

# Dandelion Girl

a novel

by

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## Chapter One

August, 1978

Kerri Wallace pulled back the pink curtain in her motel room and let the August sunlight stream through window and onto her face. There was still no sign of the cab. *Today was the day*, she thought to herself as she fastened an elastic band around her blond ponytail.

She had been staying at the Pilgrim Motel in Oakwood, Massachusetts for the last month, since her eighteenth birthday, but Kerri felt like she had been there forever. Nothing in the motel had changed since Kerri arrived. Even the rooms were all the same. A double bed with an olive green bedspread. A small television set up across the room next to a fake potted plant in the corner. The bathroom had a full tub, pink shower curtain, and bad lighting. The carpets in every room were dirty beige. Kerri had gone into all of the motel rooms in her row one day while they were being cleaned, looking for something different in them – anything. But they were all the same, nondescript, anonymous. Kerri supposed it was why the couple across the way from her room chose the Pilgrim to have an affair.

Watching them was the most exciting thing Kerri had seen at the motel for the month that she had been staying there, trying to work up the courage to do what she came to Oakwood for in the first place. The couple provided the perfect distraction, a fat brunette and an older man who snuck out of the room across from hers every afternoon. The brunette would walk down the stairs first, smoothing her skirt, fixing a lost strand of hair, and the man would reach for his car keys or a cigarette, walking a few paces behind

her as if to fool anyone that might happen to see them. Once, the brunette caught Kerri staring at her, but Kerri just smiled knowingly, as if to say, *we all have secrets*.

Kerri looked at the mirror above the dresser in her motel room. She had written the number for a cab company and an address in Oakwood on the mirror with her blue eyeliner. Not that she needed to write the address down anywhere to remember it. She had known it since she was five years old, but looking at it daily was a silent reminder that she came to Oakwood to go to that address.

Kerri paced back and forth across the threadbare carpet in front of the bed. She had imagined this day countless times, but she still had no idea what to expect. She applied another coat of eyeliner to her bottom lids and brushed her ponytail again. For all the time she had spent in the motel, it still felt as impersonal as a strange waiting room. She sat on the bed for a minute, got up, and then moved to the tiny table in the corner by the potted plant. She picked up the newspaper and looked at some of the articles, her eyes scanning the words but not really reading them. She didn't know why she was so anxious, or even why she had put off going for so long. *It's just a house*, she thought, *no one is there anymore*. But she knew it was more than that. It was her house. It was *the* house.

The checkered cab finally glided into the parking lot, and Kerri climbed inside. She gave the address to the driver and settled back, taking deep breaths through her nose and wiping her palms against her jeans. More than once she leaned forward in the cab, her moist hands gripping the shoulder of the front seat. She contemplated telling the driver to turn around, take her back to the familiarity of the Pilgrim's orange doors and stale peppermints by the check in desk, but then the cab passed Howe's Fruit Stand, and

the houses turned smaller, the lawns more unkempt. Instead of flower beds and wrought iron lawn furniture, the yards were littered with toys that had been left out in the rain and rusted, burnt grass and plastic lawn gnomes. Kerri bit her bottom lip. She wasn't even sure she would recognize the house when she saw it. She thought she could remember the wide farmer's porch and fenced-in yard and the dirt driveway with her mother's pink station wagon, but that was over thirteen years ago. Lately Kerri felt like maybe she had just made those details up in her head over the years.

When the driver finally slowed in front of a small ranch, Kerri recognized it immediately, a sickly house on the corner of Maple and Pine Street. The house looked like it was molting. At some point, someone had tried to paint the outside, but stopped halfway through. The original white paint had long ago turned gray, peeling off at the corners like a scab that had been ripped off too soon. A white pickup truck had replaced her mother's station wagon, and a stained sheet hung over the porch railing.

Her shoes sent small mushroom clouds of sand into the air as she scuffed her feet along the edge of the curb in front of the house. *There was still time to run back to the cab and go home*, Kerri thought. But then she reminded herself that home was at the Pilgrim Motel. She had nowhere else to go.

She took one more deep breath, then lifted the latch to the chain link fence and walked down the slate sidewalk to the front steps of the house. She knocked, her heart beating wildly. A young man opened the door. When he saw her, he frowned for a second, and then held the screen door open with the toe of his boot. He held a dirty yellow sponge in one hand, and soap bubbles clung to his fingers and the back of his hand.

Behind him, Kerri could see shafts of light striping the floorboards and furniture in the living room. Dust sparkled through the beams of light, moving in a slow, lazy current, swirling around like a shaken snow globe.

Kerri shifted her weight and tried to think of what to say. What she had rehearsed on the drive over sounded stupid to her now. She fought the urge to run off the porch and down the street until the house was out of view.

The man opened the door wider and stepped halfway out. Kerri noticed he had the bluest eyes she had ever seen. He was dressed in jeans and a holey white t-shirt. A cigarette bobbed in the corner of his mouth, and he exhaled through his nose for a moment and cleared his throat.

“Are you going to say anything or just stand there?” He took the cigarette out of his mouth. He seemed amused. “I can tell you’re not one of those Jehovah’s witnesses or some shit because you’re not carrying those brochures they usually slip under my door.”

“I used to live here,” Kerri stammered. Now that she was outside, the sun was a spotlight on her, and she began to sweat. A sticky film of perspiration beaded up on her forehead and in her palms.

“Really.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “When?”

Kerri couldn’t tell if he was interested or suspicious. “A long time ago, when I was little.”

“And?”

Kerri traced the toe of her sneaker along the edge of the welcome mat. “I was just in town, and wanted to see the house is all.”

“That’s it, huh. You want the grand tour?” He gestured behind him. Kerri nodded. She couldn’t decide if she thought he was mean or mysterious, but she hated that she kept blushing when she met his eye.

He winked at her. “Okay then, come in. I just got back here myself two nights ago.” He opened the door wider. “I’m Mickey. You want a cold beer?”

Kerri stepped through the doorway into her old house. It smelled faintly of oil and paint thinner. A fine layer of dust had settled over the entire house as if no one had lived there for a long time. She walked past a rooster cookie jar, past the copper pots that hung from the peg board above the kitchen counter and the ripped crocheted blanket on the back of the couch. Sheer yellowed curtains hung in the windows, brittle with age. An enormous picture of a young man wearing his army uniform was displayed over the mantle in the living room.

Kerri wiped the sweat off her brow and sighed. The house wasn’t like she remembered it at all. She had remembered pink counter tops, but now they were baby blue. The heart wall paper in the living room was gone. The house was smaller than she remembered it, cramped almost, and all the plants that her mother had hanging from the ceiling and stuffed into corners were replaced by mismatched furniture.

When she finally made it to the bathroom, she stopped in the doorway. The night they came for her and her brother, Ronnie was never far from her mind. She took in the pink ceramic tub and stenciled flower border on the walls, and the memories of the last time she was at the house flooded her.

Kerri had been six, and Ronnie, four. She had been giving Ronnie a bath, because if she didn't bathe him, their mother would wait until Ronnie's hair was thick with dirt and sweat and he started to smell. Sometimes Ronnie scratched his head in his sleep so badly that his scalp would break out in sores. He had even pulled his hair out before. Kerri had found the small tufts on his pillow, like pieces of gold thread.

That night Ronnie splashed around the warm, shallow water. Kerri crouched over him, massaging his scalp with a bar of ivory soap. One of their mother's boyfriends once brought over a bottle of baby shampoo, but when it was gone, Kerri and Ronnie had to use the slimy bar of soap in the bathroom to wash up.

"Close your eyes," Kerri said, tilting his head back. The soap oozed down the back of his neck in a cloudy river when Kerri poured the water over his head with a plastic measuring cup she hid under the sink. Ronnie looked up at her. His eyelashes stuck straight out in thick clumps. "Hurry up. I want to go watch Mighty Mouse."

"Just keep your head back okay? Or else the soap will go in your eyes again and you'll cry like you always do."

Ronnie sighed heavily, his stomach filling up like a balloon underneath his pale ribs. Kerri reached behind her for the Mighty Mouse towel on the counter, beside her mother's makeup brushes and hairclips. Ronnie stood up. Kerri wrapped the blanket tightly around his body and rubbed him dry. He stepped over the lip of the tub. The soles of his small pink feet left a steamed impression on the tiles of the bathroom floor that evaporated into the air a second later. Ronnie unwrapped the towel and held it under his chin like a cape. "Here I come to save the day!" he bellowed in his best Mighty

Mouse impression. He raised his fist high in the air and ran out of the bathroom, naked, the cape flying out behind him as he disappeared around the hallway corner.

Kerri sank her arm into the lukewarm water and pulled on the chain until the stopper popped out and bobbed back up to the surface. When Kerri turned around, a shirtless man was standing in the doorway holding a beer. He pushed his black framed glasses up the bridge of his nose and called towards the bedroom. “Rose, come here for a sec.”

Kerri’s mother jogged down the hallway. She wore an oversized black t-shirt that ended at the top her thighs and nothing else. The color made her legs look unnaturally long, and pale. A lit cigarette was perched between her thumb and forefinger. The shirtless man gestured to Kerri. “Is she like, supposed to be doing this?”

Rose crouched down, resting on her heels. “Did you give Ronnie another bath?”

Kerri nodded. “His head was getting itchy again. So I washed him up.” She kicked at Ronnie’s sneaker and it hit the side of the tub with a small thud, leaving a black scuff mark.

“Man, not again.” Rose took a deep drag and threw the cigarette into the tub. Kerri watched it land and hiss for a split second before it went out. The ashes spread out into the water.

“Come closer to me, Kerri. I want to look in your hair for a second.”

Kerri bent her head down, and her mother’s fingers gently ran through her scalp. “Shit. They have it again,” Rose said. She glanced up at the man in the doorway. “We don’t have any of that shampoo left, do we, Burt.”

“Do we have bugs again, Mommy?”



She and Ronnie had bugs in their hair before. They looked like sesame seeds that came on top of hamburger buns. The last time they had bugs, Rose had put her and Ronnie in the bath together, and after she was done, she combed Kerri's waist length hair for a long time, picking out all of the bugs. It was the longest amount of time Kerri could remember spending with her mother. She had bit her lip while her mother raked the comb across her scalp, refusing to complain. Instead, she breathed in the smell of her mother's perfume and leaned her cheek against her mother's soft knee.

"We could shave Ronnie's head. I don't know what to do about her." Rose stood up, worriedly touching her own long, red hair.

"Tomorrow, babe. I'll help you do it tomorrow. Let's get back to bed." Burt crushed his empty beer can in his fist and belched. "After I take a leak."

Rose touched her hand to her forehead. "You're right. I can't deal with this right now." She reached down to take Kerri's hand. "I need you to be Mommy's good helper and spread your bedroom quilt on the floor in the living room. You and Ronnie can pretend you're camping out. Just don't go on the couch okay?"

Kerri nodded. She and Ronnie usually slept in the living room during the winter anyway, in front of the radiator that hissed and spit steam in the corner like a dragon.

"Are you going to sleep, Mommy?"

Rose's face curved into a small smile. "Yup, Mommy and Burt are going to bed."

"Can I have a hug?"

"Oh, hon, if I hug you, than I'll get bugs too. Tomorrow, after I comb out your hair, I'll give you a big hug."

Kerri stared at her feet. Her toes were painted the same color pink as her mother's. She had an itch on the top of her head, but she refused to raise her hand and allow herself the satisfaction of scratching her head. She could act just as adult as her mother and Burt. She was a big girl, that's what everyone told her. And big girls didn't cry; only younger kids like Ronnie, and really little babies cried.

Later that night, she and Ronnie were side by side on their bedroom quilt. Ronnie was asleep, one arm curled around his Chester O'Chimp. Chester's chatty string had long since been pulled out and lost, and stuffing showed through the sleeve of his arm. The yellow stuffing was the same color as Ronnie's hair, pale as angel food cake. Ronnie had insisted Kerri put his Great Garloo monster beside the couch to keep away his bad dreams. The green Garloo waited like a soldier beside the couch, his remote control cord within reach of Ronnie should he need the monster to come save him.

Kerri couldn't sleep that night. Whenever she got close to dozing off, a mosquito would buzz in her ear, startling her awake. It was too hot to sleep with the windows closed, but the window in the living room had a big rip in the screen. One of her mother's boyfriends poked a hole in it with a screwdriver one night.

Kerri had almost dozed off when a heavy knock at the door made her sit upright. She instinctively looked up at Garloo, and his squat muscular outline stood silently beside the couch. The knock sounded again. Kerri got up and looked out the window. A police officer and a woman with a tight black bun stood on the concrete slab that served as the porch. Kerri was surprised. Usually when the police came it was because someone was yelling really loudly. When that happened, she and Ronnie would hide in the crawl space

between their bedroom closet and their mother's closet and play quietly. Kerri had a couple of Barbie dolls and Ronnie had his GI Joe back there.

This night though, there had been no yelling. Kerri turned the doorknob and stepped back shyly. The woman with the bun crouched down to Kerri's level. "I'm Isabelle. What's your name?"

"Kerri."

"Kerri, that's a pretty name." She reached into a large pocketbook slung over her shoulder and pulled out a soft teddy bear. "This is for you. I hear you have a brother too. What's his name?"

Kerri turned her head and looked through the dim living room at Ronnie's sleeping form on the worn blanket. "Ronnie," she said in a small voice. She nuzzled the soft fur of the teddy bear against her cheek.

"Can I meet Ronnie?" Isabelle held up a second teddy bear by its arm. It was the same as hers, except it had black fur underneath the ears, while Kerri's had pink fur underneath the ears. Kerri ran down the hallway to the living room and tripped over the cord for Garloo's remote. The noise startled Ronnie, and he sat up quickly. "Ronnie, come with me. There's a woman with teddy bears!" Ronnie's eyes fell to the new stuffed animal that Kerri clutched in her hand. Without asking questions, he ran after her, his cape falling to the floor after a few steps.

"Here's your beer," Mickey's voice interrupted her. He held out a can of Schlitz. "You crying?"

Kerri took a deep drink before she answered him. "No."

Mickey chuckled softly to himself. “Yeah. So I’m guessing your bedroom is the one with the picture on the floor.”

Kerri looked at him blankly. “What are you talking about?” She followed him down the hallway to the bedroom she shared with Ronnie. The shades were drawn and an old rug jutted out from underneath the bed. The bureau looked like it was the same one as she had remembered; blond pine with the crooked top drawer. The window above the bed had a view of the Dogwood tree with the wooden swing that she used to push her brother in. Except now the window beside the bureau was broken. Beneath it laid the sponge Mickey was carrying, tinged pink beside a bucket of sudsy water. A dark, almost black stain was spread out across the wooden floor like a permanent shadow.

Mickey pulled back the area rug to reveal the drawing on the floor. Kerri crouched down and traced the outline with her finger. It was of a flower drawn in crayon, a lopsided, childish picture, smeared and blurry with age.

“What is it?” Mickey asked, kneeling beside her.

“A dandelion.”

Kerri used to run through the backyard with Ronnie and kick down the wispy heads of the dandelion pods. She liked the idea that the wind blew them away to the next yard, or across the street. The dandelions took root and could survive anywhere, in the cracks of the sidewalk, in the yard with the brownest lawn, always coming back no matter how many times her mother’s boyfriend mowed them down.

“What happened to that window?” she asked, pointing. She struggled not to let the tears that had welled up in her eyes fall in front of Mickey.

Kerri watched him kick the rug back over the flower and sit on the edge of the bed. "It broke. You gonna tell me why this shitty house is making you cry?"

Kerri instinctively wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and stood up, hugging her arms to her chest. "When I lived here, my brother and I were taken away and put in foster care when we were really little. I haven't seen him since."

Mickey took the cigarette that was behind his ear and popped it between his lips. "Rough. What would make you want to come back here then?"

Kerri shrugged and sat down next to him, staring across the room at the open closet stuffed with boxes and women's shoes. "I don't know. I've felt like I had to come back you know? I thought about this place so much, about my brother, and everything that happened here. I'm out of foster care now, and this place," Kerri sighed and gestured with her hand, "is really the only place that was ever a home to me."

Saying the words out loud filled her with sadness. Her entire life had changed the night she and Ronnie left with Isabelle. Foster care was never like having a real family. She had to become a survivor.

Kerri had been given hand-me-down clothes from the other kids she had lived with, she claimed ownership over their toys once they had outgrown them. She had been made to share a bed with the other kids in foster care, alternately sleeping with her back pressed up against theirs, sometimes sleeping under the warm comfort of their breath on her forehead.

"What about your mom? Did she bail too?" Mickey asking, lighting a match to his cigarette and crushing the match head out between his fingers.

"Pretty much."

One of the last times Kerri had seen her mother was when she was ten years old. She had been playing in the backyard in one of her foster homes. The house stood on a corner lot facing out to the main road. Kerri used to press her face against the chain link fence and watch the cars whiz by, people walk their dogs, or the other children in the neighboring yards that played with their own brothers or sisters. One afternoon, Kerri was holding a rubber ball in her hands when someone called her name. Startled, Kerri dropped the ball and whipped her head around. She rubbed her eyes, thinking that she was imagining her mother standing before her on the other side of the fence. But there she was in wide bell bottom jeans, a sunflower pinned behind her ear. A girl and a boy suddenly emerged from the side of a dark van like they were climbing out the belly of a whale. They stood beside Rose, poking their fingers through the fence, staring at Kerri.

“This is my kid,” Rose said. Her auburn hair shimmered in the autumn sun. She motioned to Kerri to come closer. Kerri ran to the fence as fast as she could.

“Mommy?” Kerri’s voice choked. A shiver went through her entire body, and her legs felt weak. “Have you come back to take me home?”

“Oh kiddo, I wish I could. But I’m going away for awhile. To California. Do you know where that is?”

Kerri had learned the states that year in geography class. She knew that California was all the way on the other side of the map from Massachusetts, a state that was large, and took up practically the whole coastline. “Can I come with you?”

The boy and girl standing adjacent to Rose looked at each other and then turned away. “We’ll see you in the car.” They scurried back to the van, the girl tossing a look

over her shoulder at Kerri, who was gripping the fence with such force that her fingers were white.

“Please take me with you, Mommy. Don’t leave me again.” Kerri pressed so hard against the fence that the pattern would be imprinted on her face for hours. “I hate living here, I miss Ronnie.”

Rose placed her fingers over Kerri’s hand through the fence. “You have to be brave and strong. You’re my dandelion girl, remember?” Rose bent down and plucked a dandelion from along side the fence.

Her mother started calling her that after Kerri drew the dandelion on the floor of her bedroom. *Dandelions and Roses*, she said, *we make a pretty bouquet together.*

“I don’t want to be strong. I want to be with you and Ronnie.”

Rose looked over her shoulder at the van. The boy and girl were sitting crossed legged in the open space, smoking cigarettes. Rose slid off her mood ring. “Here, wear this for now. It’s a mood ring. Do you know what that is? Anytime you feel a certain way, the ring changes color.”

“Take me with you, please.” Tears streamed down Kerri’s face and her nose started to run.

“I’ll come back for you. Tomorrow.”

“You will?” Kerri wiped her nose against her shirtsleeve. “Are you going to get Ronnie too?”

Rose looked over her shoulder again. “I’ll come back after lunch time. Okay? We’ll get Ronnie too. See you soon, baby.”

Kerri had packed her things and stood at the fence after lunch the next day, waiting for the van to appear around the corner, her mother to get out, and Kerri to climb in and ride away to California. But she never came that afternoon, or the next one. After a week of waiting by the fence, suitcase clutched in her hand, Kerri realized that her mother had lied. She had never planned on coming to get her. And the mood ring never turned any color except for black.

“You’re really pretty you know,” Mickey blurted. Kerri wiped her eyes. She was positive her mascara and blue eyeliner were smeared across her face. Her nose was running and she was sweating in the sticky heat. The last thing she felt like was pretty.

“Thanks,” she said, adjusting herself so that she was a little farther away from him on the bed.

“Hey, you want another beer?” he asked. He stood up and left the room without waiting for her answer, returning instead a moment later with another cold can of Schlitz, unopened. Kerri burped softly and took it from him. She hated beer. It made her stomach feel huge and it tasted sour as soon as it stopped being cold. But the soft feeling it gave her when she drank it was like pulling a blanket over her head and trying to peer through it like she used to do when she was scared. The sting of sitting in her old bedroom wasn’t quite as sharp as it had been a few minutes ago, and remembering her mother’s betrayal seemed more like a dream than a memory fresh in her head. She took a long sip from the can and swallowed quickly, trying not to taste it.

“I’m not a bad guy you know,” he said, inching closer until she could feel the heat from his leg fill the space between where their skin wasn’t touching. Kerri examined his



face closely. *He may be a little dangerous*, she thought, *but his looks were even more concerning*. She had never seen anyone with eyes so blue before, and beneath his dark brow, they literally jumped off his face. She reached over to touch the inside of his wrist gently. “What is that a tattoo of?”

He looked down at his wrists for a moment and then turned his arm over, covering the tattoo, but not before Kerri saw that the black design covered a long thin scar down his wrist. He had another tattoo on the other wrist, except that tattoo snaked all the way down to his elbow. She had seen the same type of scar before on a girl in one of her foster homes. They had found the girl with both of her wrists opened up at the bottom of the basement stairs by the washer and dryer. Afterwards, she came back from the hospital with thick bandages covering both wrists. The girl told Kerri that she did it the wrong way, horizontal across the wrist. *If you really want to kill yourself you have to cut vertical*, she had said. Mickey’s scars were vertical.

“It’s my astrological sign. Capricorn,” he answered.

Kerri nodded, and took another long swig of beer. “It looks like a sea horse.”

“It’s supposed to be a cross between a mountain goat and a sea snake or something.” He put his hand on her back. “What about you? Any tattoos?”

“No.” Kerri blushed again. She hoped her shirt wasn’t sweaty where he had placed his hand.

“Why not?”

“Too permanent. I’ve barely even stayed at the same house for more than a year or two, couldn’t imagine getting something on my skin that would never wash off.”

Mickey moved his hand down her back and Kerri jumped. His hand was cold from holding the beer can. She slid a little closer to him until their legs were just barely touching. “Sometimes that can be a good thing though.”

Kerri thought about all the houses she had lived in over the years, and how many times she had pulled the blanket over her head to make all the bad disappear. It was the only permanent thing she had in a sea of change. “Yes,” she agreed. “Sometimes it’s a very good thing.”

## Chapter Two

After Kerri left, Mickey took a nap on the couch in the living room to try and calm the unsettled, anxious feeling in his chest, like he didn't belong in his own skin.

When he had returned to the house the day before and unlocked the door, his Aunt Charlotte's smell still hung in the air - rose scented soap and baby powder and the sour stench of a sick person. Aunt Charlotte's house had never been the same after she went into the nursing home, but now that he had been away it was like walking into a stranger's house.

