," Jim said.

Leah put her hand up. "As I told my sister, I don't think they would. But if they need medical care they can't get here or you can't care for them for some reason, we have resources in Houston."

"I don't understand why this is coming up now." Jackie yanked Leah's attention away from Will.

"It isn't just now, Jackie. We've told Mom and Dad this several times in the past. Now we're telling you."

"You're not going to talk Dad into anything."

"For God's sake, Jack, it's a hypothetical. Like, 'What if the Germans won the war? What if Nikki had taken her pill? What if Mom and Dad need something Mountain View doesn't have?'"

"I know what a hypothetical is."

"Then stop acting like what I'm saying is so bloody incomprehensible. What's incomprehensible is why you invited us here for lunch after pulling that vanishing act with Mom last night. I thought you were going to explain that but you've only baffled me more."

Jackie leapt to her feet. "I invited you so I could apologize for last night."

Leah looked her sister up and down. "So, you remember inviting us?"

Jackie locked eyes with Leah. "I remember now." She walked toward the kitchen. "But I don't think I'm up for that apology now."

"I wouldn't put much stock in it anyway," Leah mumbled.

Ethan's bedroom door squeaked.

Will sat forward and spoke in a low tone. "Maybe we should table this. Ethan's awake."

"I've said what I need to say. Three times, now." Leah threw her hands up and got up. "I'm sorry it was so unpleasant. Not surprised, but sorry." She held her hand out to her husband. "Shall we? I know I've worn out what little welcome I had."

Jim nodded. "A moment with you, Will?"

"Where are you going?" Jackie snapped as the two men walked through the kitchen.

Leah walked to the kitchen door. "Jim's going to apologize for his wife's temper and smart mouth and blame it on dwindling hormones and forty-plus years of sibling rivalry."

Jim turned and shook his finger at Leah.

"Not that simple is it?" Leah asked her sister.

Jackie shook her head and left the kitchen.

Leah listened as Jackie's footsteps retreated up the spiral stairs to the loft bedroom.

Twenty-Nine

Jackie

Nassau Bay, TX

1982

Jackie heard dishes clatter and bang in the kitchen downstairs. The sound carried well in the open architecture of the Houston townhome. She looked at the tortoiseshell cat curled at her feet.

"That doesn't sound good."

She waited several minutes. When the clanging escalated to a smash and tinkle of broken glass, she set her romance novel aside and left her room.

"Mom?" she called from the top of the stairs.

"I'm fine, Jacqueline."

Jackie hesitated, huffed and walked down to the kitchen.

Her mother bent over a shattered glass, snatching up the pieces by hand.

"Mom! You're bleeding."

"Who cares?"

"Jesus, Mom. Stop that!" Jackie rushed in and grabbed Ruth's hands and pulled her away.

"What's the matter with you?"

Ruth dropped the shards on the floor and sobbed. "You darn kids can't do a thing right."

"What did I do?" Jackie released Ruth's hands and backed up, stepping on the glass. "Ow! Shit!"

"Stop cussing!" Ruth screamed.

Jackie spun and stomped out and back up the stairs. She swept the cat off the bed. "Get out of here you fucking fleabag."

The cat dug claws into carpet and fled.

Jackie pulled her left sock off. She'd scraped the heel but hadn't broken the skin. She threw herself back on the pillows. "What the fuck did I do?" She put the sock back on, changed clothes, and slid into tennis shoes.

Ruth opened the door.

"You could knock." Jackie grabbed her purse. "I'm going for a drive."

"Sit down." Ruth pointed to the bed, closed the door behind her, and leaned against it.

Jackie set her jaw and flopped on the bed.

"Thank you. I have to apologize. I was upset with your sister. I'm sorry I took it out on you."

"What did Miss Perfect do?"

Ruth sighed. "I was upset with her, but I do wish you wouldn't cuss around me. Can you give me that much?"

Jackie looked into blue eyes so much like her own. "I'll try to do better, Mama."

"Thank you. Where are you going?"

"Just out."

Ruth nodded.

"What did Leah do?" Jackie ducked her head as if waiting for a blow.

Her mother closed her eyes and let out a long, deep breath. "She's pregnant."

Jackie sat up straight. "Oh, really."

Ruth released the door behind her. "Marcus says he wants to be a father. She's keeping it."

"That's bullshit!"

Ruth threw her hands up and opened the door.

"Mama, wait. I'm sorry. They're barely eighteen. How can they support a baby?"

Ruth swiveled out the door. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"Does Daddy know?"