And then Kerri showed up on his doorstep, filled with memories that didn't belong to him in the only house he had ever called his home too. The broken, taped window in his bedroom was the only memory he had without it first belonging to Kerri or his Aunt.

He ran his finger along the seam of broken glass beneath the tape. The floorboards underneath the window still held the dark stain from last year. The pores of the wood had soaked up the blood, and no amount of scrubbing would release it. Mickey had been certain that he would never be able to sleep soundly in the room again, and unpacked his things yesterday into the other bedroom. He closed the door to the other bedroom and tried not to think of what had happened there. The events of last year in that room haunted him, even when he was in jail, miles away.

Mickey stepped outside the house and locked the door behind him. He headed towards the center of Oakwood to the elementary school. The center of town was marked by the Protestant Church with its tall steeple, and the town hall that had been deemed a

historical landmark. A giant American Flag hung off the side of the building, left over from the Fourth of July parade. The elementary school was next to the town hall.

Mickey walked around the school to the grassy field behind it. The far was made into a softball mound, and the kids shared the rest of the field for soccer and gym class.

The boy was there with his father, just like his Mickey's friend Rabbit had told him they would be. Mickey took a seat on the aluminum bleachers, far enough away from them so that they wouldn't recognize Mickey. It was the first time Mickey had seen the boy since that night he had accidentally shot him.

The boy's name was Caleb, and he was twelve years old. As Mickey watched Caleb and his father throw a baseball back and forth, Mickey thought of how much Caleb reminded him of himself when he had been that age. Caleb had the same brown hair as Mickey, so curly that it was impossible to brush. Mickey had never liked baseball, but he had played with his father after school every night, trying vainly to catch his father's throws, and make contact with his baseball bat. His father never approved of Mickey wanting to draw or play music. Playing baseball in the backyard or at the park was the only activity Mickey ever did with his father.

He had just lit up a cigarette when Caleb missed one of his father's throws. The ball bounced off the edge of his glove and launched to the side. Caleb carefully bent down and picked up his cane that was lying in the grass, undetectable as a snake, and limped heavily the few feet to get the fallen baseball. Caleb looked up when he had the ball in his hands again, squinted his eyes for a moment, and Mickey held his breath. But Caleb turned around and hobbled back to the spot he was standing in moments before, shaking his head at his father who was apologizing for the poor throw.

Mickey jumped off the bleachers and snuffed out his cigarette under his boot. He couldn't risk Caleb or his father recognizing him. The rules of his probation stated that he couldn't get anywhere near Caleb or his family after what he'd done. Mickey had spent a year in prison but the time didn't even matter. He was haunted every day, any time he thought of Caleb.

Mickey had thought there was an intruder trying to break in. He and Rabbit had been drinking all night, watching the baseball game on TV when they heard a thud at the far end of the house where Mickey's bedroom was. Rabbit went first, sneaking down the hallway silently, Mickey behind him, running his finger against the wallpaper.

When they got to the bedroom Mickey saw a dark shape. Things got fuzzy then. Both of them knew where the pistol was, in the top bureau drawer next to Mickey's balled up socks. There was a burst of sound, a quick flash of light, and then screams. The shadowy figure dropped from the window onto the floor with a heavy thud. He flailed his arms and legs like an over turned beetle, struggling to get his bearings in the darkness.

Mickey and Rabbit rushed to the figure, who was clutching his leg and howling in pain. When Mickey rolled the figure over he saw it was a young boy, no older than eleven or twelve. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the kid blurted out over and over again. Rabbit turned the lights on from across the room. The boy was bleeding from his leg. Snot and tears covered his face. "Call 911," Mickey told Rabbit.

"Don't worry, you're gonna be okay." he said to the boy. "I'll be right back."

Rabbit was in the kitchen, pacing back and forth. “Holy shit, I can’t believe that was a kid. What are we going to do now?”

“Get out of here,” Mickey said. “Get out of here and I’ll take care of it.”

“What?”

“The cops already hate you. You have one strike against you. Just go!” Mickey said. Rabbit left without hesitation. Mickey could hear his truck peel out of the driveway, and in the distance, the crying of sirens, high pitched like an injured bird.

Mickey knelt beside the boy, who had quieted down. He locked eyes with Mickey for a moment, trying to shift his weight, and looked down at his pants. A dark stain snaked down the insides of the thighs of his jeans, and Mickey could smell urine. He grabbed one of the blankets off the end of his bed and covered the lower half of the boy’s body. Mickey gingerly picked up the boy’s hand, but dropped it when he felt how clammy and cold he was. The boy was going into shock.

The paramedics were accompanied by the police. The pistol was dropped into a plastic evidence bag; pictures were taken of the window and the bloodstain. The boy was loaded up onto a stretcher as easily as a feather while Mickey’s wrists were snapped with handcuffs. The officer who escorted him out was only a few years older than Mickey. “I would have done the same thing,” he whispered, before slamming the door to the cruiser shut.

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When he got back to the house, Rabbit was sitting on Mickey’s porch, his feet propped up on top of a thirty pack of Schlitz beer. Two cans of empty beer rolled on the

porch beside him like loose change. “Man, tell me you weren’t looking for that kid,” he belched.

“Just taking a walk,” Mickey said. Rabbit never understood why what he had done to Caleb bothered him so much. *After all*, Rabbit had said, *we’ve done worse*.

“Yeah. Just taking a walk. Just don’t get caught spying on that kid. Or you’ll end up back at County.” Rabbit handed Mickey a beer and he sat down next to Rabbit on an overturned milk crate.

“You got that thing covered up pretty good Mouse,” Rabbit said, nodding at Mickey’s wrist. Mickey smiled. “Thanks. My cellmate did before he got out.”

Rabbit had been the one to find Mickey. Mickey had sat in his room one night, staring at the taped up window, replaying the whole scenario in his head endlessly. The night before he was sentenced he had drank an entire bottle of rum by himself and plucked one of the jagged pieces of glass from the frame like a broken tooth. It hadn’t taken much pressure to split the skin on his wrists, and when he started to bleed, it didn’t even hurt. Mickey had curled up underneath the window and closed his eyes. It was the first time he had felt peace.

The next thing he remembered was waking up in the hospital. Rabbit had come over and found him. Rabbit was the only real friend he ever had, and Mickey considered him his brother.

Rabbit had carried Mickey to the bathroom and made tourniquets around each arm until the ambulance arrived. Mickey had to get a blood transfusion, and when he was well enough to go home, the police brought him straight to jail instead.

“Mike and Don are on their way over. I told them you were out,” Rabbit continued.

Mickey crushed the beer can in his hand. Mike Kaeding and Don Feldman were like Mickey and Rabbit, inseparable, an extension of each other. The four of them had known each other since Mickey and Rabbit were in high school. Mike and Don used to buy for all the high school parties back then, and when Mickey and Rabbit started boosting cars, Mike would take the parts and sell them for extra cash out of his garage.

Twenty minutes later, Mike and Don drove up Mickey’s driveway in a TransAm with music blaring out the car windows. Mike got out first, balancing another thirty pack of Schlitz beer on his shoulder. A bottle of Jack Daniels dangled from his other hand. “You know, Mouse, in all the years I’ve known you, I’ve never been to your house.” Mike hefted the beer onto the porch and cracked open the bottle of Jack. He looked around. “Not bad.”

Don reached for a beer and handed it to Mickey. “Welcome back.”

“Feels good to be out.”

“Well you didn’t miss much while you were gone,” Mike Kaeding said, handing the bottle to Mickey. “Same old shit. Nothing ever happens in this town worth anything.”

“Ain’t that right.”

When Mickey had shot Caleb it had been news for weeks. The teachers at the elementary school held bake sales and raffles to raise money for Caleb’s family to pay for the medical bills, and the church hosted a bowling night at King Pins and a spaghetti supper to raise even more money. Caleb had become the town celebrity, and Mickey had



become the town villain. Then the reporters found out that Mickey hadn't even grown up in Oakwood, that he had been sent here because he was a *troubled youth*, and they made him even more into a monster.

Later, in the courtroom, the rest of the story with Caleb had come out. Caleb and his friends were convinced his Aunt Charlotte was a witch. Mickey had laughed when he heard that, because Aunt Charlotte had been going crazy long before he even went to jail. She used to wake up in the middle of the night and sit on the porch in a rocking chair, eating licorice whips – her favorite candy. Mickey would wake up some mornings and find her there, a licorice whip dangling out of mouth absently, like she forgot it was there in the first place.

Caleb's friends dared him to go into the house that night to get proof of her being a witch, and instead Mickey had shot him. Mickey remembered sitting in the defendant's seat, holding his breath while Caleb's mother wheeled him slowly down the aisle to the witness stand, his leg encased in an enormous cast. The other attorney showed pictures of Caleb in his baseball uniform and jumping off the high diving board at the town pool. The attorney told the court that Caleb would never run again, and might not ever walk again, and Mickey watched as tears rolled down Caleb's cheeks.

His attorney had told him that he could appeal his sentence, that the jury pool had been tainted with all the hoopla in the news. But Mickey declined. He deserved to pay for what he did, and he hoped that when he got out in a year, somehow the guilt would be washed away and he could start off with a clean slate. He had confessed to a priest while he was in prison, even though he wasn't sure if he believed in God. He had been given Hail Mary's and Our Fathers to say, and his cellmate wrote out the words to them on the

back of a napkin for Mickey to recite. The priest told him that God had intervened to make sure Mickey didn't kill himself, because it was a mortal sin and he would be banished from heaven. The priest had told him then he was forgiven, and that all of his sins had been wiped clean. But when Mickey saw Caleb in the park, when he looked down at his wrist, Mickey wondered how that would be possible.

“Hey Don, are you still with Melissa?” Mickey asked.

Don nodded. “Yeah, I'm still with her. Why, you want me to bring her over?” He laughed and caught eyes with Mike. “She always had a crush on you anyway. You can take her off my hands for a night.”

“No, man. That's okay. You keep her where she is. Ask if she has any easy friends,” he said, and passed a joint to Rabbit. Involuntarily, Mickey thought of Kerri, who had been standing just a few hours earlier in the very spot where Don was now.

“So what are you gonna do now, Mouse?” Mike Kaeding asked.

“Have a party. Melissa can bring some of the girls from Cal's.” Rabbit slapped Mickey's knee. “You must be ready to screw anyone!”

Mickey laughed, “I got someone in mind already.”

Rabbit handed the joint to Don and leaned back against the side of the house.

“You been out for one day and you already got tail lined up? How'd you manage that?”

“This chick showed up at the house this morning. Young, like eighteen. She was pretty cute.”

“She just showed up? What did she want?” Mike asked.

Mickey shrugged. “She used to live here. Wanted to bring back the old memories or something. I think I’m gonna ask her out. She’s gotta be staying at the Pilgrim.”

Rabbit belched loudly and cracked open another can of beer. He had the same color eyes as Mickey, but his hair was blond. He wore it in a long ponytail down his back. “Where you gonna take her? She can’t even drink.”

“I think I’ll take her to the lake.”

“Get a blanket, some beer, she’ll have her legs wrapped around you in an hour.” Mike slapped him on the back. “He’s back in the game! Then when you have a party, you’ll be primed up for a real girl.”

Mickey laughed, thinking of all the waitresses at Cal’s diner that were Melissa’s friends. He had dated a few, before he went to jail. He wondered who was working there now.

“I need to get a job, too. Was thinking maybe I could pump gas down at Lucky’s?” Mike Kaeding’s family had owned the gas station since it opened, and now Mike owned it with Don.

“If you want to, you know you always have a job. Give me and Don more time to work on the cars,” Mike said.

“You can work with me,” Rabbit said. “Started selling shit. Got a real nice client base now.”

Rabbit had been selling mushrooms and pot for the last few months. He told Mickey all about when he would come to visit him at the jail. He had met this guy, Rich, or Richie Rich, as Rabbit referred to him. Richie Rich was an old hippie who used to live

in Hawaii and sell mushrooms there. He had moved to Oakwood and bought the Hartwell's old place, cleared the fields and started growing his own stuff again. When Rabbit had first suggested it to Mickey he had shrugged, noncommittally. Now, Rabbit's words hung in the air with the smoke.

“We'll see. I'm gonna try to stay clean for awhile. If I get into trouble again, I'm done. They'll ship me out to state prison.”

“That sucks. Was hoping you two would boost us some more cars, like old times.” Mike Kaeding walked around the porch to the yard. Mickey could hear him peeing on the lawn. Mike called, “You guys don't know how much I missed that extra income.”

“How many cars do you think it was?” Mickey asked out loud.

“Oh man, at least two hundred,” Rabbit said, “We did it almost every night our whole senior year, remember? Sometimes a couple cars a night.”

Mickey laughed. “Yeah, and we used to leave them in other people's driveways.”

Every weekend during their junior and senior year, Rabbit and Mickey would pile into Rabbit's Monte Carlo and race their friends down the straight-aways behind the high school. Those twenty seconds of screeching tires, the lurch of the engine, and the smell of hot tar were some of Mickey's best memories. And no one ever beat Rabbit, not even once. Kids tried from all over the neighboring towns, but Rabbit seemed to know cars better than anyone. When to shift at the right second and when to pull back, it was like he had been born to drive. By the end of junior year, his real name, Kevin, had been replaced with Rabbit.

When he and Mickey began to steal cars for sport, Rabbit was the obvious choice to be the driver. Mickey couldn't drive as well as Rabbit, but he could break into any car without making a sound. That was how he earned his nickname, Mouse. Once he popped the lock up and got inside the car, he could hotwire it in under a minute. The engine would purr to life, and Mickey would step aside so that Rabbit could get behind the wheel.

Mike and Don would follow behind them in their own cars. Sometimes they would race other people, especially if they could find a fast car willing to take them on, but most of the time they stole the cars out of sheer boredom. Mickey had thought they were so cool back then, but now he realized how they were just plain lucky.

"Do you remember the night we stole like, half a dozen cars and parked them all in the principal's driveway?" Rabbit said, grinning across the porch.

"Oh, man, I wished I could have seen the look on his face when he came out to get his paper the next morning," Mickey said.

"Those were the good days, man," Rabbit said.

Mickey agreed. "Yeah, they were." Those were the days when he still felt *alive*, before everything in his life started to cave in on itself.

### Chapter Three

The following evening, Kerri was back at Pilgrim Motel. The air was so sticky and humid it was hard to take a deep breath. The back of Kerri's shirt clung to her damp skin, and she looked down at the empty hole of the pool forlornly. The parking lot of the motel was even more deserted than normal. Nothing stirred; as if it were so hot out that it paralyzed time. The orange doors of the motel all stayed shut, the shades pulled. Water dripped on the pavement from the hum of the air conditioners.

Then Mickey appeared in the middle of the parking lot, walking around slowly, squinting up at all the closed doors. Kerri watched him for a moment. She could see how blue his eyes were even from the second story, and the black tattoos on his wrists glowed against his pale skin. She leaned over the railing and called down. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

He looked up towards the sound of her voice, and smiled at her. "Thought you could use a friend."

"How did you know where to find me?"

He began to climb up the stairs, smoothing his sweaty hair out of his eyes. "Not too many places you could be besides this dump. I was going to go down to Welsh Lake. Wanna come?"

"For what? Swimming?" Dirty water never appealed to Kerri. Neither did taking her clothes off in front of someone as good-looking as Mickey. She added, "I don't even have a bathing suit."

Mickey grinned, and Kerri blushed when she saw him looking at her in her shorts and tank top. “That’s okay. There are some hiking trails around the lake. It might be cooler than this oven. At least there’s shade.”

Kerri considered. “I’ll go put my sneaker’s on.”

When Mickey’s beat up Ford pick up stopped at Welsh Lake, Kerri looked around, amazed that a place so beautiful could exist in Oakwood. The lake was surrounded by tall pines that each stood at least thirty feet high. The town had built a wooden staircase out of the tall pine logs that went from the parking lot down to the beach. Years of fallen pine needles provided a soft blanket that covered the staircase and the rocky beach. Under the pines there were picnic tables with outside grills so that families could cook hotdogs or roast marshmallows.

Kerri walked next to him through the pines and onto the pebbly beach. The water was stagnant, and shimmered with light from the sun. Waves of heat rolled through the air above the water. Mickey pulled two water bottles from his small backpack. He took a sip from one and handed her the other.

Kerri took a sip and immediately started coughing. “This isn’t water!”

“I know. It’s vodka.” Mickey winked. “The trail is this way,” he said, disappearing for a moment between two trees. Kerri followed, watching his calves contract and expand with each step. The path was worn, easy to follow.

“So what was it like, growing up in foster care?” he asked her.

“It was hard. I never really let myself settle down because I didn’t know when I would be leaving.”

“My friend, Rabbit is the closest thing I ever had to a brother. I couldn’t imagine never seeing him again.”

Kerri pulled a leaf from a maple tree and began tearing tiny pieces while she walked. “Actually, they put us together in the first place. After awhile, they took him away. That’s the last time I saw him. I was six.”

The separation from their mother was nothing compared to losing Ronnie. Kerri remembered running her finger along the stitching of the couch cushions while she listened to Isabelle tell them that Ronnie was going to be leaving to go live with a new family. Kerri understood that it meant Ronnie would not be living with her at the house anymore, that he would be living with a new family. She understood that she would never see him again, but at the time, she did not understand that never meant forever.

When it was finally time for them to go, Isabelle stood up, and Ronnie clung to her hand. He was eating a chocolate bar she had given him. “Say goodbye, Ronnie,” she said, nudging him. He ran over and hugged Kerri fiercely. Ronnie had no idea that he would be leaving with Isabelle and would not ever be coming back.

Kerri wrapped her arms around his entire body, hugging him so tightly it felt like their bodies had melted into one another. He squirmed after a couple of seconds, and Isabelle put her hand on Kerri’s shoulder.

“It’s time to go,” she said. Ronnie did not leave with his favorite truck, or his GI Joe doll. He skipped down the sidewalk with Isabelle, and she buckled him into the backseat of a yellow cab. Kerri pressed her face against the bay window while she stood



on the couch watching them. Ronnie looked up right before the cab rolled away. He waved at her, his face smeared with chocolate.

Kerri never saw him again.

“That really sucks.”

“Yeah, it really does suck.” Kerri took a sip from her water bottle. The trees looked wavy, and the burning in her chest had fanned out. She concentrated on the trail in front of her, keeping time with Mickey’s steps. “I just want to find him again. I’m always wondering if he’s okay, what happened to him after that day. If I can’t on my own, I’ll go to my mother.” Kerri threw the last of the maple leaf on the path. “My mother is my last resort.”

Mickey stopped. “I thought you didn’t know where your mother was?”

“It’s complicated. I know where she is. Or where she was. I just try to have as little contact with her as I can,” she said to Mickey, pausing to sit on a large rock by the path to catch her breath.

Her mother was a hailstorm in the summer. She was mysterious and unexpected, and Kerri could count the number of times she had contact with her mother since the night she was taken away. There was the day at the fence, a surprise phone call, or a card in the mailbox with a return address from across the country; California, Texas, and once, Montreal Canada.

Kerri had learned not to listen to her mother’s promises that she would come back for her. She had learned to accept the checks that her mother sent to her every so

often. She tried to forget about the fact that they were sent in guilt more than any kind of love for her.

“I checked in with some of the neighbors you know,” Mickey said.

“Did they remember her?”

“Yes.”

“And?” Kerri leaned back on the rock.

“You don’t want to know.”

Kerri smiled grimly. She did know. It was the same reason she never contacted her mother. It was best to stay away from some people.

“What’s that over there?” She veered off the path toward a pile of crumbled, blackened bricks that formed the shape of the letter L across the ground. Evidence of a footpath remained, a ribbon of hard packed ground through the low lying ferns. Mickey took a long sip from his water bottle. “Used to be a house here.”

“Out in the middle of the woods?”

Mickey kicked at the pile of crumbling bricks. A chipmunk shot out from underneath the pile and scampered up a nearby tree. “Yup. Some bum set it on fire about ten years ago.”

“What was a house doing in the middle of the woods anyway?”

“This was all farmland, a long time ago.” He ran his hand across his forehead and wiped it on his shirtsleeve. “When I first moved here I used come to the house all the time.”

“What happened to the bum?” Kerri swatted a mosquito off her leg.

“He died. Come on, let’s keep moving.”

Kerri's chest burned, the vodka sliding down her throat did nothing to quench her thirst. Her shoes kept getting caught under the roots that made shallow bridges above the ground. Mickey turned around each time she stumbled, offering his hand to her. She took it eventually, and when his fingers closed around hers she allowed herself to be led by him for a few feet, until he wriggled out of her grasp to hold a thin tree trunk out of her way so it wouldn't snap back and hit her in the face.

When they reached the clearing of the trail, Mickey stopped short. Kerri peered around his shoulders to what lay ahead on the path. Kerri saw a family, a young boy and his parents. The father sat on a beach chair, reading the paper, rubbing one finger against his eyebrow beneath the brim of a baseball hat. The mother was crouched behind her son, rubbing sun tan lotion across his pale back. The boy had brightly colored swim trunks in the pattern of orange and white stripes. The cane in his hand glittered in the sun.

"Shit," Mickey said softly under his breath.

"What is it?" Kerri asked.

Mickey glanced behind him at her. "Remember that broken window in the bedroom? It has to do with the kid."

"What do you mean? Did he throw a rock at it or something?"

"Something like that." He reached for Kerri's hand and pulled her, forcefully into the clearing. "Don't even look at them. Just follow me. I'm not supposed to be around them you know? But this is the only way to the car without hiking the whole way around the lake, and I'm not doing that."

Kerri nodded. She snuck a peak out of the corner of her eye, shading her face with her hand. The boy had gone to the edge of the water, leaning on the cane while small waves lapped at his ankles. It was the mother who noticed them first, and she said something to the father, who put down his paper and turned around. Kerri saw his eyes narrow, and he stood up.

“I’m going to wait here, can you go get our stuff? The blanket and the beer?” Mickey whispered.

“Sure. Be right back.” Kerri walked towards the family. Mickey’s blanket was only a few feet away from their chairs, and when Kerri bent down to pick it up off the sand, the father came up to her.

“You two leaving?”

Kerri nodded and folded up the blanket. She tried not to make eye contact with him. He seemed like the type of person who would start screaming at any moment.

The father nodded in Mickey’s direction. “You two together?”

“Sort of.” Kerri didn’t know why she lied. She barely knew Mickey. But something about the man’s tone made her want to protect him.

“You should steer clear of him then. That kid is bad news.” The father reached for the beer and handed it to Kerri. “Its not my business, but he’s dangerous.”

Kerri turned to look at Mickey. His arms were crossed and he was pacing back and forth quickly.

“Thanks.” Kerri turned away hurried towards where Mickey was standing.

“What did he say to you?” Mickey demanded.

“Nothing, c’mon.”

She followed him back to the pickup truck. He opened the door and got inside, opening her door a crack. The air inside of the truck was muggy, and smelled sour, like clothes that had been left in the washer and grown mildew. Mickey reached for the six pack of beer in Kerri's lap. He cracked one open, and handed it to her. "I'm sorry about that. I hope he didn't say anything mean to you," He punched the dashboard. "That guy. He's such an asshole." He chugged the contents of the can and threw it out the window. Kerri watched it bounce against the pavement and roll away.

Kerri peeled off a strand of hair that had been stuck to her forehead. The rain started then, hitting the windshield hard, bringing fog up from the pavement. The vodka feeling was gone, washed away. Kerri tilted her head back and gulped her beer, wishing it back. But when the beer was empty, she was still in Mickey's dank pickup truck.

"What the hell is his problem with you? He said you were dangerous, that I should keep away from you." She struggled to keep her voice neutral, and she pressed her quivering hands between her thighs.

"This is why we shouldn't hang out. I'm not a bad guy, but you don't need this." She watched him light a cigarette and take a deep drag. "I accidentally shot that kid, but it's not like you think."

Kerri put her hand on his knee. Looking into his eyes, she could see how upset he was. She felt slightly afraid of him, but not enough that she wanted to go home quite yet. He smiled at her and rested his hand over hers. "So do you think I'm an awful person now?"

“I think there are two sides to every story. I want to hear what happened. But first you need to bring me to a bathroom.” The protective feeling that had come over her while she was talking to the father still lingered. She squeezed his hand.

He hesitated for a moment. “Come back to my house with me? I want to show you something.”

The house looked even more hopeless in the twilight and the rain. Kerri stood in the doorway of his kitchen, and he dug through a closet full of sheets and pillowcases and towels. He threw her a towel. “I think there’s an old hairdryer in the second drawer of the bathroom if you want to dry your hair off.” She passed by him in the doorway, and he gave her arm a squeeze. “I’ll leave you one of my t-shirts and a pair of sweatpants too so you don’t have to stay in wet clothes.”

Behind the privacy of the bathroom door, Kerri sat on the edge of the tub. Mickey was exactly the kind of guy her mother would have liked at her age, she thought. Kerri had remembered those kinds of guys bringing her mother flowers at first. She would arrange them above the sink, sometimes in the room Kerri and Ronnie shared. The smart ones would bring her and Ronnie toys, ice cream cones. But at the end there was the fighting, those men calling her mother names that she didn’t understand. Sometimes Kerri and Ronnie would hear the crack of hand upon cheek, and then a door slamming. And then they were gone.

Mickey was in the kitchen boiling water in an old brass tea kettle when Kerri emerged from the bathroom.

“You like tea?” he asked her, setting out a chipped mug. She shrugged. “Sure.”

The cup warmed her hands as she gazed around his kitchen. In the far corner by the living room she noticed a sheet covering an easel. “What is that?”

Mickey put his mug down. “Come into the living room, I’ll show you.”

Mickey turned on the living room lamp. It cast a soft glow over the room. Canvases were stacked everywhere, lined up against the walls and on top of each other. There were two easels in the room, each with a paint covered sheet draped over the canvas. Mickey pulled the sheets off to reveal what he had been working on.

“Wow, you did all of these?” Kerri breathed. The paintings were mostly abstract art. Kerri didn’t understand much about art. The paintings were done with drips and slashes of black against gray, red against yellow. The two paintings in the easel were the only different looking ones in the room. The first picture was completely red, with a hollowed out black face painted on it. It was as if a cloud of red fog was just beginning to clear to reveal a haunted and tortured face. The second picture was the same pattern, but was of the dark shape of a man’s body coming through the red fog.

“What do you think?” Mickey whispered. He had come up behind her and put one of his hands around her waist.

Kerri’s heart beat faster. “Whose face is it?”

“Mine.” Mickey let go of her and drifted over to the picture of the face. Its black hollowed out eyes glowed through the picture like a black hole. Kerri shuddered for a moment.

“It’s a scary picture. The face looks mean.”

Mickey chuckled. “You’re right. But I’m not always such a nice guy.”

Kerri pulled an afghan with the flowers on it off the back of the couch and wrapped it around her. It smelled stale, and the fibers were scratchy on her bare arms. “You keep saying that. I’m not sure I believe you’re that terrible.”

Mickey sat beside her on the couch. “I had a lot of fun with you today. I’m sorry it ended like it did.”

Kerri shifted around on the couch cushion so she could be closer to him. Mickey was staring intently at the painting. He held her hand for a minute, and she squeezed his fingers. Her heart was racing, and she wished he would kiss her.

“Come here, I want to show you something.” He walked into the bedroom with the boarded up window. Kerri watched his lean body. His spinal cord was taunt down his back like a rope when he bent down and shoved the piles of old shoes and boxes over to the side of the closet. “Come here,” he repeated again. Kerri followed, ducking her head into the black expanse of the closet. She could feel the side of Mickey’s face against hers even though she couldn’t see it. The hairs on her cheek were tingling. Mickey clicked on a flashlight. The closet opened up into a crawlspace, and Kerri took the flashlight out of Mickey’s hand. She shined it into the crawlspace. The circle of light revealed a dusty GI Joe, a strawberry cupcake doll face down in the corner under a golden book, its spine glittering in the light like a long lost treasure. It was the crawlspace that she used to hide with Ronnie in when her mother was fighting with one of her boyfriends.

“How come you didn’t show me this when I came over before?”



“Wanted to make sure I could show you something when you came back.”

Kerri wriggled out of the closet, clutching the two dolls to her chest. “What if I didn’t come back?” she asked some what indignantly.

Mickey picked a dust ball off of GI Joe’s jacket. “Guess it’s a good thing you did.” He sat back on the bed and patted the seat next to him. “I want to be honest with you. That kid this afternoon? He tried to break into the house. Some of the kids in town dared him to. I thought he was trying to rob the place, and I shot him.” He gripped Kerri’s arm, and she searched his face. His blue eyes were staring into hers intently, waiting for a reaction.

“Is that why he has a cane now?”

Mickey nodded. “Yes. I went to jail for a year because of it. I just got back.”

Kerri stared down at the dark stain below the window. She guessed what it was now, but didn’t bother to ask Mickey. He sniffled, and Kerri tried not to laugh at him. She always laughed when people cried, because she didn’t know what else to do.

“God I’m even more embarrassed now,” he said. “But it’s like I can’t even go anywhere without that kid around. Every time I shut my eyes I see his face.”

Kerri put her hand on his thin back. She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“Do you ever feel lonely?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Kerri answered. “All the time.” She had been a loner since she was a kid. Every time she made a friend she had to leave them. In one of the sporadic phones call from her mother, Kerri had complained that she didn’t have anyone to count on.

*“The only person you can count on is you. You have to be a survivor Kerri.”*

*“Like the dandelions?” Kerri had asked.*

*“Yes. You’re my Dandelion Girl.”*

Mickey stroked the side of her face. “I think you’re the first person who really understands me.” He brought his hand to the back of her head and pulled her closer. His lips were warm; he leaned into her until she was laying the bed. The beer and vodka she had drunk made the room spin slightly. She braced herself on her elbows and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment until she felt the spinning subside. Mickey was kissing her neck and she could feel her body responding to him.

Mickey pulled his shirt over his head. His body was lean and sinewy, but Kerri could tell he was still strong.

“I really like you, Mickey, but I don’t want you to think I’m loose,” she whispered.

He kissed her forehead and laughed softly. “I don’t think you’re loose. I just feel so connected to you. If you want to stop, we don’t have to do anything at all.”

Kerri searched his blue eyes. He seemed so sincere. She had been with one other guy, one other time. She had known it was wrong then, but with Mickey it seemed different. He was right, she was lonely too. “I don’t want to stop.”

“Trust me,” Mickey said.

## Chapter Four

The pile of blackened crumbling bricks was easy for Mickey to find again. Flashlight in hand, he walked along the edge of what was left of the foundation. The beam of his light occasionally caught the pale, glowing eye of a deer or a raccoon. *This is where everything changed*, he thought. *This is where he found out what he was capable of.*

Mickey would always remember climbing the rotting porch stairs of the Cheney's old farmhouse behind Welsh Lake one cool autumn day in November when he was a teenager. He snuck into the house all the time, searching for ghosts, even though he knew he was far too old to be entertaining such childish notions. The house was surrounded by woods that had overtaken the farm field generations ago. When Mickey first saw it, it was like stumbling across a fairytale house in the middle of the woods.

He had circled around the house carefully, peering through the cracks in the boarded up windows, until finally, he gathered the courage to pry open the rusty screened in door. Dust filtered through the air like thousands of fireflies as his weight shuddered and creaked the old floorboards. It was like stepping into another time. Mickey swept his finger across the top of the mantle and rubbed the gritty dirt between his fingers. He had walked up the stairs, gripping the banister tightly, holding his breath in anticipation of what he would find.

Moth eaten sheets covered the furniture that had been left behind, lumpy creatures that sat motionless in each room that he passed through. Sometimes Mickey would sit in one of the misshapen chairs, motionless, trying to silence even his breathing. Mickey

spent so much time in the house he felt like he knew the family that had lived there before. If only he could sneak quietly enough into a room, he could surprise them, and finally see them.

He imagined a little boy who played with the wooden train set in the upstairs bedroom, or the mother while she stood on her tiptoes with an old rag, trying to reach the top of the grandfather clock in the living room. The father would be outside, in the carriage house, sanding down a hope chest he had made so that the family could store extra blankets for the winter at the end of the bed. Mickey wasn't sure if it was more comforting that he never actually saw a ghost, if it was easier to have the family live in his own head.

The day that he strode into the living room to find another boy already there, trying to roll a joint at the kitchen counter he practically wet his pants. Mickey stood in the doorway for a moment, watching the top of the boy's blonde head bent over the counter.

"John?" he called out softly, using the name he had given to the boy he had created in his mind. The head snapped up, his eyes large and fearful until he saw that it was just Mickey, a boy his own age. He grinned. "No, I'm Kevin. Do you know how to roll a joint?" Mickey nodded his head.

"I can't get it to stay," Kevin said.

Mickey took the loosely rolled joint out of Kevin's hand and quickly re-rolled it. He picked up a book of matches from the table and lit the joint. They passed it back and forth for a few minutes.

"How old are you?" Kevin asked.

“Fourteen. How old are you?” Mickey took another hit and held his breath, trying to keep the smoke in for as long as he could hold it.

“Same. Do you come here a lot?”

“Yeah. Do you?”

“A couple times. I was the one that wrote that stuff behind the house.”

Mickey remembered when he came to the farmhouse and saw it. The graffiti was in black paint, angry words like *fag*, *fuck you*, and *whore*, written on the side of the house, the paint bleeding into the cracks and making the letters runny and crooked.

“Have you ever seen the inside of the carriage house?” Mickey asked.

“Can’t get in. It’s locked.”

Mickey put the joint down on the edge of the table. “I found a way to sneak in the back. C’mon, I’ll show you.”

Mickey had shown Kevin the inside of the carriage house, with its empty stalls and smell of hay and furniture polish. He showed him the old farm equipment, now dusty and rusted out, that was hidden in the eaves of the roof.

They smelled the smoke in the house before they even got back inside the kitchen. The joint had rolled off the table, coming to rest underneath the leg of a chair. The old wood, unattended for years and dried out with age, had caught fire easily.

Mickey grabbed Kevin by his jacket. “What do we do?”

“This is so far out!” Kevin said. He picked up the book of matches that were still resting on the table and thrust them into the small flame that licked the chair leg. The match heads exploded, and the smell of sulfur overwhelmed Mickey. The fire grew, spreading to the leg of the table and up the rest of the chair.

“What are you doing?” Mickey cried. He cupped his hand over his nose and mouth.

“What does it look like, I’m helping it.” Kevin grinned at Mickey. “It’s just an old house, it will be so cool to watch it burn.”

Mickey coughed. His eyes were beginning to water, but Kevin stood close to the fire and smoke, unaffected. The fire had spread quickly, now skirting up the wall, curling pieces of wallpaper before they burned away. It spread to the curtains, slowly eating through them. Big pieces of burning cloth dropped onto the floor and turned to black spots in the wood.

“Let’s get out here,” Mickey said, urging Kevin to follow him. He ran down the porch steps and into the woods, hiding beneath the protective cover of trees. The lake shone brightly behind him. The house glowed from within, a flickering of flame appearing in the window for a moment. Mickey swallowed. *What if the whole forest burned down?* he thought. And now there would be no more sneaking into the house, imagining what his ghost family was doing. He would never be able to look out the bedroom window on the second floor and watch the lightening come up through the middle of Welsh Lake during a thunderstorm. Mickey wished he could have taken something from the house before it burned up.

“Should we call for help or something?” Mickey asked Kevin when he sat down next to him in a pile of leaves.

“No way. We’ll get in big trouble for this. I bet we could go to jail or something.” Kevin made a circle in the dirt with a stick. “We’re friends right?”

Mickey nodded.

“Friends don’t tell on each other right? So you have to promise not to tell anyone about this, ever. We’re in this together.”

Mickey thought about what his father, back in Iowa, would do to him if he ever found out that Mickey had helped set fire to an old house. All of the beatings he had gotten from his father had been for small things; not coming home on time, forgetting to do his chores, sassing his mother. He shuddered to think of the beating his father would have given him if he found out about what he had just done. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell a soul. I promise.”

They didn’t hear about the bum for another couple of days. Mickey had come into the kitchen of Aunt Charlotte’s house for breakfast one morning and there was a picture of Cheney farmhouse on the front page of the paper. The article wasn’t very long, but Mickey felt sick when he finally got through it. A homeless man had taken refuge in the house, in an upstairs room. Mickey and Kevin didn’t go upstairs that day, just in the kitchen and the carriage house. The man was named David Ellis, and he had been passed out from alcohol when the fire spread throughout the house. He had died from smoke inhalation, the paper said. He left behind an estranged wife and two children. A picture of the man accompanied the article, and Mickey studied the grainy picture. David Ellis had dark eyes and salt and pepper hair. He reminded Mickey of his grammar school art teacher, the one who told him that he should become an artist.

That afternoon, Mickey showed the paper to Kevin at lunch in the cafeteria. “We did this,” he hissed to Kevin.

“Be quiet,” Kevin said, looking furtively around the cafeteria. “I read about it this morning too. But there’s nothing we can do about it now. So just keep your mouth shut okay?”

“But he had a wife, kids. We should turn ourselves in or something.”

“They’ll send us to juvy. You’re my best friend. You promised.”

Mickey crumpled up the paper in his hand and pressed the ball into the mashed potatoes on his lunch tray. He didn’t want to go to jail either. “You’re right. We’ll never talk about it again.”

They never did. Mickey cherished his friendship with Kevin more than anything. Before Kevin came along, Mickey didn’t have many friends as a young boy, partly because his father was always trying to find a better job and the window of opportunity to make friends was as unpredictable as the summers in Iowa, where he moved to when he was eleven. When school let out, Mickey used to ride his bike across the neighborhood to the edge of Mr. Bennet’s property. Two black willow trees stood guard at the beginning of a bike path, and Mickey would plow through the middle of them, the pointy leaves tapping his face like fingers and sometimes getting stuck between the spokes of his bicycle wheels. He would follow the bike path down an embankment, through a thicket of pussy willows and hop trees, until the front tire of his bike met the edge of the Lake Springvale’s shore. He would lean his bike up against the same mighty sycamore tree, its mottled bark like the hides of the piebald ponies that grazed the prairie grass at the Clancy’s farm.

Mickey would strip down to his underwear and wade into the water, his feet slipping over the slimy rocks and sediment on the bottom. He would wade out farther



and farther, until the water reached his neck, and then swim out to a tiny patch of land in the middle of the lake, his own personal island. He had named it Aslan Island, after the lion from the Narnia chronicles. The first time he had read the story it had mesmerized him.

Mickey's island was heaven. He spent most of his afternoons there, walking around the tiny patch of land, learning every square inch of it, his kingdom. He pretended he was Huck Finn foraging for food on the island, maybe eating the berries that dangled off the ends of the silky dogwood trees in dark purple clusters, like miniature grapes, or building forts from discarded, half rotting logs of the white ash trees. A family of alligator snapping turtles had made their nest on an embankment by the water, and Mickey watched them with fascination. The hard, pointed spikes of their shell reminded Mickey of a village of tepees from the Mandan Indians he had learned about in history class. The turtles were massive, large and round as pizzas, and they would glare at him with their small dark eyes. Mickey named each of his turtles and watched over them until they sailed into the water and didn't come back to the shore again.

Anything was better than being home, where his freedom and personal space was reduced to a room so small that his bed and bureau touched each other, only allowing him four drawers instead of six, and enough room to walk the two steps from his bed to the door. That house hadn't been built for an extra bedroom, so his parents opened up a closet where they wedged his furniture. At first, Mickey thought it was kind of fun, like being in hiding. And when his father came home, and started looking for someone to yell at, it was the perfect place for him to escape.

Mickey sighed to himself when he thought of those days in Iowa, when the only thing he cared about was what he was going to find on his island after school every day. But as he grew older all he had to look forward to were his father's strict rules and harsher punishments, and his mother's ducked head while she pretended she didn't know what was happening to her only son when he was taken behind the shed for some "father and son" time. His mother had always rubbed his back before he went to sleep, and when his father would punish Mickey, she would trace each welt on his back lightly with her finger, rubbing in ointment to help them heal faster. "You're a good boy, Mickey. Don't ever forget that," she would whisper before he fell asleep.

His family had moved to Florida by the time when started high school, and his grades began to slip. His mother and father's relationship had deteriorated to the point where they barely spoke to each other except for his father to ask for a second serving of pot roast or his mother to wish him a good day at work. His father seemed to age considerably after they moved to Florida. His dark hair grayed at the temples, and the skin around his jaw softened and expanded.

Many mornings Mickey found his father passed out in his office work chair next to a watery glass of scotch. His head would be flung all the way back, and his body draped haphazardly across the chair like a ventriloquist's dummy, waiting for a hand to reach inside and breathe life back into him.

Mickey's relationship with his father faired no better. He caught Mickey smoking cigarettes with his friends in front of the grocery store one afternoon, and constantly criticized Mickey for piercing his ear and growing his hair long, "like those hippies."

The last straw came when his father discovered Mickey with one of his friend's daughters in the shed at the edge of their property. It had been Mickey's first time, but she had been older, with short brown hair and unshaven legs. They were wrapped up in a scratchy wool army blanket, sharing a joint when Mickey heard his father chatting with someone, fumbling with the latch to the shed.

Mickey would have had just enough time to scramble around, get his clothes on, and hide out of sight. But listening to his father chat so pleasantly, making jokes and laughing with the man infuriated him. He had never spoken to Mickey like that, man to man, father to son. His father only criticized, and beat him regularly with a thick leather strap. "I won't raise a sissy boy," he liked to say to Mickey, "painting pictures, fooling around in that pottery studio with your mother. You should be playing football with the rest of the boys, not sitting behind an easel like some kind of faggot."

The girl he was with, he thought her name was Lisa, put her thin bare arm out across his chest to prevent him from sitting up when she heard the voices. "It's okay, it's natural. I'm not ashamed," she had said, and laid her head down in the curve of his neck.

His father spotted them the moment he stepped into the shed. He had probably gone in there to get a lawnmower or a tool for his mother's garden, and there, in the corner next to the curled up hoses and shovels, were Mickey and Lisa. He had a joint perched between his fingers and she had leaned over to embrace him, flashing the pale skin of her back towards his father like a dove's wing. She kissed him, and blew the rest of the smoke from her lungs to his, crushing his chest with her elbow. When she pulled back Mickey's father was gone, and the door swung shut with a soft click.

Mickey had been terrified to go home, but his father treated him the same as he did every other night, ignoring him and his mother at the dinner table while he read the paper, and then making himself a scotch and water. It wasn't until the next morning that Mickey understood the recourse of his actions. He awoke to his father's rough hand dug into meat of his shoulder. "Wake up. It's time for you to go," his father said gruffly.

Mickey sat up groggily. His father was already dressed, holding a small suitcase in his hand. A ferocious wind and rain beat against his window. He could hardly see outside, but saw the unmistakable yellow of a taxi cab sitting next to his father's jeep. Its windshield wipers waved frantically back and forth to keep the sheets of rain away.

"I don't understand," Mickey said.

"Get your clothes on and meet me in the kitchen. Now," his father said. He left Mickey's room, taking the suitcase with him.

"Based upon your behavior yesterday, I've decided that you are not interested in living under my roof any longer. You've gotten in with the wrong crowd down here, and you obviously do not respect me or the rules of this house." His father hefted the suitcase onto the table, and slid an envelope under the handle. "You are going to live with your mother's sister, Aunt Charlotte, up in Massachusetts. Your plane leaves in a few hours."

"What does Mom say?"

His father stood at the counter with his back to Mickey. He buttered a slice of toast. His knife scraped over the hard bread with tiny, sure strokes. "I'll tell her when she wakes up. You need to leave."

That was the last time Mickey spoke to his father. He had arrived in Oakwood, Massachusetts later that afternoon, in front of Aunt Charlotte's white ranch with the dirt

driveway. A rusty chain link fence surrounded the property, and an overgrown hedge blocked most of the windows in the house. All of the other houses on the block looked the same. They were neglected, some with broken down cars in the driveways, and garbage bags stacked up in the yard.

He had never met his Aunt or his cousin Peter before, but when he arrived they welcomed him with open arms. He was able to spend six wonderful months with Peter before he left for Vietnam. When Aunt Charlotte got the call a year later informing her that Peter had been killed, she went crazy. The house became a shrine to him. A blown up picture of Peter in uniform right before he was shipped off hung over the mantle of the fireplace, his proud face a reminder of what Mickey would never become. His medals were displayed in a glass case on the mantle, beside rows of photos, markers of the milestones throughout Peter's childhood.

Mickey felt a certain twinge when he looked at Peter's picture. His father had talked about Mickey joining the army ever since Mickey could remember. He would have been so proud to see Mickey in that pressed uniform, posed in front of the American flag, going off to defend his country. Instead, he had sent him to live with his aunt, banishing Mickey from his memory, from any further responsibility of him.

Aunt Charlotte wouldn't let Mickey sleep in Peter's old room, so every night, while he was stretched out on the couch, Peter's face loomed over him, judging him while Mickey rolled a joint on their coffee table, or staring at him if he brought a girl over. Peter was worse than his father ever was. Sometimes when Mickey couldn't sleep he would look at all of the pictures, the time-line of Peter's life. There was a photo of Peter and Charlotte at the Cape by the sea. There was a photo Peter on a merry-go-

around, his hands wrapped around a gold pole through the body of a laughing unicorn. Then Peter as a boy, holding his science project, one of those papier-mâché volcano's, and Peter holding a plastic soccer trophy with the rest of his teammates.