"Your father is in Paris. I'm not calling him with this news."

Jackie jumped up and grabbed Ruth's arm. "You can't let her do this."

Ruth spoke through gritted teeth. "I won't be part of that again, Jackie." She turned and walked to the stairs.

Jackie raced after her. "It's not fair. I didn't get to keep mine."

"I didn't make that choice, Jackie."

"If Daddy had been there, he would have made me keep it."

Ruth looked down the stairs and leaned forward. "No one made you do anything you didn't want to do."

"Chris did." Jackie hung her head.

"And we begged you time and again to stop seeing him." Ruth lurched forward and stepped down.

"I couldn't. I couldn't." Jackie turned and plodded back to her bed. She collapsed in her bed and balled up her pillow under her head. "I can't."

Thirty

Ruth

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Ruth watched little birds flit into the pecan tree outside her window at the Golden Valley Rehab center. Rob sat next to her in a green padded chair, changing channels on the overhead television.

Someone tapped on the door.

"Come in." Rob turned the sound down on the television. "Hey, kids."

Ruth's youngest daughter walked in with her husband following her.

Ruth grinned. "Hi, El—, Oh. Shoot!"

"Not Ellen." Rob put his magazine aside. "Leah. Leah Katherine."

"I know who she is." Ruth dismissed her husband with a wave. She patted the side of her bed.

Leah sat on the mattress next to her.

"How's it going?" Jim walked to the end of the bed and leaned on the low dresser under the television.

"Watch your head, son." Rob pointed up.

Jim looked overhead. "Looks like I'm about three inches shy, Dad."

Leah watched the little birds.

Ruth held her hand. "Tired, baby?"

Leah shook her head. "Why? Do I look it?"

Ruth raised her hand, thumb and forefinger a fraction of an inch apart.

"It's this desert air. It's sucked all the Houston humidity out of my skin and makes me look like a cadaver."

Ruth pointed at her wheelchair. "Get that."

"You need it?"

"You sit in it. It's comfy."

Leah pulled the chair up to the bedside and sat in it.

"Where were you, today?" Ruth asked.

Leah leaned her chest against the bed and laid her head next to Ruth. "In hell."

"What?"

"She's kidding, Mom. We had lunch on the hill. It was fine."

"I see." Ruth rested her hand on Leah's head and stroked her daughter's fine auburn hair across her forehead and temples and down her neck.

"Thanks, Mama. Lyssa still likes me to do that for her when she's tired. I passed on the tradition."

Leah sniffled.

"That's nice." Ruth resumed looking out the window.

"How's work, daughter?" Rob asked.

Leah mumbled into the bed. "The usual. A lot of sitting around getting fat."

Ruth tugged a handful of Leah's hair. "You're not fat."

Leah sat up and smiled at her mother.

"She could lose a few pounds," Rob grumbled.

"Rob!" Ruth patted Leah's cheek. "He's just a grouchy old man who hasn't had his dinner."

Leah sat up. "That's soon, eh?"

Ruth squinted. "I don't know. Is it?"

Rob looked at his watch. "It's supposed to be. I'm starved."

Leah's husband chuckled. "We could have brought you pizza."

"Criminy! Did they have pizza again?" Rob shook his head. "That little boy is going to turn into

pizza. My daughter has forgotten how to cook. If it's not pizza, it's fried chicken. Yet somehow Jackie stays so thin."

"Anyone can stay thin by not eating, Dad. Never saw anything on her plate." Leah sat back in the wheelchair.

"Of course she eats, just not as much as you. Will has the same problem. He's gotten fat, too."

"That's my cue, hubby. I'm ready to call it a day." Leah stood.

Ruth grabbed her daughter's hand. "Are you leaving already?"

"We just came by to say a quick hello. It's on the way back into town." Leah leaned in and kissed Ruth. "I love you, Mama. You've always been there for me," she whispered into Ruth's left ear. She stood, clenched Ruth's hand, and stepped away. "We have evening plans with the other Mueller clan and I'd like to get some rest before dinner."

Rob picked up his magazine and flipped through it. "Fine. Have a nice evening."

"Thanks. You, too." Jim waved to Rob and bent to hug Ruth. "See you tomorrow."

"She's always been good to you," Ruth said as the door closed behind Leah and Jim.

"Who?" Rob pressed the call button on Ruth's bed.

"Our youngest."

"So?" Rob stood and wandered to the other side of the room.

"Why say those things?" Ruth picked a tissue out of the box on her nightstand and dabbed her eyes.