On the other side of the mantle was the other half of his life when he became a young man, sliding a corsage over a pretty blond girl's delicate wrist, and then posing in front of the same fireplace before prom,. There was a picture of Peter beside his first car, a black Ford Pinto, shined up like piece of gleaming onyx.

The only good thing about living with Aunt Charlotte was that she was so wrapped up in her own pain that she didn't have the energy to care where Mickey was and what he was doing. The only moral compass that guided him was Peter's ghost, which he grew to hate as the years went by.

What saved him was meeting Rabbit at the house in the woods that day. Rabbit had grown up even worse than Mickey did, but he never let it bother him. In fact, it was the first time Mickey had met someone that was actually jealous of the way he had grown up. Rabbit was fascinated with Mickey's stories of all the different places he had lived, the wide prairie fields of Iowa, the sticky air and endless golf courses in Florida, and mountains that stretched all the way to space in Colorado, where Mickey had been born. "All I've ever seen is the same apartment, the same nothing. You got it good, man. You don't even know." Mickey had scoffed, relaying the beatings of his childhood, and the emptiness of it, and then went home with Rabbit after school one day. Rabbit had grown up in the projects, in a tall, eight story building filled with families just like his—teenagers who already had children, husbands that spent their social security checks at the

package store down the street, and women who wore children on their hip the same way that most women displayed their latest handbag.

Trash was strewn across the walkway and in front of the building. Mickey saw a scooter with one streamer missing from the handlebar, a single dirty sock, and an action figure stuck inside the middle of a bush. Mickey followed Rabbit up a flight of stairs, down a hallway with a stained carpet and gray walls. When Rabbit opened up the door to his apartment, the air assaulted Mickey, a sour smell of lingering sweat and cat urine and sickness. The dingy curtains bathed the apartment in twilight. A thin man sat on the couch, watching *The Price is Right* on a black and white television and eating a peach. He wore knee socks pulled up over legs that were as thin and spindly as a colt's, and the juice from his peach ran down his chin and splattered onto his stained white t-shirt.

"My dad," whispered Rabbit, "just wait right here." Mickey stood in the doorway while Rabbit ran into his room for his baseball hat, and took two cans of soda from the refrigerator. Rabbit's father didn't register his presence whatsoever, except to put the peach pit on the end table beside him and wipe his mouth with the back of his hand. Mickey knew at that moment that he could have had it worse. His aunt's house with its pictures of Peter and her shallow sobs when she thought Mickey was asleep in the dead of night didn't seem so bad.

Mickey stopped walking when he got back to the beach at Welsh Lake. He could see where Caleb had been because of the holes in the sand from his cane. Mickey followed Caleb's path, dragging one foot over the sand to cover the holes, until he got to the water's edge. Mickey took off his clothes and dove into the water. He swam until he

was in the middle of the lake, gazing up at the moon, which hung in the air like a great white wafer. Fatigue gripped Mickey's muscles, and he thought about slipping under the water and sinking down to the bottom of the lake. Finally, when he felt like he couldn't tread water any longer, he made himself turn around and swim back to shore.



## Chapter Five

September, 1978

Kerri applied another coat of mascara to her eyes under the flickering bulb of her bathroom mirror. She was getting ready to go to a cookout at Mickey's house. She pulled a shirt out of the closet to wear, and then realized it was the shirt she had on the day she went hiking with Mickey. She hadn't seen Mickey since they went to Welsh Lake, but he had called her a few times at the hotel since. When the phone rang last night, she picked it up, knowing it was Mickey. No one else had ever called her at the motel. Her stomach fluttered with the thought of seeing him again. She couldn't stop thinking about the night they were together. It had been a much better experience than her first time.

Her first had been with Mr. Kent. That's what she called him, Mr. Kent. Not by Jason, his first name. Mr. Kent had been a friend of the foster family she had been living with until her eighteenth birthday a few months ago. Mr. Kent came over for supper once a week, always paying special attention to Kerri. Last year when she turned seventeen he asked her foster parents if it was about time for her to have a job, and they agreed.

Kerri started coming over to Mr. Kent's house three times a week to baby-sit his children. She got them off the bus, made them a snack and dinner. After the dishes were cleaned up and the kids had eaten dessert, Mr. Kent drove her home. He had told her he was separated from his wife, but Mrs. Kent still filled the house with her presence. Kerri could only assume she had left him in the wintertime, because the house had been filled with snowmen when she starting babysitting in the fall. Figurines of snowmen were on

the end tables, and hanging on the walls. There were even a few stray Christmas cards stuck to the fridge with snowmen magnets. Kerri knew that if he put the decorations away, it would really mean Mrs. Kent wasn't coming back. Kerri had done the same thing with Ronnie's blanket that he had left behind. That was the blanket she always used to pull over her head when she was scared. The blanket was her most treasured possession until she was twelve. Then one of her foster parents threw it away because it was "too grubby." After that Kerri had to learn what life was like without the blanket to hide under.

Mr. Kent had always been nice to her, but eventually it turned into something else. One week, instead of paying her the usual twenty dollars, he gave her a small bottle of vodka with a red bow on it. "Get into some trouble with your friends" he said, winking at her. Kerri's face turned red, like it always did. "Thanks Mr. Kent," she mumbled, and tucked it into her purse.

A few weeks later, Mr. Kent came home with a bottle of wine. He poured a glass for each of them to drink with dinner. After the kids were done, they went into their rooms to do homework, and Mr. Kent poured Kerri another glass of wine. He asked what her favorite subjects were in school, if she was planning on going to college. She told him about what it was like growing up in foster care, sipping her wine nervously. Mr. Kent seemed like he never blinked and Kerri couldn't help but fidget whenever they were alone together, and she didn't have his children around to distract her.

She thought he looked like Burt Reynolds, only skinnier. No one had ever paid so much attention to her before. Kerri started to curl her hair on the days she baby-sat, and

painted her nails pink. When she wore lipstick one day Mr. Kent told her how grown up she looked, that she could pass for twenty one.

The first time he kissed her was the first time Kerri had kissed anyone. Mr. Kent surprised her with a yellow rose after his kids were in bed upstairs. He took her by the hand and kissed her gently. Kerri began to imagine herself marrying Mr. Kent and moving in with him. As soon as she turned eighteen, she told him, they could run away together and elope.

When that day finally came, Mr. Kent got another babysitter. He took Kerri out to a fancy restaurant and ordered her steak. She told Mr. Kent she loved him, and he ran his fingers across the top of the knuckles of her hand.

When dinner was finished, Mr. Kent drove Kerri across town to Mosley State Park. There was a restored grist mill there, and a gazebo overlooking the pond. It was in the gazebo that Kerri was with Mr. Kent for the first time. The only time.

Kerri had driven to the RiteAid exactly four weeks later after her first missed period, with her babysitting money in the pocket of her jacket. She bought two different brands of pregnancy test, and each kit had two tests in it. She drank a large glass of water on the deck of her foster family's house, staring at the broken swing-set in the park across the street. The other foster kids had nowhere else to play, so they rigged the swing with the broken chain to the good swing, and propped the slide up on the side of a tree so they could at least climb on it. Kerri watched the kids run around and tag each other. She watched two little girls that stood at the edge of the grass, cupping their hands around each others ears, telling secrets about the rest of the world around them.

She remembered being that age, sharing a room with other girls, always one, but sometimes even two or three, their bunk beds stuffed in a room in the shape of a letter L. Depending on who had been there the longest determined who got the top bunk. When she had been of that tender age, the age where secrets and alliances were forged while the shadows on the walls shift and grew darker, Kerri had thought that she was lucky to have built in friends, sisters almost. But then the social workers showed up, as spontaneously it seemed as a sun shower, and one of the beds would be empty for a few days, until another girl showed up, and was stuck sleeping on the bottom bunk.

Kerri came back into the bathroom after the standard three minute response time. The tests were lined up on the bathroom counter, each with a cheerful pink plus sign in the center of the window. They were all positive. She picked them up one by one and shook them, hoping that if she shook it hard enough the plus sign would disappear, but they remained where they were, all four of them.

Kerri didn't feel surprised. She had known, as many women say they do. It was the instinctual feeling that something had been added, that somehow her body wasn't just hers anymore. She had tried to push away the thoughts, convincing herself for the last month that she was just imagining things, shaking away the nagging stir of nausea in the pit of her stomach when she cooked dinner for Mr. Kent's kids.

She gathered the plastic pregnancy sticks in her hands. They clicked against each other, a bouquet of pink plus signs. Kerri stepped on the pedal of the trash can and dropped all of the pregnancy tests in except for one, which she wrapped in a paper-towel to show Mr. Kent.

When the kids were upstairs in bed later that night, Kerri told Mr. Kent she was pregnant. Kerri watched the color drain out of Mr. Kent's face and he put a hand over his eyes. "Are you sure?"

Kerri nodded eagerly. "Yes."

Mr. Kent put a thick wad of bills into the palm of her hand. "I can't have a baby with you, Kerri. I'm sorry."

"What is this for?" she asked quietly.

"I'm sorry if you thought we would be together. But I'm still trying to work things out with my wife. You're a good kid, Kerri, a sweet girl. I never should have led you on like this." He patted the top of her head like he did to his son and daughter.

"There's more than enough there to go to the doctor, and then some extra for you."

Kerri left then. She left Mr. Kent's house, and she left her foster family, and kept driving until she reached Oakwood, until she reached the glowing vacancy sign of the Pilgrim Motel that lit up through the trees like the moon.

Now, she opened the night stand drawer and counted what was left of that money. Only a few bills remained; she pressed them between the pages of the bible and shut the drawer. She wouldn't be able to stay at the Pilgrim much longer. She had no idea what to do.

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Kerri heard the rock music blaring when she got to the beginning of Mickey's street, before she even saw the house. When it finally came into view, Kerri saw people

sitting on chairs in a loose circle in the backyard. Light gray smoke rose from a grill, and the smell of hotdogs made Kerri's mouth water.

"I was wondering when you were gonna show up," Mickey said, coming up from behind her. He put down a package of hotdog buns and stepped towards her. She gave him an awkward hug, stiffening in his arms when two pretty brunette girls in halter tops stepped onto the porch. "Hey Mickey," one girl said and stopped.

"Melissa, Beth, this is Kerri," Mickey said, putting his arm around Kerri's shoulder. Kerri put her own arm around his waist. Mickey had told her that he didn't want to go steady, that he wasn't the relationship type, but Kerri felt the strange need to claim him as her own when she saw the girls on the porch. Melissa exchanged a quick smile with Beth, and then stepped forward and smiled at Kerri. "You come into the diner sometimes right?"

"Yeah," Kerri recognized her then. Melissa gave Kerri free desert sometimes when she came in. "I didn't even recognize you without that uniform on."

"And I'm Beth," the other girl said.

"Hi," Kerri said softly. She felt so ordinary in front of Beth. Beth's hair was long and shiny; they way women's hair was in shampoo commercials. She had a perfect figure, and the kind of confidence that Kerri knew she would never be able to imitate.

"Come with us, I'll introduce you to everyone," Melissa said.

There were only four other people at the cookout. The first person Kerri saw was a blond guy behind the grill. He was shirtless, and his stomach muscles rippled in the

sunlight. A giant tattoo of an iguana was wrapped around his forearm. “I’m Rabbit,” he said. “You want a beer?” He cracked open a can of Bud light and handed it to Kerri.

“And this is Mike and Don, my boyfriend,” Melissa said, gesturing to the other two guys sitting in the yard. Mike stood up, extending his hand out to Kerri. “Nice to meet you, Kerri,” he said from underneath the brim of his baseball hat. Don nodded in her direction, and Melissa sat on his knee.

By the time the sun went down, the cookout was in full swing. After the two cases of beer were gone, Beth produced a bottle of Jack Daniels from her purse and took a gulp of the warm liquid. Kerri hadn’t had much alcohol during the party. She knew she wasn’t supposed to drink while she was pregnant.

“You want a sip?” Beth asked Kerri, holding out the bottle to her. Kerri looked at the bottle and shook her head. “What, you can’t handle the hard stuff?” Kerri looked around the circle. They were all watching her. She touched her stomach, considering. She was only about six weeks along. *It’s not even a baby yet*, she thought to herself. *It’s just a pin prick inside of me.*

Kerri unscrewed the cap and tilted her head back. The Jack burned her tongue, but she swallowed it down and gagged slightly when she was done. Beth laughed, flashing her shiny white teeth. “Don’t drink much huh?”

Kerri shook her head. “I do a little.”

“Not everyone is like you Beth,” Melissa said.

“Do you smoke pot?” Beth asked.

“Sometimes,” Kerri said noncommittally. Unless she drank a lot while she was smoking pot, getting high made her feel jittery and nervous.

Beth tossed her hair over her shoulder and rolled her eyes. “How old are you anyway?”

“Eighteen. How old are you?”

“Twenty two.” Beth lit up a joint and took a drag. She held it out to Kerri. Kerri knew it was a challenge, so she took the joint and sucked in. She held in the smoke as long as he could but her lungs felt dry and she burst into a coughing spasm. Beth laughed at her. “Rookie,” she said, and took the joint out of Kerri’s fingers before she dropped it on the lawn.

Melissa tapped Kerri on the shoulder. “Come with me to get the last case of beer?”

Don threw his cigarette into the fire. “There’s another case of beer? I thought we drank it all?”

Melissa took Kerri by the hand and pulled her off the lawn chair. “There’s another case in the trunk of my car.”

Kerri followed Melissa across the lawn. The hit immediately started to take effect, and a slight, panicked feeling tickled deep in Kerri’s stomach.

“Don’t worry about Beth. She’s just slow to warm.”

Kerri laughed; she imagined the sound echoing through her head. “I thought she just didn’t like me.” Kerri turned her head back around. Beth was sitting on Mickey’s lap now, passing the joint back and forth. Kerri’s stomach tightened.



Melissa bent down and hefted the case of beer out of her trunk. "I can tell Mickey really likes you though."

"Why?" Mickey had barely spoken to her the entire night. After their brief hug on the porch, he had been careful to not sit next to her, or pay too much attention to her. He had kicked Rabbit off the grill, and then busied himself cleaning up in the kitchen while the rest of them drank outside.

Melissa smiled. Kerri could see her two front teeth were crooked. "Well the fact that he invited you at all. I mean, it's been me and Don, and Beth will probably take Rabbit home with her, so that leaves you and Mickey."

"What about that Mike guy?" Kerri asked. *Mike wasn't bad looking*, she thought. He had been the quietest one of the evening.

"Mike hasn't dated anyone in awhile," Melissa said, slamming the trunk of the car.

By the time the fire had been reduced to a few glowing embers, Kerri still felt high. She had no idea what time it was. Melissa and Don had disappeared what seemed like hours ago, and Rabbit and Mickey were on the front porch. It was only her and Mike Kaeding left in the back yard.

"So are you Mickey's girl or what?" Mike asked, handing the last of the bottle of Jack to her again. Kerri took a swig. She didn't know what Melissa was talking about. Mickey had completely ignored her the entire night. Beth had occupied most of his attention. Kerri looked around the yard. *Where was Beth*, she thought.

Mike leaned forward and whispered, "We're out of Jack."

Kerri looked down at the bottle in her hand. She could see Mike's reflection in the glass, his black eyes in the firelight.

"Want to go inside and help me find another bottle?"

Kerri stole one last look around the yard. She couldn't see Beth anywhere, but Rabbit had appeared. He took a seat at the far end of the circle of chairs and lit a cigarette. "Where is Mickey" she slurred. Rabbit shrugged his shoulders. "Where's Beth?" Kerri asked.

"Don't know."

Mike squeezed the top of her arm. "Follow me, and we can find some more booze. Who cares where Mickey and Beth are. If they're together, why can't we be together?" He flashed Kerri a grin. *He's right, Kerri thought. If Mickey was going to play games like that, then so could she.*

As soon as they got to the kitchen, Mike put his arm around her waist and pushed her against the counter by the sink. Kerri kissed him, even though his breath tasted sour with beer and he wasn't nearly as attractive as Mickey. Mike reached behind her and put his beer in the sink, grabbing at Kerri's belt. She continued to kiss him, harder, squeezing her eyes tightly together.

Then she heard a grunt, and the heat from Mike's body against hers was gone. She opened her eyes and saw Mickey grabbing Mike's neck from behind. Mickey held him by his shoulder and punched him in the face with his other hand.

"Mickey, what are you doing?" Kerri cried.

“That’s not yours. She’s mine,” Mickey said to Mike Kaeding who was on his knees in the kitchen, covering his nose with a bloody hand. He held his other hand up.

“I’m sorry man, I’m sorry.”

“She ain’t like the other girls. She doesn’t get passed around.” Mickey looked at Kerri. “You okay?”

“I’m okay.” Kerri pressed herself against the counter and Mickey took her hand. Kerri looked down at Mike, who was staggering to his feet, reaching for a dishtowel hanging off the cabinet. Kerri shook herself loose from Mickey’s grip. “I gotta go.” The screen door slammed shut behind her. When she reached the end of Mickey’s driveway, she broke out into a run.

## Chapter Six

Kerri licked frosting off of her fork. “This is the best carrot cake I’ve ever had,” she said to Melissa.

Melissa broke off a piece of cake with her fork. “I know. So how are you doing?”

“Okay I guess.” It had been two weeks since Mickey’s cookout, since he beat up Mike Kaeding in the kitchen. Mickey had called the hotel every day since that night, but Kerri hadn’t answered any of the calls.

“He told Don that he’s really sorry about what happened,” Melissa said.

“Yeah I bet he is.” Kerri mumbled. “It doesn’t matter anyway, I don’t think I can stay here any longer. I’m totally out of money.”

“I can get you a job at the diner,” Melissa offered. She took Kerri’s empty cake plate and put it in a bucket of sudsy water and dishes. Kerri looked around the diner. Part of her thought what was the point of working there, but then she realized that she had no place to go home to. She didn’t even have a home. Oakwood was as good a place as anywhere else. “Okay,” she agreed. “I’ll work at the diner.”

When she got back to the Pilgrim Motel parking lot, she snuck around to the back staircase so the owner wouldn’t see her go past the check in desk. A note had been taped on her door yesterday because she hadn’t paid the rent for the week. She opened the door. Since she was late on rent, the maids stopped coming to clean her room too. She hadn’t had fresh towels in over a week.

*What am I going to do?* She thought. She was eight weeks pregnant, broke. She sat thinking for awhile, and then reluctantly, she picked up the phone and dialed Mr.

Kent's number. The phone rang a few times, and Kerri was about to put the phone in the receiver when she heard the familiar voice coming out of the receiver. "Hi Mr. Kent," she said. "It's me, Kerri Wallace."

Mr. Kent paused, and Kerri held her breath. "Are you mad I called?" she said.

"No, no," he cleared his throat. "Are you okay? Where are you?"

"Yeah I'm fine," Kerri said. She let out a breath. She had almost been afraid that he had forgotten about her.

"The kids ask about you. They miss you."

"I miss them too." Kerri touched her stomach lightly, and clenched her teeth together. She wanted to ask him for help, for more money, or for her to go back and live with him.

"Did you, take care of things?" he continued. "You know."

She thought of telling him the truth – that their child was still growing inside of her. Then she heard a woman's voice in the background. "Who's that?" her voice cracked. She flexed her hand into a fist and loosened it again. "Sheila. We worked things out," he said. "So really Kerri, is everything all set."

"Yes," she whispered, "you don't have to worry about anything."

"Good good. It's good to hear from you kiddo."

Kerri cringed. "You too." She hung up the phone. She sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, staring at the empty white wall in front of her. The hotel bible lay opened beside her, void of the money she had pressed between the pages a few months ago. Kerri picked up the bible and hurled it against the wall. The book landed on the floor across the room, face down.

Kerri started to cry then, harder than she had ever remembered crying before. She had never felt so alone. She looked down at her stomach. She hated that she was pregnant, hated that she loved Mr. Kent and he wanted their child to be gone. She didn't want to have a baby either, but it was too late to do anything about it. She cried until she fell asleep.

## Chapter Seven

October, 1978

A few weeks after the cookout, Rabbit showed up at Mickey's door. "Beth is on her way over here," he announced as he came through the doorway.

"What? Why?" Mickey said.

"You saw how she was all over you the other night. She wants to finish what you two had going on."

Mickey sighed. Beth was hot, way hotter than any other girl he had met. But he still liked Kerri better. Thoughts of her kissing Mike Kaeding in the kitchen flooded his mind constantly. He never wanted to think of her with another guy again. She was the first girl who simply accepted him, even though she knew some of the bad things he had done.

Rabbit leaned against the kitchen counter. He picked up a stray fork and twirled it in his hands. "What, you mean you're not interested?" He winked. "She's worth it, trust me. Who do you think took her home after you beat up Kaeding?"

"Really?"

Rabbit peeked through the blue curtain that covered the window above the sink. "Here she comes man, be cool."

"Hey doll," Rabbit said, winking over her head to Mickey. He pretended to wipe sweat off of his forehead and fanned his face. Mickey tried to avert his eyes from Beth's breasts, which were spilling out of her tight shirt. She had a gold chain around her flat belly, which was completely exposed because her shirt ended at the top of her waist.

“You want a beer?” Mickey stammered.

She sauntered past him in her tight jeans. Mickey could not help but stare at the way the denim hugged her backside. Rabbit reached for the inside pocket of his coat and took out a half pint of rum. He put it in the freezer. “That oughta loosen her up some.”

“Where’s my beer?” she called.

Mickey carried in a beer for her. She was perched in the middle of his couch, twirling a cigarette between her fingers. “Mind if I smoke?” she asked, reaching for the beer. Her fingers brushed against his for the briefest second. She took a deep drag on her cigarette, staining the tip of it dark red with her lipstick.

“You gotta joint around Mouse?” Rabbit asked.

“On the table beside you. Just rolled it.”

Mickey stood up and went over to his record player. He picked out a Doors album and gently put down the needle. The sounds wafted through the room. The three of them didn’t talk much through the joint, and when the roach was too tiny to hold in their fingers, Mickey took it and put it in his roach bowl to save for later.

“So you did all these paintings and stuff?” Beth asked. She was obviously stoned. Her brown eyes were so red it looked like she had a fever. Rabbit got up and walked into the kitchen. Mickey could hear him open the freezer door and set shot glasses down onto the counter.

“Yeah, I did them all.” He looked around the living room. Canvases were stacked up on top of each other in every corner. He had hung the pictures he first showed Kerri up on the wall, the face and the dark body coming through the red fog. He had



been sketching a lot lately, practicing portraits of people he saw at the diner, or kids playing in the park.

Beth took the shot glass of the rum that Rabbit handed her and downed it quickly, then reached for another beer.

“You ever do any nude pictures?”

Mickey swallowed. “No.” He had once asked Kerri to do a nude picture, or even a topless picture. But she refused. She wasn’t afraid to be naked around him, she said, but she didn’t want to be on display for him to stare at her for hours and hours while he painted. Nowhere to hide, she had said.

“Why doll, you want to volunteer?” Rabbit said. He rubbed her thigh. She looked at him, annoyed, and swatted his hand away.

“Why not?”

Mickey hesitated. “You guys came here to party, not to watch me do artwork. That can’t be much fun.”

“She wants you to paint her naked Mouse. What’s more fun than that?”

Beth crossed her arms over her chest. “So how about it, Mickey? I want to pose for you.” She giggled. “It will be fun. For the sake of art?” She ran her tongue across her full lips and looked at him expectantly. Rabbit was nodding his head vigorously.

“Well, for the sake of art,” Mickey trailed off.

Beth lifted up her shirt. She was not wearing a bra. She kicked off her jeans, revealing her purple panties. She stood before Rabbit and Mickey in nothing but her gold belly chain. Mickey’s groin tightened as he took in the sight of her body. There weren’t too many girls that looked like Beth, and certainly none that even compared to her in a

crappy town like Oakwood. Mickey had no idea why she would be interested in him, and he knew that he would never have another opportunity like this again.

“How do you want me?” Beth said. “I mean, how do I pose?”

Mickey looked wildly around his living room. He pulled out a stool and had her sit on it, legs crossed.

He got into his chair in front of her and took out his tools. He began to sketch her outline, the shape of her full breasts, her narrow hips, and long brown hair. He had let her keep the belly chain on. It sparkled when she shifted and it caught the light.

“How am I doing?” she asked after awhile.

“Views getting better all the time,” Rabbit called out to her. “What color are you going to paint her nipples, Mouse?”

“You are so vulgar,” she said to him, rolling her eyes.

Mickey looked up from the canvas. His hands were smudged with charcoal and his neck ached. “You can put your clothes back on whenever you want to. I have everything I need.”

Beth smiled. “Really. Because I don’t.”

She stood up, beckoning him to follow. “Show me your bedroom Mickey,” she said, crossing one foot in front of the other down the hallway to his room. Rabbit slapped Mickey on the bottom. “Have fun, man.”

Beth was standing by the edge of his bed when Mickey got to the dark room. He squinted through the darkness, reminded of Caleb plopping down onto the floor of the bedroom in front of the window. Mickey was glad Beth wouldn’t be able to see the dark

stain on the floor. She pressed her face against his chest, kissing him softly over his t-shirt. She pulled his shirt over his head and tugged on the waistband of his jogging pants. Even in the dark Mickey felt exposed in front of Beth, as if she had x-ray vision and could see every part of him.

“Kiss me,” she said, pulling him down to her. He gave in, lowering her onto the bed. She wrapped her legs around him.

The light flickered on in the bedroom. Mickey stopped and rolled over onto the bed beside Beth. “Rabbit, what the,” He trailed off. It was Kerri standing in the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest. Mickey could see her lips were trembling and she was trying not to burst into tears.

“You piece of shit,” she said.

“Sorry honey, he wants someone more experienced,” Beth snickered. Mickey slapped her hand away when she went to touch him. “Quit it,” he said to her.

“Kerri, this isn’t what it looks like.”

“Oh really? Because it looks like you’re having sex.” Kerri wiped her eyes, which were welling up quickly. “It’s okay. You told me you didn’t want a relationship anyway.” A small cry escaped her mouth, and she fled down the hallway, her shoes making quick taps against hardwood floor like a machine gun.

Mickey leapt up from the bed and threw his clothes on.

“Why are you so upset? She’s just a kid,” Beth said, “Come back to me.”

Mickey paid her no attention. He ran out into the kitchen, pausing for a moment when he saw Rabbit still there, smoking a cigarette and reading the newspaper calmly, as

if were a pleasant Sunday morning over coffee and bagels. He looked up when he saw Mickey. “She asked where you were and heard you guys before I could even answer man, I’m sorry.”

A record album lay on the table beside him. Mickey noticed it was the new BeGees record, the one he had wanted to buy at the store the other day but put it back because he didn’t have the extra money.

Mickey followed Kerri out, catching up to her as she slammed her car door shut. He pressed his palm against her window.

“I didn’t think you were coming over tonight.”

Kerri revved the car engine. “Get off of my car.”

Mickey tried to open her door. It was locked. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have had to see that.”

“I came over here tonight because I wanted to tell you something.”

Mickey leaned on the hood of her car; the engine was warm under his hand. “What’s that? Look I told you, we weren’t going steady. It’s not like I’m cheating on you.”

Kerri looked straight at the steering wheel. Mickey could see her clenching her jaw together. She finally looked up, her blue eyeliner smeared around her eyes like she was crying blue tears.

“I came to tell you that I’m pregnant.”

She reversed down his driveway, spraying up sand from the tires and peeling away down the street. She didn’t look back once.

“Shit!” Mickey yelled.

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Kerri heard a knock at the door and peered through the peep hole. Mickey was standing in front of the hotel room door, holding a bouquet of wild flowers. She considered not opening the door, and he knocked on it again, heavier this time. “I know you’re in there, Kerri. I can hear the TV.”

Kerri sighed, and opened the door after a lengthy wait. She pursed her lips together and stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

“Can I talk to you?” Mickey asked.

She opened the door wider and Mickey handed her the bouquet. He ran his hand lightly over her stomach and she flinched. “Are you really pregnant?” he asked. “You’re sure?”

She wordlessly handed him the pregnancy stick that was in her underwear drawer, watching his reaction carefully. He studied the stick for a long time, and then set it on the nightstand.

“Look I know you don’t want any of this,” Kerri said. She turned her back to him. “I’m out of cash anyway, so I can’t stay at the Pilgrim anymore. I’m going to take off pretty soon, figure something out.”

Mickey pulled on the sleeves of his shirt and sat down at the table. He fingered the leaves of the fake plant. “This just took me by surprise. I mean, we were only together one time.”

Kerri snorted. “One time is all it takes.”

Mickey’s voice hardened. “Well I guess I thought that you were on the pill or something. Or I would have pulled out.”

“Sorry, I’m not an expert.” She picked up the pregnancy stick and opened the drawer. She threw it inside.

“Well neither am I!” Mickey said.

“Obviously.”

“Look, what do you want from me, Kerri? I just got out of jail, I got no money, no nothing. This is the last thing I need.”

Her stomach tightened. She had heard this response before, said the same lines back, except this time she was saying them to someone she didn’t even care about and barely knew. *How could I ever have thought this would work*, she thought. “Well then I won’t trouble you with it. I’ll take care of it.”

Mickey stood up from the chair. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that you don’t need to worry about it. Like you said, it’s not your problem.” Kerri went to the bathroom and shut the door before her tears could fall. “I think you should go now.”

Mickey didn’t answer. And Kerri didn’t come out until she heard the door slam shut. She watched him walk across the parking lot through the muted pink curtain. Everything seemed softer that way, less real. She pulled the chain across the door.

## Chapter Eight

November, 1978

Kerri flung another outfit onto the floor of the bedroom. Even the small amounts of weight she had gained made most of her clothes feel too small. She turned sideways in the mirror, sliding her hand over the barely noticeable bulge of her growing stomach.

In desperation, she had decided to try and cash the check her mother had sent her for her birthday a few months ago. The last few checks she had received from her mother bounced. Kerri didn't even know why she bothered to send checks at all. This latest one came inside a birthday card with a dog and a lion on the front, a card for a toddler, not an eighteen year old. Her mother had written a single line, *Happy Birthday, it's a big year*, and didn't bother to sign the card. Kerri had tried to cash it, surprised when the two hundred dollars actually went through. Kerri hadn't seen her mother since the day at the fence when she was nine, but she had gotten checks and cards sporadically since; sometimes a birthday card and a Christmas card in the same year, sometimes two or three years would elapse before she saw her mother's familiar printing on a piece of mail addressed to her. But after the phone call with Mr. Kent and the blow up with Mickey, Kerri didn't have another choice. Her mother was the only person left who could help her.

Kerri sipped the coffee she had brought up from the Pilgrim's dining area and thought back to the conversation she had with her mother the night before. "Well it's about time you called your mother," Rose had said. Kerri could hear her smoking a cigarette through the phone. Her voice sounded raspier to Kerri than she remembered. "I

was wondering if you wanted to come see me,” Kerri had said. She had swallowed and choked out, “I need your help, Mom.” Kerri told her mother to meet her at Cal’s diner.

Kerri’s hands were slick with sweat around the steering wheel by the time she got to Cal’s diner, pulling up to the large glass windows in the front. She looked through the glass at the women waiting tables in the diner. It was like looking into mirror of her life. Kerri knew them as well as she knew herself. She could feel their swollen ankles and aching feet, the smile they painted on their faces when they came into view of their tables, masking whatever was really going on in their personal lives. Maybe their husbands’ were cheating on them, their sons or daughters could be in jail, they could be pregnant too. They would always be worried about money, having enough to pay the rent on their tiny apartments, wishing they had enough to get the dark roots of their hair touched up, or to get a new purse or pair of jeans. They were doing what they had to do to survive. *And I’m doing what I have to do to survive*, Kerri thought.

Kerri waited in her car for a minute, running her hand absently over her stomach. She had thrown up this morning, but now she was hungry. She craned her neck around to see if her mother’s car was in the parking lot. She had told Kerri she would be driving a white Buick. When her mother finally drove up, fifteen minutes later, she opened the car door and Kerri was able to get her first good look at her mother in over ten years.

Kerri wondered if her grandmother had planned to name her daughter Rose when she was contemplating what names to choose, or if she had waited until Rose was born to pick her name. Either way, the likeness fit her mother perfectly. Rose had long, auburn hair that was a deep reddish brown, like the color of a brightly polished penny. Her face



was heart shaped, with large brown eyes that seemed to be the same color as her hair.

Kerri held her breath for a moment, intimidated by her mother's beauty.

Kerri pulled her coat tightly around her body and stepped out of her car. For mid November, the air was unseasonably cold. Kerri had found an old woolen, plaid, oversized jacket hanging off the back of a chair at Cal's when she was visiting Melissa one night. It had been left there by a trucker that had been passing through, and Kerri had been drawn to its uniqueness, to the scent of tobacco smoke that rose off of the shoulders of the coat. It reminded her of what a father would smell like, lighting up his pipe at the end of a hard work day while his wife prepared hot soup and steaming, buttery biscuits in the kitchen. Kerri had spent nights with the coat wrapped around her pillowcase, breathing in its scent and imagining what sort of man it used to belong to.

Now she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, suddenly feeling foolish for wearing the old coat to meet her mother.

"God, I never thought you'd end up back in this dump," Rose said, looking around at the center of town. "It looks exactly like it did twenty years ago." Rose gave Kerri a quick hug, and the smelled of alcohol filled her nose. Kerri wished she hadn't called her mother after all.

A moment later, Kerri found herself sitting across from her mother, one clammy hand face down on the white linen covering the table, the other hand gripping a ceramic coffee mug. The coffee tasted stale and bitter. Little bits of cream floated on the surface of the coffee like crests in the sea. Each time Kerri raised the mug to her lips she saw a faint brown line circling the middle of the mug. It was a stain from the coffee sitting too

long in the cup at the same level. Now it separated the two halves of the mug like an equator.

Kerri stirred another packet of sugar into her coffee and strained to be casual. She looked up at her mother, who was strumming her fingers against the linen. “So what do you need help with?”

Kerri stopped stirring her coffee and laid her spoon down on the tablecloth. Her mother obviously wanted to get right to the heart of things, for which Kerri was grateful. She didn’t want to drag out her visit any longer than she had to.

“I’m pregnant.”

Her mother sat back in her chair. A thin strand of hair worked its way to the corner of her mouth and got stuck in her lipstick. Kerri thought she saw a faint smile around the corner of Rose’s mouth. “Well no shit. You look just like I did when I was pregnant. Totally normal except it looks like you swallowed a melon.” Rose sighed. “So what about the father?”

Kerri swallowed. She had never told anyone about what had happened between her and Mr. Kent. She didn’t think she ever would, or could. “He’s this guy I just met. Actually Mom, he lives in our old house.”

Rose lit a cigarette and blew two smoke rings towards the ceiling. “I meant, is he helping you with the baby.”

“Oh,” Kerri said. She felt disappointed that Rose wasn’t more interested in the fact that she had been to the old house, or that Mickey was living there. “He doesn’t want to deal with it.”

Rose snorted and ground out her cigarette. “Figures. Just like you’re father.”

Kerri nodded. She knew nothing about her father. She felt sad when she realized her own baby would know nothing about its father, either. “I don’t even know my father’s name,” she said softly. “What can you even tell me about him?”

Rose frowned, and her beautiful face was distorted for a moment like she had smelled something rotting. The lines around her eyes crinkled up while she remembered. “Your father’s name was Christopher. He had just graduated high school after you were born. I was only fifteen at the time. Of course, being a father so young, he skipped college, got a job at the paper factory. Then he started drinking and doing drugs. He never paid me a dime for anything. The only thing he ever did was get a tattoo of your name on his forearm. He was so proud of it. Thought that was the way to show he really loved you.”

“But where is my father now? What happened to him?” Kerri pressed. She had never really given her father much thought, but now that he had been brought up, Kerri wondered what kind of man he was.

Rose shrugged. “I don’t know. He got way into drugs, and then he just left town one day and didn’t come back. By then, you were two, Ronnie was still a baby, and I was seventeen. “

Kerri rested her head in her hand. There were things she had dreamed of asking her mother since she was a little girl, and now that her mother was sitting in front of her, flesh and blood, her questions seemed best unanswered.

“I thought maybe that was why you had called me today, to find out about him. Was going to tell you to save your time.” Rose took a sip of her coffee. “But this whole pregnant thing we can deal with much easier.”

Behind Rose a young girl and her mother sat on the barstools at the counter. The girl had long hair down to her rear end that swayed back and forth as she wiggled around on the bar stool. Her mother was smoking a cigarette with one hand and cutting the girl's French toast with the other. The mother was stooped heavily in her chair, her back curving like a bow while she absently stroked the top of her daughter's head.

Kerri settled back in the hard aluminum chair of the diner. The sounds of silverware scraping against plates, the squeak of the waitress' shoes against the linoleum and tinkling of the bell over the door was suddenly deafening. She had never hated her mother more. Her anger rose up to the back of her throat, and she swallowed. Her mouth had a bitter, sour taste to it, and she had started to sweat.

"I also wanted to know if you kept track of Ronnie like you did with me. I want to find him."

"He was adopted about a year after you both were taken from me."

It was another verbal blow from her mother's mouth. Kerri had begged as a child for one of her foster families to adopt her. The first foster family she was placed with, Patty and her two sons, had been the family she fit into the best. Kerri had begged Patty to adopt her one day while they were walking to the ice cream stand in the center of town by the pool.

"Can I live with you forever?" she had asked Patty while they sat together on the picnic table. Kerri remembered she had ordered Rocky Road Ice Cream with rainbow sprinkles, and had tried vainly to pick out the red sprinkles and line them up on the picnic table, because red was her favorite color.

“I wish you could, but some day you’ll have to leave.” Patty had put her arm around Kerri and hugged her close. “But I’m gonna try to keep you as long as I can.”

“Why can’t I just be with you?” Kerri had whined.

Patty took her by the chin. She had a long brown ponytail that reminded Kerri of a horse, and freckles over every inch of her bare flesh. “It’s more complicated than that. Your Mommy has to say its okay, and she hasn’t said that, so I can’t adopt you.”

Kerri stuck her lip out and mashed her ice cream around with the spoon, pondering over what Patty had said.

“Well, can you ask her if it’s okay?”

“I’ve tried, but she hasn’t said yes yet. I think she wants to see if she can come back for you.” Patty cleared her throat and sniffled. “Wouldn’t that be nice, Kerri? To be back with your Mommy? She must miss you very much.”

Kerri took her ice cream cup and hurled it as far as she could into the field. “No! I don’t want to live with her. I hate her. I just want to be with you!” She leapt up from her seat and put her hands on her hips. Tears streamed from the corners of her eyes and her chest heaved. “Why can’t I just stay with you? I don’t want to go away again. I don’t want to be with my Mommy. She left me. Why would I want to be with someone who left me.” Kerri stamped her foot. “If you make me go back with her I’ll hate you too.”

Turning, she ran across the parking lot to the edge, where the foot high grass and dandelions grew. She did not know how long she stood watching the grass and dandelions blow gently with the wind. After what seemed like eternity, Patty’s freckled hand squeezed Kerri’s shoulder. “It’s time to walk back now, sweetie,” she said.

“They told me that you wouldn’t sign over your parental rights to allow me to be adopted by anyone.”

Rose nodded. “That’s right.”

Kerri’s voice raised an octave. “You wouldn’t sign the papers to release me, but you signed them for Ronnie? Why? Why didn’t you give me the same chance?”

Rose picked up the cream and stirred it into her coffee. “Kerri, it was selfish of me. I realize that now. But I had dreamed about having a daughter since I was a little girl. I tried to get you back, I really did, but I kept making the wrong choices. I was afraid to let you be adopted and have some other mother. I was afraid that you wouldn’t want anything to do with me,” Rose shrugged her shoulders and she crushed out her cigarette.

“Well, do you know where Ronnie is?”

“Yes, his mother contacted me quite recently, as a matter of fact. When he was adopted, I asked if it could be an open adoption, but the adoptive parents said no. I guess they never wanted to tell him that he was adopted.” Rose smiled for a moment, and pulled out a change purse. She shook out a pile of pictures, and pushed them towards Kerri across the table cloth. They were heavily creased, smudged, some so old that the gloss had practically worn off. “His mother still sent me a school picture every once in a while.”

Kerri studied the small pictures. Ronnie still had the same pale hair as she had remembered and the same dimple on each side of his cheek. Her heart beat faster.

“So why did his mother call you now after all this time?”

“She wanted to know if mental illness ran in the family. I guess Ronnie’s been acting out lately. Since he found out he was adopted, anyway,” Rose chuckled. “I’m sure its just teenage stuff.”

“But wouldn’t he have remembered me? Didn’t he wonder where his sister was?”

Rose’s voice lowered, and she looked sympathetically at Kerri. “Kerri, he was very young when you guys were together. Only about four. Between the separation of losing you, and me, I don’t think he remembers much of anything.”

Kerri put her hand to her forehead. It was damp, and she felt light headed all of the sudden. “I need to go to the bathroom,” Kerri said. She rose from her seat so abruptly she knocked her knee on the table, spilling coffee over of the sides of the mug. As she maneuvered through the crowded tables into the bathroom, the tears rolled down her cheeks. She knew it was a mistake to ever contact her mother. All she had ever brought her was pain.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror and leaned forward until she was touching the glass with her forehead. She couldn’t believe that Ronnie might not remember her. She had spent every day of her life wondering if he was okay, and it might have all been for nothing. Sobs rose up from within her, but she pushed them down, taking deep breaths until her stomach and chest unclenched.

Kerri blotted her face with a rough paper towel from the stack by the sink and tried to rinse out the sour taste in her mouth before she walked back to her table. She sat down again across from her mother. The only thing left on the table were the salt and pepper shakers and the stains on the white linen, a brown blob of maple syrup on her mother’s side, a half moon circle of coffee on Kerri’s side.

Her mother smiled at her like they had just been discussing their weekend plans. “So when are you due?” she asked.

“April.”

Rose wrinkled her brow. “So it’s too late for you to get an abortion, huh.”

Mr. Kent’s wad of money and all the beers she drank at Mickey’s cookout a few months ago flashed through Kerri’s mind. “Yeah, it’s too late for that.”

Rose reached into her bag and took out a plastic prescription bottle. “Here,” she said, handing Kerri the bottle. “It’s my secret stash of money. Never know when you’re going to need it. Take it. Get a fresh start.”

Kerri’s fingers wrapped around the bottle. “Thanks.”

“You’re my strong one, remember? You’re a survivor, just like me.”

*My dandelion girl*, Kerri thought.

“I’ve got to be going, now,” Rose said. Kerri fought the urge to run out of Cal’s Diner. She pictured herself throwing the prescription bottle into the sewer drain by the curb and telling her mother she didn’t need her money. But instead she zipped up her jacket carefully and followed her mother out into the cold.

Rose handed her the scrap of paper with Ronnie’s phone number and address, and instructions on when Kerri could call her in the future. “I’ll throw you a baby shower when the time gets close.”

Kerri nodded, but she knew that her mother would probably be moving away soon with her latest boyfriend, and wouldn’t see Kerri or her kid until they were almost grown. She watched Rose close the door to her Buick and take a right out of the diner parking lot, waving at Kerri before her car was out of sight.



Kerri took the bottle out again and opened it. Inside was a roll of twenties and hundred dollars bills. Kerri quickly counted it. It was more than enough to last for awhile longer. In her other hand, she looked at Ronnie's address. He was only living two towns away. She stuffed both items in her pockets and got into her car, cranking the heater and letting the warmth hit her face.

## Chapter Nine

Kerri looked at the road atlas she had bought from the drugstore that was spread out on Melissa's lap next to her. Ronnie lived just a few towns away from her, in Lakeville. Before she called him, she had to know exactly where he lived.

"Is this where I'm supposed to turn?" she asked.

Melissa ran her finger along the squiggling line of the map. "Yeah," she said. "Man, your brother must have been adopted by a pretty rich family."

Kerri couldn't agree more. The town of Lakeville was different in every way from Oakwood. All of the houses were twice the size of the ones in Oakwood, and set far back from the road. Some of them had gates across the driveways, statues of lions or panthers guarding the driveways. It was hard for Kerri to believe that just twenty minutes away there existed a world that was so different than hers. She wondered if she would recognize her brother. He could have easily passed through Oakwood, perhaps stopping to pump gas at the same time as her, or eating at Cal's while she was having a sandwich.

She touched her stomach. She worried that Ronnie would think she was white trash for being pregnant – the same as her mother.

"This is it," she said, stopping the car in front of a large colonial. Wreaths hung from every window, and Kerri could see a sparkling Christmas tree through the living room windows. There was a red truck in the driveway with stickers on the bumper, and dog toys in the yard amongst the snow. *Her brother was just through those walls*, she thought. She couldn't wait to call him.

“Want to come back to the diner with me?” Melissa asked. Kerri had just started to wait tables at the diner, but she wasn’t very good at it. She just kept getting bigger, and slower, and by the end of her shift her feet hurt so bad she felt like had needles going up the back of her legs.