"Because they're true."

Ruth slammed her hands to the bed. "I don't call you an ass, but it's true."

Rob's jaw fell open.

The door opened and a nurse walked in. "Did you need something, Ms. Ruth?"

Ruth shook her head and pointed at her husband. "I think he needs to eat."

Thirty-One

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Jackie walked into Ruth's rehabilitation room at 6:30 p.m.

"There's my pretty girl. Is that my coffee?" Rob shuffled toward her.

Jackie handed him the plastic cup.

Ruth cradled a cup of water in her hands and stared at the television.

"Mom?"

Ruth's eyes slid left toward Jackie. "Hm?"

"You okay? Did Leah and Jim come by?" Jackie sat on the end of the bed.

Ruth looked back at the screen overhead and nodded. "We had a nice visit."

"Glad someone did."

"She didn't seem happy?" Rob set his coffee on the floor next to his chair.

"She was a bitch, as always."

"Jackie, please." Ruth reached to put her cup on her nightstand.

"Your mother's already upset, Jackie."

"What's she upset about?" Jackie put her hand on her hip.

"I'm just sad. That's all." Ruth tugged a tissue from her sweater pocket.

"Bullshit! Leah did something to upset you."

"She didn't." Tears filled Ruth's eyes.

Jackie turned to her father. "Well?"

Rob frowned at her and shook his head.

Jackie paced out into the hallway, then stormed back. "They went to Brian's, didn't they? I'll be back in a while."

"Jackie?" Ruth's voice squeaked through the gap in the door as Jackie slammed it shut.

Jackie pulled into Brian's driveway, swung her car door open, and charged to the house. She banged on the Mueller back door.

Brian opened the door. "Hey, Jackie. Come on in. We were just going to head out to dinner."

"I want to talk to my sister. Outside."

"Lea!" Brian yelled. "You sure you can't come in?"

"I'll be out here, thank you."

Moments later, the screen door clanged and Leah and Jim crunched across the driveway.

"What's up?" Leah shoved her hands in her jeans pockets.

"What the hell did you say to Mom?"

Leah shook her head. "Nothing. Why?"

"You must have said something to her because she's all upset. You told her you were coming back for them, didn't you?" Jackie stepped toward Leah.

Leah threw her hands up and looked heavenward. "You're bloody kidding me. How many times do we have to go through this?"

Jim moved in between them. "Let's calm down."

"What did you say, Leah? She's up there crying her eyes out because of you and she won't talk to me."

"All I did was tell her I love her. I've explained things at least three times already and you still think I'm trying to take them from you. Jesus Christ, Jackie!"

"Darling."

Leah glared at her husband.

Jackie stuck a finger in Jim's chest. "You stay out of this."

Jim shook his head. "I don't think so."

Jackie's head hummed. "I don't buy it for a minute, Miss Innocent. Something upset her and you were there."

Leah pushed past her husband and stopped inches from Jackie's face. Her green eyes narrowed. "You don't get it, Jackie. Mom cries because she wants to come back and can't. Because it's too fucking late. Because you and Dad dragged her out here fifteen years ago and separated us so you could prove they loved you more."

"She stayed, didn't she?" Jackie leaned forward.

Jim put his arm between the two women. "Come on, guys. Can we please—"

"She stayed because she does everything for Dad. She gave up everything for him when he was giving up everything for you. She stayed because you pissed away his money on all that crap in the workshop and there was nothing left for her. Poor little Jackie can't survive without her daddy. Then you go and treat him like shit and tell him to fuck off."

"He owed me!" Jackie sobbed.

"Owed you? For what?"

The screen door slammed and Brian walked out into the driveway.

"He was never there when I needed him." Jackie slapped at tears streaming down her face.

"He was never there for any of us." Leah swept her hand toward Brian. "The old man screwed up. Get over it. Look, you're going to get Power of Attorney, right? You're holding all the cards. They're not going anywhere."

Jackie clenched and unclenched her hands at her sides. "Damn straight!"

"Then get the hell out of my face." Leah waved both hands at Jackie.

Brian woke up from his shock and stepped in. "Can we maybe take this down a notch and talk like adults."

Leah looked at Brian as if he had dropped out of the sky. "I'm not going to talk to her another second. I'm done." She turned toward the house.

Jackie's roared and she ran after her little sister. "Little Miss Goody Two Shoes. Always right, aren't you? You've had your say and now I don't get mine. Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!" She grabbed at Leah's shirt but thick arms wrapped around her waist, lifted her off the ground and set her down several feet away.