Luckily, her mother’s money had kept her at the motel, and she had started to save her tips to try and get an apartment soon.

“You can use Cal’s office to call your brother. He’s gone for the day,” Melissa continued. She threw the atlas into the backseat of Kerri’s car and pulled her knees up to her chest.

“But what if he doesn’t remember me?” Kerri said softly. They had pulled away from Ronnie’s house, and the houses were becoming increasingly shabbier as they got closer to Oakwood. Tears formed behind Kerri’s eyes.

“Of course he’ll remember you. And if he doesn’t you’ll have to make him remember.”

Cal’s office was tucked away behind the sink and the cooling racks in the backroom. The office was barely big enough for a filing cabinet, let alone a desk and chair, but Cal had wedged one in there anyway. Kerri sat at the desk and took a deep breath. She studied the walls of Cal’s office. There were pictures of his two sons in their baseball uniforms in front of the dugout. The boys’ pants were scuffed from sliding into bases, and his oldest son was missing his two front teeth. There was a picture of Cal and his wife standing on the beach, Cal holding onto a beer in one hand and a hotdog in the other while his wife kissed his cheek.

Kerri had been cheated out of her own versions of family pictures. She had one other picture of herself as a child that one of her foster parents had taken, but other than a few school photos that had survived the numerous moves, she had no other family pictures to speak of. She picked up Cal's phone again and dialed her brother's number. The phone rang, loud and hollow in Kerri's ear. One ring, two, three. She was just about to hang up when the receiver clicked. "Hello?" A deep voice answered. Kerri swallowed, trying to muster some saliva to wet her tongue. "Is Ronnie," she paused to look down at the paper her mother had written. "Is Ronnie Parks available?"

"This is he."

Kerri heart accelerated even more.

"Who is this?" Ronnie asked.

"This is your sister, Kerri."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. From where Kerri was standing, she looked out the window at the parking lot of Cal's. A group of teenage boys were clustered around the entrance of a pizza store. They punched each other in the arm and smoked cigarettes, trying to act cool.

"Who put you up to this?" Ronnie asked. His voice was harsher now. "Who the hell are you?"

"Ronnie, this is really your sister. I swear. I've been looking for you."

"Bullshit. I just found out I had a sister last year."

*How could Ronnie not remember her?* she thought.

"If you don't tell me who this is, right now," Ronnie said, "Then I am going to hang up this phone."

“Wait,” Kerri thought quickly. She fought back tears at what Ronnie had said. He had been at the center of her thoughts since she was a little girl, and she was never even a thought in his mind. “If you don’t remember me, do you remember when they came for you? A lady gave you a teddy bear. It’s brown with black paws and black lining in the ears.”

“My parents gave me that bear when I was a kid.”

Kerri bit her knuckle. “Ronnie, don’t you remember the tire swing? We used to sneak outside and play on it when Mom wasn’t looking after us.”

“Tire swing?” He paused on the line, and Kerri held her breath. “It was by a tree with a lot of pink flowers?”

“Yes,” Kerri breathed a sigh of relief. If he could remember that, he could remember her. “The dogwood tree in the backyard.”

“I do remember that,” Ronnie said slowly. “But I thought I had just made it up in my head.”

“I used to push you in it all the time. It was your favorite.”

“How did you find me?” he asked.

“Mom knew your address.”

“Our real mother?” his voice rose several octaves. “You’re in contact with her?”

“Sort of.”

“Where are you living right now?”

“Oakwood. Same town as where we were born.”

He blew out a breath into the receiver. It sounded like static and she held the receiver away from her ear for a second. “God. This is so weird. I’m over in Lakeville. I have to see you. Right now. What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Where do you want to meet?”

“I’ll come to you.”

“Meet me at Cal’s diner, it’s in the center of town.”

“I know where that is. We play Oakwood High all the time.”

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When Kerri put the down the receiver, she felt like her insides had been twisted up and pulled out of her. She left Cal’s in a daze, nodding faintly when Melissa asked how the call went. “I’m leaving my car here,” she told Melissa. “I’ll walk back home.”

She set out onto the sidewalk. The air was cold, and when the wind blew it stung her cheeks and hands. It was supposed to snow later. Kerri’s mind wandered while she navigated over puddles and the frozen drifts crusted over with dirty snow that had piled up from the plows. The cars whizzed past her with such steady frequency that it reminded her of a fan blowing, lulling her into a catatonic state. Ronnie didn’t remember her. He had been young, but Kerri could remember everything about him. What he liked to eat, how blond his hair was, and small scar on his arm from when he snagged it on a nail on the basement staircase. She remembered how warm his hand was when he clung to her in the back of Isabelle’s car that night, and that they insisted on sleeping together when they were dropped off at the house. The woman put them in separate bedrooms but Ronnie snuck into her room anyway. She stayed awake that night, breathing in the smell

of strawberry soap that she had washed his hair with. The next day, Ronnie was gone, and they cut Kerri's hair as short as a boy's while she cried in front of the mirror. The other kids had called her lice boy long after the bugs were gone.

At ten minutes of eight, Kerri sat nervously at a table by the window at Cal's diner. She clutched her purse tightly in her lap. She had been jumping up to peer out into the parking lot at the slightest noise. Ronnie had told her to look for his red Mustang.

Finally Kerri heard the purr of the Mustang's engine and the slam of a car door through the window. She peered through the glass, cupping her hands to shield the glare of the inside lights. Ronnie got out of the car and spat onto the sidewalk. The first thing Kerri noticed was Ronnie's hair. No longer the color of corn silk, it had deepened to a light brown. He wore it long, with neatly trimmed sideburns. He was tall, and wore a leather jacket with patches sown on the back and sleeves. The sleeves were tight around his arms and shoulders, but Kerri could see that he was still gangly, and he walked with a slight stoop.

The overhead bell jingled and she stood up beside the table, holding her breath. They each stood there for a moment, taking in each other. Kerri saw that he had their mother's eyes, pale blue; the color of the ice at Welsh Lake before it broke up in the spring thaw. Unlike their mother's eyes, which absorbed light like the deepest parts of the lake, Ronnie's eyes were painfully red, but not from crying. Ronnie was stoned, Kerri could smell the marijuana emanating off his clothes from across the room.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said. She stepped forward tentatively, and she put her arms around him. He hugged her gently, awkwardly and then pulled away. They stood looking at each other, and Kerri suddenly felt uncomfortable. Her brother clearly didn’t remember her, and his eyes kept darting from her to the entrance of Cal’s, like he was contemplating leaving.

“Do you want to eat? Are you hungry?” she said.

“I want you to take me to the old house.”

It was the last place in the world Kerri wanted to go to, but she didn’t want to disagree with Ronnie during their first conversation. “Okay, let’s go,” she said. They drove down the streets without speaking. Kerri stopped in front of their old house a few minutes later, the very house that she had walked up to and knocked on the door a few months earlier. She hadn’t seen Mickey since he stormed out of the hotel room two months ago.

At least in the dark, the disrepair of the house wasn’t as obvious as when it was in daylight. The sagging roof was covered in a layer of snow, and the rust didn’t show on the chain link fence. A crooked wreath with an unraveled bow hung on the front door. There were no lights on in any of the windows; Mickey must have been out.

“This is it?” Ronnie squinted through the windshield, as if the house was bathed in light so bright that he couldn’t stand to gaze at it without shielding his eyes.

Kerri shut the car off. “It looks different inside from when we lived there.”

“It looks like shit,” Ronnie said. “Maybe its better I didn’t grow up here.”

“This house is nicer than some of the ones I had to live in after we left Mom,” Kerri said.



“What was she like? Mom?” he asked quietly.

“Beautiful. Cold,” Kerri said. It seemed like a lifetime ago, sitting with her mother at the diner.

“I can’t believe she never even tried to get us back. She never even tried to visit me.” Ronnie punched the dashboard and the sound of his fist hitting the plastic echoed through the car. Kerri shuddered, startled by the small act of violence from her brother.

“I don’t know. At least she let you go. Let you have a chance at a real life. She wouldn’t do that for me.”

“Why do you think she even had us?” Ronnie asked. He was holding up a knife he had in his back pocket, snapping the blade in and out. He asked the question casually, lightly, but Kerri could tell he was troubled. “She wanted someone to love,” she said, thinking of the small life inside her body, fluttering, growing.

“I’ll never love her.” He turned to look at her accusingly. “Do you?”

If Ronnie had asked her the question the day before, her answer would have certainly been no. But now a life was growing inside her, taking up space that had always been empty, and something had also lifted out of her soul. “She’s the only mother I’ve ever known,” Kerri said.

Ronnie didn’t answer. He got out of the car and ran towards the house. “Ronnie, wait!” Kerri said. She fumbled with the seatbelts in Ronnie’s car.

“Fuck her!” Ronnie shouted. He picked up a rock by the curb and launched it at the house. The window in the living room exploded and glass shot out everywhere. The sound was deafening on the otherwise silent street. Kerri ran up to Ronnie. “What are you doing?”

He looked at her, his blue eyes brimming with tears. "I grew up with these Leave it to Beaver parents, and everything in my life was fucking perfect. But then they sit me down, and tell me I was adopted. How screwed up is that?"

Ronnie picked up another rock, and rolled it around in his palm. "My real mother just gave me up? Gave you up? What kind of person does that?" He launched the other rock at another window, missing and hitting the side of the house.

"Who's out there?"

Kerri snapped her head up. Mickey had stepped out onto the porch. He had a gun in one hand.

Ronnie grabbed Kerri's sleeve. "Don't let him shoot me, holy shit."

"Mickey," Kerri called, "it's just me." She walked onto the porch. Her heart was beating quickly, but not from being nervous about the gun. She realized then how much she missed Mickey.

Mickey stuffed the gun into his waistband and sat on a crate. "Look, don't parade your new boyfriend around me. Just get out of here."

"He's not my boyfriend," Kerri said quietly. "He's my brother."

Mickey stood up. "Really?" He gave Ronnie a once over, and stuck his hand out. "Hey, man."

Ronnie stood for a second, sizing up Mickey, who was at least three inches taller than him. After a minute Ronnie put his hand out too. "Sorry about the window, man. Found out about a lot of heavy shit in the past few weeks. Kinda lost it there you know?"

Mickey lit up a cigarette and shook out the match, tossing it onto the porch. "If you help me put in a new window we'll call it even."

“Deal.”

“You want a beer, kid? Help yourself. The kitchen is right through there,” he gestured towards the door. Ronnie grinned for a second, and then went inside the house.

Mickey gestured towards Kerri’s stomach. “How are you doing?”

Kerri smiled. “I’m okay, feel so fat.”

“You look great.” Mickey cleared his throat. “You know, I’ve been thinking a lot about what I said last time. I wanted to call you, but I thought you hated me.”

Kerri didn’t answer, but she sat down beside him.

“I want to make it up to you. Make it right.”

“Oh yeah? How?”

“Meet me here tomorrow?”

Kerri smiled in spite of herself. She picked at a nail for a minute before answering, struggling to not seem too interested. “I guess. I’ll come by after lunch.”

“You won’t regret it, I swear,” Mickey said. He kissed Kerri on the cheek. When Ronnie came back from the kitchen, Kerri walked with him to his car, stealing one last look at Mickey on the porch before they turned the corner.

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The next day Kerri stood on Mickey’s porch. The sun was shining, and the air was crisp and cold. It blew down the front of her jacket through the opening and she shivered. Mickey opened the door before she even had a chance to knock. He was smiling widely at her. He kissed her cheek, and her heart beat faster. She wished that Mickey didn’t make her feel so nervous all the time. “Follow me,” he said, and took her hand. He led her into the spare bedroom, her mother’s old bedroom. Kerri gasped. The

furniture was gone. Mickey had painted the room a pale green and hung a border of brightly colored paint brushes and overturned paint cans. He had set up an old rocking chair in the corner by the window, next to a crib. Kerri walked over to it, running her fingers along the worn wooden slats. She recognized the crib; it had been Ronnie's when he was a baby. She looked closer at the old wood. Ronnie's teeth marks were still etched in the slots, tiny pin pricks in half moon circles. Rose used to leave him in there for hours. Tears sprung out of Kerri's eyes.

"I found the crib in the attic. The rocking chair too." Mickey put his arm around her. "Its perfect isn't it?"

Kerri let out a shiver, and Mickey moved his hand down to her back, rubbing it gently. "Don't cry Kerri. I told you I wanted to make it up to you, and I did, see?"

He gestured to the broken window by the rocking chair. "All I need is your brother's help fixing the window."

"Its perfect," Kerri forced out. Her voice was hoarse from crying. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket. She felt sick. She couldn't imagine putting her baby in that crib.

"Kerri, I acted like a total jerk about this. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I acted stupid too." Kerri sighed. She was so sick of lying, but she didn't know how to tell him the truth now.

"You can stay here, if you want," Mickey said.

"I don't know," Kerri said. The thought of living with Mickey, in the house, made her skin crawl. But there was no place else for her to go, and he knew it.

“C’mon. I want you to.” Mickey grinned at her. “I think you might be the one person who keeps me in line.” He kissed her cheek again. Kerri wondered who the person was who could keep her in line.

## Chapter Ten

December, 1978

Kerri stood with Mickey on the front porch of Ronnie's house, waiting to be let in. Next to her leaned a wooden Santa Claus that waved cheerfully at the cars passing by, and held a curled scroll of the good and bad list in his other hand. Kerri wondered what list she would be on if Santa was real.

Kerri held a large poinsettia plant that she had bought from a stand at the corner of a gas station down the street from Ronnie's house. The red foil around the plastic pot crinkled as she shifted its weight. She surveyed the house. It was the biggest one on the street. A candle burned in each window, the small flames flickering like an inviting kiss. The outside of the house was outlined with white lights and a fresh green wreath hung beneath every window.

Kerri smiled as she took in Ronnie's house and the rest of the houses on the street. She always loved Christmas time because it broke up the stinging emptiness of winter and cold. The shimmering colored lights, presents wrapped in different colored paper and bows, and the thrill of the first snowfall was something that never lost its magic since she was little.

"Man, are they gonna open the door or what?" Mickey took a cigarette from his pocket and put it in his mouth.

"Put that away," Kerri hissed. She eyed Mickey critically, taking in his ripped jeans and uncombed hair. She had argued with Mickey about what he was wearing before they got into the car to drive to Lakeville, and hadn't spoken during the ride over.

“And don’t talk about being in jail, I want to make a good impression.”

Mickey put the cigarette behind his ear. “What do you care? They aren’t your parents.”

The door opened, revealing a burst of warm, spiced air; potpourri and vanilla and the smell of tobacco from a cigar. Ronnie’s mother, Linda, stood in the doorway. She was petite, with honey blond hair and brown eyes. Diamond studs sparkled in her ears. Behind her shoulder a Christmas tree sparkled brightly. The same white lights that were strung on the outside of their house circled the tree in perfect even rings.

“Kerri, this is gorgeous. But you didn’t have to bring anything with you. Come in, let me take your coat.” Linda lifted the plant out of Kerri’s arms, who mumbled something about not being able to show up to a dinner party empty handed. Mickey shook Linda’s hand, and they followed her past the Christmas tree to the dining room, where Ronnie’s father, Allen, sat smoking a cigar. Linda put the plant on the table and dusted her hands off. She gave Kerri a tight hug. “It’s so good to finally meet you,” she breathed. Kerri smiled back, uncertain and feeling suddenly shy.

“Where’s Ronnie?” she asked.

“Upstairs,” Allen answered her. Kerri heard the door open. “Kerri? Mickey?”  
Ronnie called down.

“Come downstairs,” Allen called back.

“I’ll be down in a minute. Mickey, come up here for a second, I want to show you something.”

“Be right back,” Mickey said, and he disappeared into the hallway.

Allen gestured for Kerri to sit down, waving his cigar like a baton lazily over the chair next to him. “Nice to meet you, Kerri,” he said, extending his hand to her. “You look a lot like Ronnie.”

“I do?” Kerri blushed. She was pleased that he could see the family resemblance, because Ronnie had drastically changed his appearance since she saw him the first time. Ronnie had recently dyed his hair black and pierced his ear. He and Mickey had been spending many afternoons together, walking around Oakwood with their cameras and shooting pictures of things. They talked about light differentials and depth and things she didn’t understand. It was like Ronnie seemed to prefer spending time with Mickey over her.

“So Ronnie told me that you’re expecting?” Allen said, sucking on his cigar.

Kerri looked down at her stomach. Though she was barely showing, she felt huge. Heat filled her cheeks. Everything was so perfect, Ronnie’s parents, the house, the decorations. Kerri felt like she and Mickey were like a stain against them.

“I’m due in April,” she said. Allen nodded, blowing out the smoke and setting the cigar down gently in an ashtray.

“What do you want to drink?”

“Water is good,” Kerri said. She strained to hear if there was any noise coming from upstairs. It had been awhile since Mickey had gone up there. She felt uncomfortable in front of Ronnie’s parents, exposed. She stood up from her chair to go find them when Allen and Linda came out of the kitchen one after the other. Linda carried a silver platter with a glistening ham, Allen a bowl of steaming mashed potatoes and browned, sugared carrots. Allen snuffed out his cigar when he sat back in his seat.



Kerri watched the smoke float up in the chandelier and hang in the air. They each sat at head of the table, and left the chair next to Kerri and across from her vacant.

“Ronnie!” Allen bellowed. Ronnie appeared around the corner silently, with Mickey in tow. Ronnie sat heavily into the chair across from her, and Mickey sat to her left. Kerri watched as their eyes met, and they laughed. “What’s so funny?” Kerri asked. She hated how Mickey was closer to her brother than she was. “Nothing,” Mickey said. He covered his mouth with his napkin and took a deep breath. Kerri rolled her eyes at him.

“Thank you both so much for inviting us to dinner. We don’t get to sit and have a real meal very often.” She slid her napkin from the star shaped napkin ring and placed the cloth in her lap.

Linda put down her glass of wine. “You’re welcome here anytime,” she looked at Mickey, and Kerri noticed her smile wavered slightly, “both of you.”

Kerri ducked her head and smiled down at her plate. “Thank you.”

Though Kerri was not privy to the history that Ronnie’s family had shared together, it was as if she could have been their daughter all along. Squinting, a stranger could say that she had the same shade of blond hair as Linda, and the same lean, tall body as Allen. She imagined herself growing up around this table, how different her life would have been. She would have been in the picture above the china cabinet, standing behind Ronnie, her hands on his shoulders. There would be a row of pictures across the mantle chronicling the two of them as babies, pleading to the camera with questioning eyes, then a pair of crying toddlers with red noses and wet cheeks. Linda would have

shown her how to wear makeup while she got ready for her first formal, demonstrating how to apply eyeliner without smudging it and what the perfect shade of blush was for her skin tone.

Allen would have taught Kerri to drive, taking the station wagon with the wood paneling out to Sear's parking lot after hours, letting Kerri practice parallel parking and turning. Ronnie's father would have insisted on meeting Mickey, or anyone else she wanted to date. Mickey would be made to come to the door to pick her up for their first date, instead of showing up at her motel room with only the thought of getting her into bed.

Instead, Kerri grew up balancing paper plates of hotdogs and beans on her lap in front of the TV, or sitting in her room, knee to knee with whomever she was sharing it with. She was never banned from playing until she finished what was on her plate, or forced to give up dessert because she was in trouble. She figured out how to wear makeup by copying the models in *Cosmopolitan* and on TV.

Kerri had learned to drive from an older boy who lived in the same foster house as her for awhile. She didn't remember his name, but he had taken her in his Chevy Malibu to an empty field to practice. After Kerri had slid back into the passenger seat and buckled her seatbelt, he had cupped his hand around the inside of her thigh, reaching his other hand to the back of her neck. She had slapped him, hard, and he made her get out of his car, leaving her in the field to walk home.

"What did you normally do for the holidays, Kerri?" Allen asked her from across the table. Kerri watched as he spooned carrots onto his plate with his chubby fingers.

She thought back to what she did last year at Christmas, when she was still in foster care. The family she was living with had only had her for a few months. Marsha and Bill had four other children that they had taken in, and often left Kerri to watch over them. She had done the Christmas shopping for all the little ones that year, enlisting the help of Evan, the next oldest to her, to help wrap them. Christmas Eve night she had stood in their empty garage with Evan, who was twelve, sipping peppermint schnapps and coffee from plastic cups. It was his third year in foster care. His parents had been killed in a car wreck, each an only child with no surviving family. The two of them stood in the edge of the garage entryway, their white wispy breath floating out of the garage and disappearing into the black night. “Last Christmas in this shit hole,” he had said to her, sparking up a pin joint. He sighed, and kicked the tire of the lawnmower with his shoe. “Me, I still got six more years of this. Not even knowing where I’m gonna end up. It sucks.”

Kerri wished she could have reassured him, told him that it wasn’t so bad, that he would get used to it, but they both knew it would be a lie. She raised the plastic cup to her mouth and swallowed the last of the schnapps and coffee. “Yeah”, she agreed, “it does suck.”

Now, sitting with Ronnie’s parents, feeling the closest thing she had ever had to a family, Kerri wished that she had said something different to Evan. *Things do change, when you least expect it. All you can do is hope that it’s getting closer to you every day.*

She picked up her glass of water. She couldn’t help but think of Evan again, wonder if he was at that same house, still sneaking in Marsha and Bill’s bedroom and

adding the cocaine dust to his joints. She had learned early on that she had to say goodbye to everyone she met, eventually, and that there was nothing she could do about it except to enjoy the people she liked and tolerate the people she didn't. But she suddenly felt a longing for some of the people in her past, like Evan, that she had said goodbye to and would never see again.

She looked up from her plate. Everyone was at the table, watching her, waiting for her response. "I never really knew where I was going to be. Some houses celebrated, and other families didn't do anything. No presents, no tree." Kerri smiled to herself. "One of my greatest memories though, was when I was about six or seven. I had been with this family for about a year, but it would be my first Christmas with them. They lived on a farm, not a real working farm, but they had goats and chicken and some sheep and a couple of horses. But that year, on Christmas Eve, I went down with my foster father to check on the sheep and one of them had given birth."

Kerri stared off into space, enjoying the memory. Her foster father had paved a walkway from the back porch to the barn where they housed the animals. He always made her feel so safe, her tiny hand lost between his rough fingers while they walked to the barn each night after dinner.

Kerri had been amazed the night of the birth, at the two tiny sheep that lay next to their mother, still pink and bloody, and the frown on her foster dad's face while he looked at the smaller one, which was huddled up in the straw. The mother wasn't licking it like she was her other baby. The mother rejected it, he told her, and he scooped it up, wrapping it in one of the horse blankets that hung over a stall. He carried it back to the house, Kerri half running to keep up with his long strides. She helped him gently wash

off the sheep, and boil water on the stove to warm a bottle. Her foster dad crouched down, placed the bottle in Kerri's hands, and tried to coax the sheep to eat. When it finally latched on, it knocked Kerri off balance for a moment from the force of its sucking.

Later, she fashioned it a bed, carrying in an empty tomato crate and lining it with blankets. She put the bed in front of the refrigerator, because the grate at the bottom blew warm air out that could keep the sheep warm.

"I got to name the sheep. It went everywhere with me. They started calling me Mary." Kerri chuckled to herself, sipping her water. "It even slept in my room for a little while. In my mind back then, it was like the family had given me the sheep for Christmas. It was probably one of the happiest holidays I had," Kerri said.

"Baaaa," Ronnie said. He and Mickey started to snicker. Kerri's face turned red again, and she felt sadness deep inside. Ronnie turned out so different from her. He got to grow up in the same house, with loving parents, and never having to say goodbye to anyone unexpectedly. She looked at him silently, and at Mickey, who was covering his mouth with his napkin again, and the sadness turned to anger.

"What's your problem Ronnie?"

Allen glared at him from across the table, and Ronnie's laughter quickly disappeared. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. He was silent for a few minutes, and Kerri imagined him running through the cache of his own memories, and what it would have been like for him if he hadn't been adopted. That even though they lived worlds apart, they still came from the same place, and it had only been by sheer luck that he got out and she did not.

Ronnie handed her a basket of bread across the table. She opened the red and green plaid cloth that covered the bread and took a roll, slicing it open with her knife and squeezing a pad of butter in the crack to melt.

“Well I have some news,” Linda said, grinning. She waited until everyone put their forks down. Kerri gripped her glass tightly trying to will herself to not be angry. “Ronnie got an early acceptance to college!” Linda exclaimed.

Kerri looked across the table at Ronnie. His head was down, and his was biting on his bottom lip. *Still the same as I remember*, Kerri thought. It was the same face he used to make when their mother scolded him.

“I’m not going to college,” he said.

“Since when?” Allen said. He broke open a roll and buttered it, one eyebrow raised. “You most certainly will go, especially since you have a scholarship.”

“I want to do what I want, you can’t make me,” Ronnie said. “I want to take a year off. Travel, try it make it as a photographer.”

“It’s not up to you. If you live in this house, you live by our rules,” Linda said.

“Screw you then. I’ll go live somewhere else.”

Linda placed her hand on the top of Allen’s arm. He was pouring more whiskey into his glass. Kerri pressed down on her mashed potatoes with her fork, making a circular lump on her plate. She wished she could have gone to college. But instead, she was stuck having a baby.

“Don’t speak like that to your mother again.”

Ronnie stood up from the table. “She’s not even my real mother, and you’re not my real father!”

Allen slammed his fist onto the table top. “Get upstairs to your room. Right now.”

Ronnie shrugged his shoulders. His face was sullen. “Whatever,” he said under his breath. He turned and stalked away from the table, holding his arms rigidly by his sides.

Linda began stacking the dinner plates together and carrying them into the kitchen. Her eyes were watery, but she hadn’t let any tears fall. Kerri studied her. She was everything a mother was supposed to be; put together, kind, strong. She could hear Ronnie stomping around upstairs in his room, and Kerri felt irritated. He had no idea how good he had it; Allen and Linda had given him all the things that she had to miss out on. “I’m going to upstairs to say goodbye,” she said to no one in particular. “Mickey, why don’t you go wait in the car?”

Ronnie had sprawled onto a beanbag chair in the corner of his room when she opened the door. His walls were papered with all the pictures he had taken over the years. Ronnie’s style was so different from Mickey. Ronnie preferred to take pictures of people, children swinging at the playground, elderly couples that got dressed in suits to have Sunday morning coffee, a mother pushing a stroller down the street. Not one of them had any idea that Ronnie had snapped their picture.

Not like Mickey, whose pictures were dark and brooding. He photographed barren landscapes, or pictures of trash strewn in the street, circles of dead grass from dog urine in someone’s back yard, or glittering bits of ashes that rose out from barrels of burning leaves.

Kerri walked over to the corner of his room, towards a picture on the top of the wall, almost at the ceiling. It was of a pregnant woman sitting on a park bench. Her husband was next to her, leaning over to kiss her, his hands wrapped around her stomach.

Kerri studied the picture even closer. The pregnant woman did not make eye contact with her husband, but was instead smiling down at her melon belly, resting the tips of her fingers on it. Her other hand was pushing against her husband's knee. Kerri could tell by the angle of her arm that she was pushing him away from her. The husband gazed up at her dreamily, excited. *There were on two different wave lengths*, Kerri thought to herself. She wondered how long ago Ronnie had taken the picture, if the couple were still together.

“Why do you have to be like, Ronnie?” she said quietly.

Ronnie opened the drawer to his nightstand and took out a baggie of pot and rolling papers. “They aren't my parents; I don't have to listen to them anymore. Fuck them.”

“Don't act like such a shit. Would you have rather grown up like I had to?”

He shrugged, and licked the edge of the paper. “You turned out okay.” He snorted for a second, “except for the whole preppers thing.”

Kerri wanted to slap him across the face. “You have no idea how good you had it. How good you still *have* it. You're so pissed about not having a relationship with our real mother, but she's a bad person Ronnie. You should be grateful that you have the parents you do.”

“If you like them so much, you can live here. I'd rather live with Mickey any day.”



Kerri shook her head. She knew that he was just being a teenager, that he was only sixteen. *Maybe its just hormones*, she thought. She took a deep breath and put her hand on the doorknob. "I'll talk to you later Ronnie."

## Chapter Eleven

February, 1979

Mickey and Rabbit beeped the car horn in front of Ronnie's house. He appeared a moment later, calling over his shoulder to his mother before slamming the front door shut. "Pretty far out neighborhood," Rabbit said. He leaned his head back and poured a sleeve of sunflower seeds into his mouth. He chewed for a moment, and rolled the window down to spit the broken halves of the shells onto the pavement.

"What's up man," Mickey said to Ronnie as he climbed inside the pick up truck.

"So where are we going?" Ronnie asked. Mickey could tell he was eager to be part of what he and Rabbit were doing. Ronnie bounced up in his seat for a minute and bummed a cigarette out of the pack that lay on Mickey's dashboard.

"We're taking a little detour out to the old Hartwell farm." Rabbit poured some more sunflower seeds into his mouth.

They drove in silence for awhile, following Rabbit's directions. When Mickey took a left onto Eagle Road, he slowed to a crawl. The road turned into a deeply rutted dirt path, wide enough only for a single car. Frost heaves rippled through the road like a frozen wave of ocean.

After a few miles the road opened up into a wide field with a barn in the middle of it. The barn was unkempt, with peeling white paint that made it look diseased. High dead grass poked through the blanket of snow that covered the field. It had gotten so cold that a layer of ice had frozen over the snow, freezing everything in time. A rusty orange snow blower guarded the entrance to the barn. It was the only color against the gray sky, white field, and the peeling, rotted wood of the barn.

Rabbit beeped the car horn and the wide double doors of the barn slid open.

“This is it? This is where they keep everything?” Ronnie glanced around furtively. Mickey put his hand on Ronnie’s shoulder and he jumped. “No one’s watching kid, don’t worry.”

“Yeah, and don’t saying anything in there alright? Let us do the talking,” Rabbit added. He pulled the barn door open all the way and they followed him inside.

The heat in the barn was shocking, like stepping back into the bathroom after a hot shower. Rivers of sweat gathered at Mickey’s armpits and rolled down the sides of his torso. Geysers of cold air rushed through the gaps in the wood and stabbed at his bare skin when the wind blew.

Rabbit’s friend Richie Rich came out of a dark corner of the barn, holding a brown paper bag in his arms. “You finally made it,” he said, and tossed the bag onto an aluminum table by an old horse stall. Richie Rich’s eyes were dark, wide, and glassy from being high. He had a long gray ponytail that hung down his back and a gold earring in his left ear.

Rabbit peered into the bag and smiled. “Looks good, man. This isn’t everything though. There should be twice as many ‘shrooms.”

“You have the money?” Richie Rich crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes darting between the three of them. He had a large port wine birthmark on the side of his neck that looked like a bloodstain. A bluish yellow bruise bloomed out over the crook of his elbow. Mickey leaned against a wide post beside an antique tractor in the barn. He usually didn’t dislike people on the spot, but something about Richie Rich made him

squirm. *He couldn't be trusted*, Mickey decided. Ronnie elbowed him in the side. "Why is it so hot in here?" he whispered.

"Helps dry out the mushrooms," Mickey said, gesturing to the mushrooms that hung from clotheslines above the horse stalls, dangling like brown caps off a pegboard.

"I got the money." Rabbit pulled out a thick wad of bills from his pocket and handed it to Richie Rich. "Don't forget about the rest of the deal."

Richie licked his dirty finger and counted the money Rabbit had handed him. "I know," he said. He opened up a stall door and picked up two more sacks of mushrooms. He looked up at Mickey. "Here, go put these in the truck or something."

Mickey coughed, and took the two bags from Richie Rich. They weren't heavy, but they were bulging with mushrooms. When Mickey peeked inside he could see the blue veins under the mushroom heads squiggling around like lines in a roadmap. He picked an especially large head and stuffed it into his jacket pocket.

He secured the sack under the backseat of the truck. "Let me see," Ronnie said, peering over his shoulder. "Can I take one now?"

Mickey hesitated. "Start slow, whatever you do. Take a little piece of stem, then a little more. Otherwise you'll be tripping your balls off and we'll have to babysit you."

Ronnie picked off a small piece of stem and put it in his mouth timidly.

"Hey you guys ready?" Rabbit called. He slid the barn door shut.

Once they got on the road again Rabbit lit up a joint and passed it to Ronnie.

"You guys going to come to the party tonight? You can make some good money selling these things."

Rabbit laughed. "We wouldn't miss it."

Mickey stopped the truck again. They were already back at Ronnie's house.

"See you tonight kid," Rabbit said.

"I don't know about this, man," Mickey said once Ronnie was gone.

"About what?"

"This party tonight."

"You think Kerri will get mad?"

Mickey shrugged. "Probably." The bigger Kerri got, the more distant she had become towards him. He felt like she was a stranger to him now.

"Invite her, she can drive us. I know I won't be able to drive later. Gonna be giving these away to those girls like candy." Rabbit grinned and slapped his thigh.

Mickey frowned, he didn't want to reprimand Rabbit, but he was getting out of control. Usually they met the kids they bought for at the parking lot of lower field of the high school. Mickey and Rabbit leaned over into the driver's side windows of the kids' shitty cars, watching them peel off twenties from their allowance wad and hand them over like they were giving Mickey a stick of chewing gum. Sometimes the girls would offer to lift up their shirts for an extra joint or a six pack, but Mickey never let them.

Rabbit, on the other hand, climbed into their backseats all the time, kicking out the boys while he drove their cars to the corner of the lot. The boys would spark up their joints and wait, laughing and passing around bottles of Arrow Blackberry Brandy and Jenkin's Vodka, the cheapest stuff around. Then Rabbit would emerge, take a swig of the kids booze and signal to Mickey to get in the passenger seat of his truck.

"Those girls are like jail bait man, you should watch it," Mickey said.

“We didn’t have girls like that in high school, Mouse. I don’t give a shit what they are. I’m doing them a favor, they can do me a favor back.” Rabbit glanced at Mickey from the corner of his eye. “Besides, you’re one to talk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that Kerri ain’t much older than them anyway. She’s only eighteen. Barely legal herself.”

“But she is legal. She’s not in high school.” Mickey lit up a cigarette and stared out the window.

“Look, all I’m saying is don’t give me shit because I get a blow job every once in awhile from a high school girl. Your girlfriend isn’t even old enough to drink, but she can be a mom? Fucked up logic if you ask me, Mouse.”

Mickey sighed. He had grown tired of the high school parties. The boys got drunk too quickly and ate too many mushrooms at once, smoked more pot than they had to. A fight broke out at least once a night. Someone looked at someone’s girlfriend the wrong way, or made a comment about a clique they shouldn’t have. The girls were no better. Rabbit was still fooling around with a couple of them, slipping them free joints and shots of whiskey he bought from the barrels of moonshine that Richie Rich stored in his barn. Then the girls got drunk enough to get it on with Rabbit, but not before they annoyed Mickey. They giggled about nothing, acted like they knew everything.

“It’s starting to get to me, that whole scene.”

Rabbit reached into his pocket and pulled out a condom, shaking it back and forth like it was a packet of sugar. “That’s why you got to have some fun once in awhile,

Mouse. Kerri won't mind. She's too busy cooking that kid of yours in her stomach." He tossed it onto Mickey's lap.

Mickey shook his head. "No thanks. Kerri still hasn't gotten over the whole thing with me and Beth." He still felt guilty about it. Sometimes he wondered though if it was because he really liked Kerri as much as he told himself he did, or because she was pregnant with his kid.

Rabbit shrugged. "You should have used one with Kerri, that's for sure."

"Take your own advice. You're gonna get in trouble one of these days. Can't mess around with those girls. They're kids."

Rabbit stood up and took one of the cigarettes Mickey had on the dashboard, tucking it behind his ear before he pulled his hat back on. "Man, you really got soft. Who's the pregnant one, you or your girl?" Rabbit called out the truck window, "I'll be back tonight."

Kerri was at the kitchen table eating a bowl of ice-cream and thumbing through a magazine when Mickey came inside.

"Hey. Where have you been?" she asked. Kerri turned the page of her magazine.

"Out with Rabbit," Mickey said. He sat across from her at the table. He didn't want to tell her that Ronnie had been there too. She had gotten so defensive about everything lately. Mickey knew it really bothered her that Ronnie liked spending time with him more. He watched Kerri read the article. She had gotten so round the past few months, he couldn't help but stare at her stomach all the time. He couldn't believe that there was a miniature little boy or girl inside of her. When he went with her to her last

doctor's appointment, he studied the charts on the walls with fascination, amazed that sometimes within one week, whole fingers and toes, ears and eyes, were suddenly visible and grown.

"Want to go to a party tonight? One of Ronnie's friends is having one." Mickey cringed when he heard himself say Ronnie's name. Kerri immediately stiffed, and stabbed her spoon into the melting lump of cookies and cream.

"I didn't know anything about a party," she said.

"Yeah, I guess it was a last minute thing. You want to come?"

Kerri stood, the bowl of ice-cream clutched in her hands. "I would have liked my brother to invite me himself, not to be some sort of an afterthought." She tossed the bowl in the sink and stalked out of the kitchen. "And no one wants a pregnant cow at a party."

Mickey sighed, and lit up a cigarette. He couldn't wait for things to get back to normal. *Whatever normal really is.*

*The kids were rowdy tonight.* That was what Mickey thought when he sat down on the floor of the living room, his third beer resting between his legs. He and Rabbit were the heroes of the night again, swooping into the party armed with bottles of whiskey and rum, thirty packs of Pabst and Keystone, and of course, the pot and 'shrooms. The kids had swarmed them, laughing and punching Mickey in the arm. No sooner had he put the first thirty pack on the card table in the living room where the beer pong was set up, a million hands were reaching into the box, pushing him out of the way. Their chattering voices lulled Mickey into a trance, talk about the football team winning the state championship and who got the drunkest at the last party, and who was sleeping with



who. Joints were rolled and lit in every room, passed around like sparklers from one eager hand to the next.

Not everyone wanted to do ‘shrooms though. The boy who asked Rabbit for the shrooms, Reagan Darling, was the only who did it at first. He came out of the master bedroom, holding a baggie and twirling it above his head like a flag.

“Get this party started!” he called, and sat down in front of the coffee table. The crowd parted to make room for him, and hovered silently, watching him pop a large mushroom head into his mouth and chew determinedly. “Who wants the next one?” he asked, holding out the baggie to the crowd.

No one moved. The kids were all looking down at their shoes, sucking in deep hits from their joints or chugging their beers, trying to act like they were *all stocked up man, they didn’t need that quite yet*. Rabbit finally broke the silence. “Don’t mind if I do brother,” he said to Reagan, and took a mushroom out of the bag.

Rabbit tossed the bag back on the coffee table. “Squares,” he said.

Tracy Kenmore, one of the girls he had been messing around with, pushed her way through the crowd and grabbed onto Rabbit’s hand. *She’s a gymnast*, Rabbit told him once. *She’s the one that’s gonna remember me when I’m done with her*, and Rabbit had winked at Mickey, slapping the iguana tattoo on his forearm.

The silence lifted. Someone laughed, the music got louder, and another kid stepped out from the crowd and put a mushroom in his mouth. The crowd cheered, and Mickey watched Rabbit lead Tracy into a dark room and close the door behind him.

Mickey took the last sip of his third beer and dropped the stub of his cigarette into the empty bottle, listening to the quick hiss before it burnt out. Kerri had gone to the bathroom awhile ago with Ronnie's girlfriend, Carla. Carla had already thrown up once, and Kerri helped lead her through the crowd towards the bathroom. Everyone got out of Kerri's way when she got close to someone, as if her pregnancy was catching. Mickey felt bad; he never should have made her come.

He checked his watch again, waiting for Rabbit to get out of the bedroom so they could leave. The party was in full swing. Couples were making out in the shadowy corners of rooms, and a few people had passed out already in chairs and on the floor.

He picked up a half smoked joint off the table in front of him that had been lying beside a can of beer that no one had come to claim for the last half hour. He lit up and wandered upstairs to the rooms that were cloaked in darkness. The first door he tried was locked, and he could hear a couple through the wall have sex. The second door, however, swung open easily, and Mickey stepped inside, pressing his back against it and shutting his eyes. The silence was welcome. The only noise Mickey could hear was the crackle from the baseboard heat. He pressed his ear against the door, listening to the dead air from the hallway on the other side. As a child, Mickey used to listen to the sounds inside a giant conch shell his father had bought for him from a street vendor in Mexico. The air that swirled around inside it never sounded like the ocean to Mickey. It sounded more like the wind rushing past his ears when he stuck his head out the window of a car. It vibrated inside his eardrums, drowning out all the other sounds around him. Mickey used to listen to the conch shell in his bedroom when his father was yelling at his mother, , and he would imagine he was somewhere far away. On the Arctic tundra maybe, with the

wind pushing against his back to keep him walking, or diving deep in the ocean, where the water fills up inside your ears, forcing out any other sound except your own breathing.

When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Mickey looked around the room. The twin bed had a dark blue comforter that matched the light blue walls. A catcher's mitt hung off the desk chair. Baseball cards spilled out from under the bed in a haphazard pile. Mickey sat gingerly on the bed, and then decided to lie down on top of it. He shut his eyes for a moment, imagining what it would be like to have a son. He could teach him how to play the guitar, take him to baseball games. When he was older, Mickey would show him how to shave and tie his shoe and to drive a stick shift.

Mickey was just about to get up and leave the room when he spotted something leaning against the wall by the headboard of the bed. Mickey reached over to grab it, his heart beating in his ears. It was a cane. *It couldn't be Caleb's*, he thought to himself. He knelt in front of the bed and pulled the lip of the comforter up. He slid a box from underneath the bed and tore it open. He needed to find a picture, some sort of proof that he wasn't in Caleb's room, that this was not Caleb's house. The box contained more baseball cards. A search of the desk drawers produced nothing except stray pencils and metal pieces of an Erector Set.

Mickey closed the door behind him and brushed his hand against the side wall to find the switch. When the hallway light turned on, Mickey went up to the picture of a young boy and his sister. Mickey's heart dropped to his chest. He had to leave, right now. He thundered down the stairs to get Rabbit and Kerri.

When he got to the bottom of the stairs, Rabbit emerged from the bedroom, wearing only his jeans. He had wild look in his glassy eyes. Mickey knew immediately that Rabbit had done something else besides just mushrooms.

“I gotta get the fuck out of here, man. This is the kid’s house!” Mickey couldn’t bear to say Caleb’s name out loud. It wasn’t as real if he was just *the kid*.

“Come in the bedroom with me. I think something’s up.” Rabbit’s jaw was clenched, and he licked the insides of his lips nervously.

“What do you mean, something’s up? What’s going on in there? I gotta get Kerri and go!” Mickey whispered, furious, but he followed Rabbit into the bedroom.

The room was lit by a few mismatched white pewter candles that had caved in on the sides. Wax ran onto the dresser. Rabbit and Tracy’s clothes were spread out across the floor. Her white bra peeked out from underneath the bed, and Rabbit’s shirt hung off a chair in the corner. Two lines were spaced out on the nightstand beside a lamp.

Tracy was sprawled out, spread eagle on the bed, naked except for a white pair of underwear with peace signs on it. Her blond hair was sticky against her neck, and her lips were blue. Mickey touched her skin. It had a greasy feel to it, clammy and cold. White spittle had gathered in the corners of her mouth, thick and foamy as toothpaste.

Rabbit stood beside the bed, leaning over her. He clenched his arms around his chest, shivering. He danced from one foot to another, and shook Tracy by the shoulder. “We were putting our clothes on and I went to take a leak, when I came back, she was like this.” Tracy’s head flopped to the side when Rabbit shook her. Mickey could see she was still breathing, though they were shallow, rapid breaths.

“Where’d you get the blow?” Mickey asked. He licked his finger and scooped some of the coke onto his finger, and rubbed it against his gums.

Rabbit licked his lips again. “She had it. She said it was better than ‘shrooms. Said I’d be able to last all night on it.”

“Well, we gotta call an ambulance or something.”

“That’s a little extreme, Mouse. Don’t you think?”

“Are you fucking stupid Rabbit? She’s OD’ing.”

“No, no way. I just need you to help me wake her up.” Rabbit slapped her, hard, against the cheek. “Doll face, get up! You’re missing the party.”

Mickey flicked the switch to the room. The bright light was cutting. Rabbit shielded his eye and squinted. He looked at Tracy again. “Woah, she is OD’ing, huh.”

Mickey picked the phone out of its cradle. The dial tone was loud, humming the way his ears did when he sat in a silent room. Rabbit took it from him and slammed it down into the receiver.

“We can’t call anyone.”

“What? Why. She could die, man.” He thought of the bum, David Ellis. “And I’m not gonna be responsible for another accident because of us.”

Rabbit picked up his shirt from the edge of the chair and pulled it over his head. “If an ambulance comes, the cops are gonna come. And if the cops come, they’re gonna wonder where these kids got the liquor. And if this is really that little brat’s house that you shot at, than what do you think the cops are gonna do to you?” Rabbit leaned over and snorted the two lines on the nightstand quickly. “I mean, shit, they’re gonna wonder

where the coke came from. That's some serious shit Mouse, I'm not ready to go to jail because this dumb bitch can't hold her blow."