"Fuck you, too, Jim!"

"I know. I know. Brian?" Jim nodded to Brian.

"Cogent argument, Jack," Leah said and disappeared inside.

Jackie slumped. Brian took her by the shoulders and led her back to her car. She wrapped herself in her own arms and gritted her teeth.

"Why does she hate me so much? I don't care. I hate her, too. She always gets her way." Jackie threw her arms up, opened her car door, and flopped into the driver's seat.

"I do everything for Mom and Dad and no one appreciates it."

Brian nodded. "I tell you what. Let me get you some coffee. You sit here and I'll be right back." He walked toward the house.

Jackie stared straight ahead, turned the engine over, and drove out of the driveway.

Thirty-Two

Ruth

Las Cruces, NM

2010

Ruth sat on the edge of her bed, feet dangling, hand resting on the arm of her wheelchair. Her husband lay in the bed beside her, legs crossed, half-listening to Brian ramble about a fellow postal worker who cussed him out for taking the afternoon off.

Leah and Jim came in, both grinning.

"We heard you all the way from the lobby, Brian. Maybe we should close the door." Leah hugged her brother. "Hi, Mama. Hi, Dad." She bent and kissed Ruth and turned back to Brian. "So you were summoned as well?"

"Yup. I was told to be here or be square and I's do what I's told."

"Since when!" Rob snapped.

Ruth patted Rob's shoulder and winked at Brian.

"Do we know why we were summoned?" Jim took up his position against the dresser.

"You don't?" Brian crossed his arms and leaned against the wall near the window, "Jackie said she's bringing new Power of Attorney papers and her friend, the notary.

Leah sat on the empty bed. "Actually, Dad called me and just said come back over."

"You were here already, today?"

Leah nodded. "Came by and visited after breakfast for a couple of hours. A wonder Mom isn't sick of us."

Ruth held her hand up. "Hello? Can someone help me into my chair?"

"Sure, Mom." Jim walked over and eased Ruth into her wheelchair. She patted his hand.

"When do you guys leave?" Rob asked.

"Tomorrow a.m., about four. We try to make the trip in one day." Leah pulled her legs up and tucked them under her in lotus position.

Someone knocked on the door.

The group welcomed the petite nurse with a chorus of "come ins."

"Ms. Mueller? It's time for your exercise," the nurse announced.

Ruth waved goodbye to her family. "Love you."

"How long does that take?" Leah asked as Ruth rolled out the door.

Ruth rolled back to her room. "Everyone is here. How nice."

"Not everyone. Jackie still hasn't showed," Leah said and leaned against the headboard of the second bed. "Fine for us. We don't have to be any place."

Brian paced. "I do."

"Sit down, son."

"Thanks, Mom, but I've been sitting while you were gone." He took his phone out of his pocket and flicked his thumb over the screen. "Jackie, where are you? We're waiting. I took off work for this." Brian ducked out of the room.

"You want to get back in bed, honey?" Rob asked.

"I'm fine. I like my chair." Ruth rested her elbow on the chair arm and rested her cheek on her hand. "What did you do while I was gone?"

"B.S.'d mostly. What we always do." Leah sat up and moved closer to Ruth.

Brian returned with red cheeks and neck. "She'll be here, 'in a while.'"

Ruth smiled. "Lordy, I am so tired." She closed her eyes and drifted off to the music of their voices.

*

Ruth's nap ended when Jackie and Will arrived.

"Sorry I'm late. I waited for my husband to get home so I could have someone on my side."

Rob frowned. "Where's my great grandson?"

Will grimaced under dark-rimmed eyes. "Ethan's with his mother."

Ruth blinked. "Hi, Sweetie."

"Hi, Mama." Jackie threw her purse on the empty bed, just missing smacking Leah in the back.

In her left hand she carried a sheaf of paper.

Ruth smiled as Will ushered in a dark-haired woman in her sixties. Her scarecrow frame rattled in her polyester suit.

"This is Marla Nuñez. She's a notary and a friend of Jackie's who was kind enough to help us today," Will said.

The woman nodded at everyone.

Will closed the door and stood behind Jackie and Marla.

"Here!" Jackie slapped paper down next to Leah. "And here's a pen. Have at it. The places you need to sign are marked. I'm sure you can figure it out. You're so much smarter than me."

Leah shot a glance at Rob and he snapped his mouth shut.

Leah picked up the papers and shuffled them.

"Well?" Jackie growled.

"It's fine, Jack."

"You going to sign or what?"

"I'll sign. I just wanted to be consulted. Treated like an adult member of the family."

"You got what you wanted. You always do. Always have."

"Always have?" Leah dropped her shoulders and shook her head.

Jackie sat on the bed facing the door, then stood again.

"Sit down and relax, sweetheart." Ruth rolled toward Jackie a few inches.

"I can't, Mom. I was attacked last night and I'm still angry."

"By whom?"

"Her!" Jackie jabbed her finger at Leah.

Leah tightened her shoulders. "It was a mutual attack."

"Leah got her way. She always does."

"You keep saying that and I don't know what you mean." Leah put the papers aside. "I think it was pretty even."

"I can't think right now but you did. Like...like, I got pregnant and they made me have an abortion, but you got knocked up and you got to keep yours."

"I should step out, now." Marla squeezed around Will and slipped out the door.

"Our memories of how that went down are quite different." Leah stood and moved away from the bed to stand next to Jim.

"Then your memory is wrong!"

"Fine. You're right, Jackie. Your life was more tragic than mine. Can we not do this, please?"

"No! You said awful things last night and you are not going to skate by, today." Jackie grabbed Will's sleeve.

Ruth looked out the window and blinked against her stinging, dry eyes.

"Leah, I don't think you would be so hard on Jackie if you knew what she went through," Will said.

Ruth turned back to Jackie.

Will pried Jackie's fingers from his sleeve and held her hand. "Come on, sit down." He led Jackie

to the bed.

"What she went through?" Ruth asked.

Jackie sniffled. "When I was little."

Leah let out an explosive sigh. "All due respect, Will, you weren't there."

"All due respect, Leah, neither were you. Not as I understand it."

"What are—" Ruth started.

"When I was five, Uncle Wynn. He...he raped me." Jackie blurted.

"In addition to granddaddy?" Leah crossed her arms.

"Leah Katherine!" Ruth shrieked.

"That's her story, Mama. Not mine."

Jackie shuddered. Ruth inched her wheelchair up to her older daughter. "Please, no, Jackie."

Brian spoke up, "She's talking about Wynn Huckle. He told her to call him Uncle. He had a dog."

"You were always so busy, Mama. You never paid any attention to me because of Leah. I thought it was Granddaddy, but it was Uncle Wynn."

"I don't recall. I'm so sorry, honey." Ruth laid her hand on Jackie's trembling arm.

"I don't know what to believe." Leah glared at the floor.

"Leah, that's not fair." Will glared at her.

"For years, supposedly it was Granddaddy. Now it's some guy I've never heard of. Who else? Dad? Brian?"

"I'm telling the truth!" Jackie screamed.

"God knows you've always been truthful." Leah threw her hands up.

Ruth put her hands to her ears. "Stop! Sisters shouldn't do this. Stop it!"

The door swung open and an orderly filled the doorway. "¡Señoras, por favor!"

Jackie collapsed forward into her hands, sobbing. Leah turned bright red and walked to the

window, pushing past Brian.

Ruth pulled herself to the end of the bed with her slippered feet, her hands shaking too much to turn the wheels. "We're all right, Chuy. I'm sorry."

Jim bent his head toward the man. "Sorry about that. Tough times. We'll keep it down."

"Don't make me come back now." The man looked down at Ruth. "You sure you're okay, Miss Ruth?"

Ruth nodded.

Chuy shook his finger and glared at the others, and left, closing the door behind him with a soft clunk.

"I'm sorry, Mama," Leah said.

Jackie sniffled loudly. "I'm telling the truth."

Leah held her breath a moment, then let it out in one long exhalation.

Ruth pushed herself back and held her daughter's hand. "Jackie, my daddy never touched anyone."

Jackie shook her head. "No, mama."

"Then what the hell, Jack?" Brian barked.

Ruth held her hand up.

Jackie looked her mother in the eyes. "I couldn't tell you."

"But why blame my daddy?"

"When I went to that therapist, that's what she suggested and that's what I remembered. But, once I remembered Huckle, I couldn't take it back."

"Sure you could. You could have saved Mom the hurt and the rest of us a lot of anger. Not to mention I might have believed you." Leah spoke from far away behind Ruth.

Jackie shook her head. "I'm sorry. Mama?"

Ruth patted Jackie's hand. "It's okay." She dabbed at tears.

Jackie leaned around Ruth to see her sister at the window. "Leah? Can you forgive me?"

Leah dropped her head against the window glass. The air between Ruth's daughters swam with dust motes and long seconds.

"Yeah."

"Your sincerity is underwhelming, dear," Rob mumbled.

"To paraphrase my brother-in-law, you wouldn't be so hard on me if you knew what she blah blah blah."

"What does that mean?" Jackie sniffled.

Leah turned and looked at Ruth.

Ruth shook her head. "Leah." The name fell out like a stone.

"Never mind. None of it matters." Leah stepped away from the window. "I'm sorry about the baby, Jackie. Whatever the reason, it shouldn't have come to that choice for you. I shouldn't have been so hard on you. I was young and self-righteous."

"Is that why you hate me?"

"We've done some pretty crappy stuff to each other and some crappier stuff to Mom and Dad. I'm angry about all of it. I'm as angry with myself as I am with you. I can't fix any of it. It's too late."

"You can be nice to each other." Ruth's voice cracked.

"Amen," Jim whispered next to Leah.

Brian spoke up behind Ruth. "If your friend didn't run screaming in terror back to town, we can start with those papers."

"I'll go find her." Will stepped out of the room.

Jackie stood, walked to Leah, wrapped her arms around her and sobbed.

Leah laid limp hands on Jackie's shoulders. Her eyes flickered over Ruth and out to the pecan

tree.

Ruth followed her daughter's gaze, hoping for birds.

Thirty-Three

Ruth

Tripoli, Libya

1969

Ruth awoke chatty and alert and bounded down the hall of the bungalow when the phone rang at three in the morning after Kate went into labor on the other side of the world. She snatched the handset to her ear and heard the crackle of distant wires.

"Mama?"

"It's Daddy, Ruthie." His voice struggled to make the journey across the Atlantic.

"Daddy! Hi!"

"Ruthie. They're gone. Katie..."

"What? Gone?"

"Katie...Something tore. I don't understand it all. She and the baby are gone."

"No. No, Daddy, no."

Ruth slammed the receiver down hard, three times. "No! No! No!" and fell to the floor with a long, high wail.

Rob stumbled from the bedroom and Brian fell in behind.

"Mama?"

"Go back to bed, Brian."

"But..."

"Go back to bed, son," Rob snapped.

Ruth lay howling on the floor where Rob tried to gather her up. She resisted him.

"What's wrong. What happened?"

She wouldn't tell him. Wouldn't make it real.

The phone rang.

"No. Don't answer."

Rob picked up the phone.

"No!" Ruth crawled away from him. Brian reappeared and came to her side. She pulled him in and clung to him.

"Thanks, Walt. I'm so terribly sorry. So sorry. I'll take care of her. We'll get there as soon as possible."

Ruth began sobbing again.

Thirty-Four

Leah:

West Texas

2010

Leah and Jim and the Chevy truck poured off the mesas of the Trans-Pecos where the mesquite squatted low in the sand as if retreating from the brutal sun. At Sierra Blanca, a border officer brushed a drug dog blowing his coat for the summer. Tufts of the German Shepherd's coat floated on the wind and cliff swallows twisted down from the awning rafters, snatching up the fur for nesting material. Another officer asked Jim as to their citizenship, which Jim confirmed.

"You always sound overly cheerful. As if you have to convince him," Leah said.

"It's hard not to be nervous when a guy with a gun on his hip and wearing a Kevlar vest is bellowing at you in the middle of the desert."

"I'd be the same way. It's discomfiting." Leah put added tongue on the t.

Jim glanced at Leah, looked back to the road and shook his head.

"What?"

"Why can't you just say, 'It's uncomfortable'?" He asked.

"It's not the word that came to mind. What does it matter?"

"You just criticized me for my reaction to Border Patrol and used one of your words, and it makes me feel like you're trying to be superior."

"First, I didn't criticize you. I made an observation about something that I might do just as well. Second, it's not my word. It's a word that was in my head. I don't go looking for a word to make things sound superior. I look for words that seem to fit best. I'm sorry if that feels like I'm talking down to you, but it isn't. It's just how I was trained to speak and write."

The road hummed while Leah caught her breath.

"And, by the way, you might have noticed sometimes I can't find the word I want and I say things like, "It makes me feel icky. Other times I get things just plain wrong." Leah sank into her seat and stared out at the beige all around them.

"It sure felt like criticism." Jim gripped the steering wheel and stretched his back.

"I'm sorry. I'll be more careful in the future." Leah dug her fingernails into the soft flab on the underside of her right upper arm until she could feel the skin break.

"I'd rather you say, *icky*."

"You'd rather I'd be something I'm not to make you feel secure? Sounds like we're both criticizing each other, now. Which makes neither of us perfect, eh?"

"I'm not criticizing you."

"Yes, you are. You're saying I'm flawed because I prefer to use specific words instead of bowing to your ego like a good little wife would do."

Jim slammed his fist into the steering wheel. "How the hell did we get here?"

"We drove!" Leah snapped.

"Thanks, smart ass."

"I wasn't being smart ass. I'm serious. You've been driving for days and I've been caught up in family crap the whole time. We aren't connecting, so we're sniping at each other. That's how we got here." Leah held back tears. Tears only made him angrier.

Jim switched the radio on, scanned station after station of country music, Tejano, and bland chatter, then gave up and switched the radio back off. The rumble of the tires on pavement at eighty mph and the groans of the desert wind were the only sounds for ten miles.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," Leah said.

Jim looked out the driver's side window a moment, then back to the highway. "I'm sorry, too.

Every time I think of your folks moving out here and the strain it's put on me. On us. It sets me on edge. Doesn't it do that to you?"

Leah leaned her seat back and put her feet on the dash. "Not so much. But they're my family, and you don't let me drive, so it's not nearly so hard on me as it is on you. If I were driving a thousand miles to visit your family while you slept, I'd probably be a basket case, God's honest truth. Don't know how you've done it this long without just abandoning me in Cruces."

"Don't think I haven't considered it. You're too good in bed. Besides, the dogs would miss you."

"Hmph! You'd find someone else for the sex but who else would feed those idiot dogs?"

Leah and Jim settled back into their seats, backs rounded and shoulders down.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"About?"

"You know. That 'blah blah blah' part about Jackie."

"It was pointless. More screaming and hollering just to be told I've got it wrong or I made it up or imagined it or brought it on myself or God knows what rationale would have been thrown at me when the truth is, I should just let it go. She wants me to forgive her for dragging Granddaddy through the mud for twenty years so why not go a few steps further and forgive her for all the other crap?"

As they made their way into the state's interior, the smell of Texas crude stung their noses and eyes. The land began to move, a prickly, undulating, tan sea shifting into soft greens as they neared the Hill Country.

The farther Leah got from Jackie, the more preoccupied she became with how the stay in Las Cruces ended. Her mind felt like a rubber band pulled tight, ready to snap at any moment and send her flying into confusion again.

The darkness and ugliness that had pooled in her heart had dissipated but there remained a

dissatisfaction she struggled to contain.

"You going to nap?"

"No. I'm wide awake." An old U2 tune slid through her mind.

"You haven't napped much on this trip."

"Lots to think about."

She usually found the miles of scrub and sun exhausting and the rehashing of the gatherings numbing. Instead, she'd turned over every facet of the visit as if cleansing each memory from the past five days. She opened each event, spreading it out like crumpled paper, brushed it off and smoothed the wrinkles, reading whatever code lay within, neatly folded it back up again and tucked it away. She made a few shaky notes in her Rhodia notebook but mostly the process tried to fit the events into her spirit in an orderly fashion. She prayed in between, little silent open-eyed prayers as the land zoomed by.

"So you believe her?" Jim tapped the steering wheel.

"Does it matter? I've said it before. Something made her a mess. If it was real, all the crap she did to me makes sense and I can forgive her. If it wasn't, all the crap she did to me doesn't make sense but it's still terribly sad that she felt she had to do it so I can still forgive her. In the long run, forgiveness is for the forgiver. I'm tired of being angry with Jackie. I hope someday she's tired of being angry with me."

"That's kind of you."

"For a change." Leah laughed. "You don't think I can do it."

"I didn't say that."

"That's okay. You'd be foolish to think otherwise. Last night I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stand who I've been this entire trip. I was working so hard back home to be more tolerant, more generous, more—whatever. I got to Cruces and turned into this witch who just wanted to judge and gossip and criticize. I felt sick last night. I can't keep letting Jackie turn me into that—that thing. Can't promise she

won't push my buttons again but I've got to be better than this. If not for me, at least for Mama."

"You do what you need to do. As long as you're not judging me for doing what I need to do to stay sane."

"Not at all. It's all about how it makes me feel. Not you." Leah thought for a moment, "I wouldn't stop you from eating peanuts, but I can't touch them. If it's detrimental to me, I can't do it, and boy howdy, it's detrimental."

Jim's voice rolled over her last word. "And as long as you don't go getting the idea that you can trust her. Forgive, don't forget. You don't need to get hurt again. While she sat there with her sob story, you held your peace about what she did to you. I think your mom saw that, too."

"She didn't just see it. She shut me down. I miss that clarity in her. She used to have it all the time. Not just in brief moments."

"I wish she'd shut your dad down. Why do you put up with him?"

"He's old. How many years does he have left? He's been angry since I married you and decided I didn't need him anymore. Bless his heart. Let him be angry. At least you can see where I get it from."

"Ouch! Talk about being blinded by the light."

Leah laughed and sighed. "It was good for me. I don't want to be a grumpy old bitch on my death bed. It's getting tiresome. I don't understand how he's not just exhausted from it because this last five days has worn me out. He's been angry with me for nineteen years."

Leah leaned the seat back and let her head roll to her left. "Of course, old habits are hard to break. Be patient with me, please."

Jim offered his hand.

Thirty-Five

Jackie

Las Cruces, NM

2011

Jackie sat on her balcony overlooking the valley sucking on a cigarette and cold coffee. She propped her feet on the rail, letting the winter sun fall across her legs. She sank into the big cable sweater she'd snatched from Will's side of the closet.

Chores awaited. Christmas decorations needed to be put away. Laundry grew that little boy stench in the downstairs bathroom. None of it pressed in on her.

Jackie heard her phone playing its little Jingle Bell tune. She let it go.

Several minutes later, "Jingle Bells" played again.

"Oh, what is it?" She got up, scraped the metal chair out of the way and went into the loft room. She stared at the phone, pulled out her reading glasses, and looked again. "Hmph. What do they want?" She listened, pacing. "Damn."

On her way to her car, cable sweater passing for a long shirt over tight leggings, she called Brian.

"Hey. Daddy fell. Just scraped up and maybe a bruised or broken rib. No reason to worry Leah, just yet. Call me when you get this."

Thirty-Six

Ruth

Las Cruces, NM

2013

God pushes the wind into the valley, scribbles on the sluggish Rio Grande's surface, bends stiff grasses along its banks, and gathers up grains of sand. He balls up the thin air and sand and throws it at the nursing home walls off which it bounces to wrestle with the pecan tree outside Ruth's window. The skitter-taps of sand on glass draw Ruth from her meandering recollections.

"Hello," she says to her old confidant. How long since she's leaned on Him? Sung to Him? Loved Him? Oh, in silence she'd said many a prayer asking for her children to be safe, her husband to return from overseas, her great grandchild to survive his difficult birth, her parents deaths to be less painful. But she hasn't just talked to him in a great while.

Maybe it's been since Waco. But perhaps it goes back further than that. Perhaps back to Briargrove when Leah was sick.

She looks at her bent hands. So thin. So wrinkled. She turns to Rob, asleep next to her. Their beds are pushed together, an idea Chuy had not long after Rob fell and moved in with her here. It's sweet how her husband still needs her after all this time.

God tosses more sand at the window.

It's been a tough row to hoe, but all in all a good life. God will take care of them. Her beautiful girls, Jackie's ice blue eyes and toothsome grin, when she finds the will to smile. Will—she's glad Jackie found him.

Ruth rolls on her side, facing away from Rob to separate herself from him and commune with God.

Delicate Leah came up like a storm after all those quiet years.

Brian. All blow and go and banging through the house from the time he could walk. Trumpet voice like his granddaddy.

God's blows hard through the cracked weatherstripping. The pecan branch shadows dip, rise, dip again, wave sleepy goodbyes.

She rolls over onto her back and closes her eyes. Something heavy lies on her chest. A sea of confused memories tosses inside her: Brian building white sand castles, Jackie dangling in wet diaper over the turquoise Libyan sea, Leah splashing in London rain, an old blue shoe bumping on black waves with her father holding her in the salt spray.

God lifts the weight from her chest and carries her breath out into the valley.

Vita

Karen Dockal was born in Tripoli, Libya and shuffled around the world with her family until she graduated from Clear Creek High School in Houston, Texas in 1982. She worked in the NASA-Johnson Space Center community in computer graphics and word processing before earning her Bachelor of Science in Biology in 1995. She worked in the Texas Medical Center as a research technician in HIV and cardiac research for the Baylor College of Medicine until illness forced her into early retirement. In the fall of 2008, she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Permanent address: 305 Lark Hollow Lane
League City, Texas 77573

This thesis/dissertation was typed by Karen L. Dockal.