"Well, we can't just leave her here." Mickey looked at Tracy again. She was still breathing, but her skin looked waxy. Mickey suddenly felt embarrassed for Tracy, to be so exposed, and that Rabbit cared so little for her that he would leave her without going for help. He stooped and looked under the bed for her shirt, and draped it over her bare breasts to give her some dignity.

"Like hell I can. You better come with me, Mouse, because you're in as much deep shit as I am."

Rabbit shut the door behind them where Tracy lay on the bed, still motionless. They pushed their way through the crowd of kids packed tightly in every room. Mickey's heart thudded loudly in his chest. It would only take one person to peek into the room Tracy was in, and then chaos would ensue, and everyone would be searching for them.

"Hey guys!" Ronnie called.

"Ronnie what's up. We were just leaving. Gotta get going now," Rabbit said. He held up his keys. "Catch ya later.

"Yeah later sure." Ronnie frowned, and then said, "Hey my girl took Kerri home a little while ago. They couldn't find you, so they asked me to tell you."

"Thanks, man," Mickey said. In the confusion, he had totally forgotten about Kerri. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Ronnie nodded, and then disappeared into the crowd of kids.

When he and Rabbit got to the front door of the house, Rabbit grabbed a girl's arm that was coming in. "Hey, go have someone check on Tracy in the downstairs bedroom. She needs some girl help."

The girl blinked, confused. "Who?"

"Just fucking do it," Rabbit snapped. He turned to Mickey. "C'mon, we're out of here."

Calebl's house was set on the back side of Welsh Lake at the end of a long dirt driveway. Light streamed out of the top floor windows and through the open doorway, lighting up the house like a jack-o-lantern. Its angry mouth flickered with the silhouette of the girl Rabbit had grabbed when Mickey glanced back over his shoulder. She was standing in the doorway, watching them leave. He turned back around and searched for Rabbit's white pickup truck in the darkness. The truck sped down the dark driveway silently, weaving in and out of the cars parked up and down the sides like jumbled train cars. "She'll be good," Rabbit kept saying over and over again in the passenger seat.

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Carla's eyes were half opened, and her head was slumped against Kerri's shoulder. The vodka and cranberry juice in her hand was practically over turned in her lap. Kerri desperately wished she could drink it, but the doctor said it wasn't good for the baby. Her doctor had explained how harmful alcohol was to the babies, and then Kerri felt guilty for drinking at Mickey's cookout the night Mike Kaeding hit on her. The baby still hadn't felt real to her back then, but now that she felt it move and kick inside her, she didn't want to do anything to harm it. She had even cut down on her smoking, though

her doctor told her she didn't have to. "How are you doing Carla," Kerri stroked the top of her head.

"Good," she replied.

Carla had been the only one brave enough to actually talk to Kerri at the party. A few of the girls had put their hands on her stomach, without even asking Kerri's permission, like she was some sort of strange attraction. Otherwise, Kerri had been trying to block out the whispers and comments that had only grown louder as the kids drank more.

"Did it hurt?" Carla asked, propping herself up on one elbow. Her drink had finally turned over, and was staining the carpet a pale pink.

"What do you mean?"

"To be pregnant." Carla slurred her words heavily. Her eyelids were barely open slits.

"Well not yet." That was one thing Kerri hadn't been looking forward to, the pain of childbirth. If she told Carla the truth she would have said being pregnant was terrible. She was uncomfortable a lot, and hated that she had gotten so fat. But when the baby moved inside her she always held her breath and smiled, trying to capture the moment before it disappeared.

Carla laughed and struggled to sit up again. "No, I mean did it hurt when you did it?"

Kerri thought of Mr. Kent, and how she stared up at the wooden beams of the gazebo over his shoulder while he was on top of her. She had told him she loved him,



and he whispered it back into her ear. She quickly pushed the thought out of her mind and wished she was able to drink. "It's not that bad."

"That's why Ronnie and I haven't done it yet." Carla pointed her finger at Kerri's stomach and gave it a little poke. "I don't want that to happen to me."

Kerri nodded. Her eyes scanned the room for Mickey or Ronnie. There was no sign of either. Carla finally closed her eyes and moaned.

"Wanna know something?" she said to Carla. Carla sighed again and murmured "Mm what?"

"I lied to Mickey."

Carla opened her eyes. "Really?"

"Yeah. Like a month or so before I met him, I was with another guy. This guy that I worked for. I babysat his kids."

Carla sat all the way up and rubbed her eye, smearing mascara across her cheekbone. "Ew. You slept with like, an old guy?"

"He wasn't that old."

Kerri bit her lip for a second. She had wanted to tell someone the truth for so long now. It weighed on her that she had to lie all the time. Any time Mickey touched her stomach, or discussed what to name the baby, she felt even more guilty for lying to him. "The kid isn't even his."

"Whose is it?" Carla's eyes went wide.

"It's that guy's baby. It's not Mickey's." Kerri spoke slowly. Carla could barely follow along with the conversation.

"What are you going to do? Are you going to tell him?"

“No, I can’t.” But the confession had made Kerri feel so much better. It was like she took a weight off of her back and gave it to someone else. “Don’t tell Ronnie,” she said, “promise me.” Kerri doubted that Carla would even remember the conversation she was having. She kept fading in and out of consciousness.

“You’re a good pillow,” Carla said. She had her head against Kerri’s stomach and she knocked on it gently. “Your mom is really nice. You better be a good baby,” she called, cupping her hands over her mouth. She looked at Kerri and smiled.

“I promise that I won’t tell Ronnie. You can trust me.”

“Good. Is your car here?”

“Yup.”

Kerri took Carla’s purse and searched for her car keys. She reached over to help Carla to her feet. “C’mon. I’m driving us home.”

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“You gotta come down, man. You’re too high. Where do you want me to take you, your place? Or mine?” Mickey asked him.

Rabbit cleared his throat. He had been fiddling with the dial to the radio for the last few minutes, turning it around and around, reluctant to settle on one station. “Mine.”

“I’m tired,” Mickey said, rubbing his eyes. He imagined his warm bed, tucking his body into the curve of Kerri’s back and rubbing his cheek against her hair when it fanned out across his pillow. He liked to rest his hands on her stomach while she slept and feel the baby flutter and kick at night.

During the past few weeks Kerri had retreated more and more into herself. She shrugged Mickey off when he touched her, and when she kissed the side of his cheek he was reminded of his aunt's papery lips and pursed mouth against his face.

"You wanna go get a beer somewhere?" Rabbit asked. "I'm gonna be up for hours."

"I should get back. If Kerri already left she's probably pissed at me."

Rabbit nodded, and under the quick intervals of street lights Mickey could see his drawn face. "That's cool. I know things will be different now."

"You'll always be my boy. I just have other people counting on me. Two other people."

Rabbit fished out a bent cigarette from his jacket pocket and pushed in the car lighter. "It's weird how things change though, isn't it? It's always been you and me for so long."

"Rabbit, just cause I'm having a kid doesn't mean that we're not gonna be friends."

Rabbit chuckled. It sounded hollow and forced to Mickey. They were facing the front of Rabbit's apartment building. The wail of a police siren in the distance broke the silence.

"Thanks for the ride, man. I'll call you tomorrow," Rabbit said. Mickey watched him open the door to the building and go inside without looking back around.

## Chapter Twelve

March 1979

“I used to come up here after school when I first moved into town. Watch the planes take off,” Mickey said, carefully parking his car in the rut between the gravel and fence that marked the beginning of the airport’s property. On the other side of the road was an open field where dairy cows grazed. Mickey was fascinated by the cows, their big gentle eyes, the way that they were so predictable, dotted around the field in small clusters, their jaws moving up and down in the same, steady rhythm.

His cousin Peter had brought him there the first time, squishing him into the back seat of his pick up truck while he and his girlfriend made out in the front. They had bought him a hotdog and a chocolate shake from the stand up the street, and while he ate that, Peter and his girlfriend passed a bottle of liquor in a brown paper bag back and forth, until finally she took off her shirt and Peter kicked Mickey out of the truck. He had climbed over the fence of the airport and walked for awhile toward the lit runway. He lay down in the middle of the field, watching the planes take off and land, so close to him, it was like he could reach into the sky and pluck them out with his fingers.

“Did you have fun at that the party the other night?” Mickey said. He passed Ronnie a joint.

“Yeah. This hot chick was all over me after Carla left. She wanted me to get it on with her,” Ronnie said, passing the joint back to Mickey.

“Yeah? Why didn’t you,” Mickey said.

“Waiting on Carla. She’s close to be ready. You know, to do it.”

Mickey thought of Lisa, her hairy legs and flat stomach, and the way she just got on top of him in the garden shed after his father caught them there. That was the last day he had ever spent under the same roof as his parents.

“Wanna go get bent?” Ronnie asked.

“Sure,” Mickey said. “I got a sixer in the backseat.” He reached behind him and offered a can to Ronnie. They got out of the car and sat on the hood of the truck. Ronnie started to snap frames with his camera; pictures of the cows and the airplanes and kids that pedaled by on their bicycles.

“Looks like we’re gonna need more beer.”

Mickey watched as Ronnie drained his beer. He burped loudly, and reached for another can. Mickey cleared his throat. “You might want to slow down on those,” he said, annoyed. Ronnie always drank three times what he did, and he never offered to pay for it. “I don’t want to drop you back off with your folks drunk.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just another excuse for those squares to punish me.”

Ronnie started to rant, and Mickey tuned him out, walking a few paces in front of Ronnie to the fence by the cows. He had tucked a small flask of rum in his back pocket, and he took it out and stole a quick sip before Ronnie noticed. Ronnie always talked way too much when he got drunk, spouting off until Mickey interrupted him and talked over him.

“So Mick, I gotta tell you something,” Ronnie said. He leaned his arms over the fence and grabbed at a long blade of grass.

“What’s that,” Mickey said.

“She’s doggin’ you. My sister.” Ronnie nodded his head, fiddling with the blade of grass in his hands.

“What do you mean?”

“She told Carla at that party the other day that she did some old guy and that’s whose kid it is. It ain’t your kid, man.”

Mickey was aware of his heart then, beating hard, but not fast, inside his chest. His breathing too, had become labored, as if he was hiking up a great mountain. His vision had narrowed to only see the shape of the words forming on Ronnie’s lips, and the faint black hairs that jumped above his mouth when he talked. *It ain’t your kid, man.* The words swirled around inside his head like a vine, wrapping itself tighter and tighter around until he thought his head was going to explode.

“Why you telling me this,” he said in a slow, measured tone.

Ronnie belched, and crumpled his can. “Cause that’s some fucked up shit, man. Trying to pass off the kid as yours. So then what? The kid grows up thinking you’re the dad and finds out later your not? Trying to prevent the same thing that happened to me.” He threw the can into the field.

Mickey let out a shaky breath. All those months of planning, accepting that he was going to be a father. This was supposed to be his salvation. All the things that the priest had said to him when he was in confession, that God had a plan for him, it all made sense when he had met Kerri. He was supposed to be a father. He could make up for all the mistakes he had made, with Caleb and with his parents. Now it was all for nothing. Mickey felt so confused and enraged, he didn’t even know what to do.

“C’mon, lets go.”

“Where?” Ronnie said.

“You’re coming back with me to the house. To talk to Kerri.”

Ronnie shook his head. “No, I don’t want to get in the middle of things. Just drop me off at my parent’s house and let me know what happens.”

“You put yourself in the middle,” Mickey said. He threw his own beer can into the field and started jogging back to the truck. “You started this; you’re going to see it through. I want her to tell me herself.”

\*\*

Kerri was standing at the stove, stirring a pot of soup when Mickey swung open the door. It hit the side kitchen wall with such force that the glass panel cracked, leaving a jagged line through the middle. He glared at Kerri, and walked past her to the bedroom. The door slammed again.

“Kerri, I told him,” Ronnie said. He leaned against the broken door, his arms crossed over his chest.

“You told him what,” Kerri asked, even though she already knew. She swallowed. She should have known better than to tell Carla her secret. She should have told Melissa if she was going to say anything to somebody.

Kerri took a step closer to him. She could feel the baby kicking inside her. “You didn’t, Ronnie,” she whispered.

“I had too,” Ronnie shrugged his eyes on the floor. “It’s not fair what you’re doing.”

“I loved you,” Mickey said. He stumbled into the kitchen. His cheeks were wet, streaked with tears.

“Mickey, let me explain.”

“Is it true?” His hands were clenched into fists. Kerri searched his face before she answered. She wanted to lie; to insist that Ronnie was making the whole thing up to hurt her. She thought of the nights that she had spent lying beside Mickey in bed, his hands running over the mound of her belly, whispering how excited he was to be a father. Mickey had put the mobile up above the crib just a few days ago, a pattern of flowers he had painted himself from wooden cut outs.

“Is it true?” Mickey asked again. Kerri watched as he pulled a small silver revolver out of the waistband of his jeans and point it at her with a shaking hand. “Tell me,” he insisted.

“Yes, it’s true,” Kerri whispered.

“What was that? I can’t fucking hear you.” He cocked the hammer back with a snap. “Speak up!” he commanded.

“Mickey, put the gun down man, what are you doing?” Ronnie said.

“Stay out of this kid. This is between me and your sister.”

“He’s right Mickey, put the gun down. What are you going to do, shoot me?”

Kerri struggled with all her strength to keep her voice neutral. Her hands and leg started to tremble as if she was cold. Tears streamed down Mickey’s face, even though his features were a mask of rage.

“You wouldn’t be the first person I’ve shot with this gun.”

“I’m sorry Mickey, I didn’t know until I was farther along that it wasn’t yours.”

Kerri pleaded. “I was with someone right before you met me. That’s it.”

“Bullshit Kerri. You knew. You did this on purpose.” He pressed the nozzle of the gun against Kerri’s bulging stomach. “This was the one good thing I did in my life.



You were the one good thing I had. And now it's a lie. It was for nothing." His face crumbled, and his hand went slack for a moment.

"Mickey, dude, get that gun off my sister's stomach."

"Shut up Ronnie," Mickey said, scowling in his direction.

"Mickey, please, put the gun down." The gun was hard against her stomach. The baby had stopped kicking, as if it too was waiting to see what was going to happen. Her hands were sudsy from washing dishes, slippery. It was just like when they first met, and Mickey was holding the sponge in his hand at the door. They had come full circle. She slowly, gently, reached for his hand.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

Then things got confusing. Ronnie was between them, grabbing for the gun. His hands were around Mickey's arm, and Kerri had grabbed him around his waist. All three of them were yelling, but Kerri couldn't understand what they were saying. Then the gun went off, and Ronnie was lying crumpled on the ground.

"Oh my god," Mickey said. His face was ashen. "I didn't, he grabbed the gun from me, Kerri."

"What did you do?"

Kerri had dropped down to the ground, cradling Ronnie's head in her hands. His eyes were closed, and his breathing labored. "Call 911," Kerri pleaded. She reached for a dishtowel hanging over the edge of the counter and wrapped it around Ronnie's chest. The blood was everywhere. When she stood, she felt wetness between her legs.

"Mickey," she cried. "I think my water broke."

Mickey held the phone in his hand but hadn't started dialing yet. "What? You're not due for another month."

A sharp pain spread through her. "I need to get to the hospital."

### Chapter Thirteen

*Light from the moon and the street lamps streamed in through Mickey's curtains, and Kerri's eyes fell to the corner of his bedroom, above his guitar stand on top of an amp. A tiny stuffed polar bear sat there, its white fur now gray, and the black stitching around its mouth and nose had unraveled long ago. Mickey told her it was his favorite childhood toy; a gift from his mother when he learned how to swim. His mother had always wanted to learn, but had been too scared. "I think it was the proudest she'd ever been of me, that I succeeded at something she couldn't do for herself," he had told Kerri one night while they were lying on his bed. He held the bear out at arms length above him. "I guess I saved it to give to my kid when they do something that I could never do."*

*"Like what?"*

*Mickey had put the bear on the top of her stomach and rolled over to kiss her on the shoulder. "I don't know. Maybe ride a bike."*

*Kerri sat up on one elbow. "You never learned to ride a bike?"*

*"Nope. I just couldn't get the hang of it. My father wouldn't let me learn with training wheels, so I was always too wobbly to stay up for more than a few seconds."*

*Mickey rubbed one of the bear's paws with his thumb and forefinger. "He thought that it would make it easier for me, that I would be more determined to learn, but, instead I just gave up."*

*"Didn't all your friends have bikes? What did you do?"*

*Mickey grinned at her. "I learned to ride a skateboard. That really pissed my dad off."*

*The bear stared at her now from across the room. Kerri slowly eased out from under Mickey's arm and crossed the braided rug to the amp. She plucked the bear from the top of the amp, holding it in her arms and squeezing it tightly. The bear's fur was covered in dust, and it smelled like the sage incense that Mickey burned when he was in the middle of a painting. She buried her face in the bear's fur and breathed in deeply.*

*"Do you think I'll be a good Dad?" Mickey asked her suddenly.*

*"Yeah, I think you will be. Do you think I'll be a good Mom?"*

*Mickey took her hand and kissed it. "You do a good job of taking care of me, you're gonna be a great Mom." Kerri smiled despite herself. "I don't know. I'm scared about it. I'm glad you're with me. To help."*

*"I'll always be here."*

Kerri woke up. The birth was over. When her daughter was born, bloody and screaming and tinier than Kerri had expected, the nurse gently lowered her into Kerri's arms. The nurse showed her how to cut the baby's umbilical cord, and when it fell away, the baby stopped screaming, looking up into Kerri's face intently.

"What's her name?" the nurse asked.

"Rhonda. After my brother, Ronnie." Rhonda had the same white blond hair as her uncle. Kerri hoped it never darkened. Kerri snuggled her closer, and she found a breast and began to nurse.

"Do you have any family to call?" the nurse asked, and she laid a gloved hand on her shoulder. Kerri traced her finger against Rhonda's soft cheek. Her mother was God knows where, and she didn't even know if Ronnie was alive.

“No. But can you see if my brother is here? He got hurt right before my water broke,” Kerri said.

The moment was interrupted by Mike Kaeding bursting through the door, breathless. “Did you have the baby yet?” he said, and then saw her, and stopped short. Kerri looked up at him curiously.

“Why are you here?” she said.

“Mickey called me. He asked me to look after you. He told me about Ronnie, Kerri, I’m sorry.”

“Is he okay? Ronnie?” Kerri sat up against the pillows. She felt so tired, and her arms were shaking.

Mike sat on the bed and picked up her hand. Kerri knew what he was going to say before he even opened his mouth. “He didn’t make Kerri. I’m sorry.”

Kerri hung her head. *He can’t be gone.* “And Mickey?”

“He’s at the police station now.” Mike squeezed her hand. “Wow,” he said softly, and he knelt down until he was face to face with Rhonda. “She’s beautiful.”

Kerri stroked the top of her head. She was so soft. “Can I hold her?” he asked Kerri. Rhonda had stopped nursing, and her eyes were heavy. Kerri held her out to Mike and he scooped her up, walking slowly around the room, murmuring something that Kerri could not make out. She leaned her head back into the bed. She was exhausted, and had never felt so alone. She clenched her hands together tightly under the thin cotton sheet.

Mike gently kissed Rhonda’s head, laughing softly when Rhonda sighed and flexed her tiny fingers.

He carefully placed Ronnie in the bassinet at the side of the bed and sat down beside Kerri. He took her hand in his, and Kerri found that she shook beneath his fingers.

“Kerri, I’m so sorry, about everything,” Mike said quietly.

Tears rolled down Kerri’s face, quick and straight. She took her hand back, retreating to the safety underneath the sheet. Her mind spun, replaying the events in the kitchen over again in her head. She couldn’t remember who had the gun. Her hands were around Ronnie’s waist, trying to hold him back from lunging at Mickey, but her grip was loose, and she was so unbalanced from being pregnant. She remembered the ‘o’ of Mickey’s mouth and shock on his face when the gun went off.

Kerri leaned her head back against the pillow. She was so exhausted, she couldn’t even cry any longer. She closed her eyes, and gripped Mike’s hand until she fell asleep.

## Chapter Fourteen

The snow blew away like sand, whipping against Kerri's cheeks while she stood next to Mike, her hand clutching his, at Ronnie's gravesite. His wake and funeral had been never ending, and the lines of people extended from the church to outside the parking lot and into the street. Linda and Allen had insisted that Kerri stand beside them in the receiving line. She shook hands and kissed cheeks and hugged too many people to ever remember, murmuring thank you's while they offered their condolences. Most of them didn't know who she was. They bear-hugged Linda and Allen and offered Kerri a polite extended hand, only to be told later that she was his sister. Several of them had come back to her afterward, offering Kerri a story about what a wonderful guy Ronnie was, and how they were so sorry. Kerri had nodded, smiled, squeezing down on her tongue so she wouldn't cry.

Kerri had tried to call her mother to tell her what had happened, but the number she had given her at the diner was disconnected. Kerri would have to wait until her mother tracked her down, sending her another random postcard in the mail or a message on her machine.

Kerri was grateful her mother wasn't at Ronnie's funeral. Rose would have ruined everything, crying dramatically at how unfair life was to have taken her son away, gripping Kerri's arm tightly and wailing that Kerri was all she had left in the world. She would have screamed and cursed out Mickey, or blamed Kerri for being a liar and causing this whole mess to happen. Even if she didn't say or do anything, Kerri still felt Rose would have been insulting beside Linda, with her pearls gleaming softly around her

throat and dangling from her ears. Her gentle sturdy hands comforted those who came to comfort her, so different than Rose, with her long, fake pink fingernails. Surely Rose would have worn a tight black chest, cleavage hanging out, arranging her features in a perfect façade of sorrow, pressing her body tightly against every man that came through the receiving line.

Too many people to count stood behind her and Linda and Allen now in the cemetery, fanning out like a flock of crows in their black and gray winter coats. Snow crusted around the top lip of Kerri's shoes while she stood, motionless, listening to the priest.

Ronnie was to be buried on the south side of St. Mary's Cemetery, in one of the new sections they had built. His marker was two down from a tall flag pole that had been erected to honor all of the soldiers that had come back from Vietnam. Kerri watched the flag ripple in the breeze, the rope banging against the side of the flagpole like a drum. It was the only noise besides the priest's voice. Smaller flags sticking out of the planters at the top of the markers blew back and forth around the snow covered cemetery like the wings of great tropical birds.

Mickey had taken Kerri here before to show him his cousin Peter's grave. She had been fascinated by the shrine to him on the fireplace mantle, how until Aunt Charlotte moved into the nursing home, Mickey hadn't been allowed to sleep in Peter's old room. But when she had stood at the foot of the grave, it finally sunk in. Mickey had thrown his cigarette butt on the grass beside Peter's marker and walked back to the truck, but Kerri had lingered on for a moment, carefully plucking the cigarette from the grass



and placing it in her pocket, unable to walk away knowing that she had disturbed the grave in any way.

Kerri had heard people say that it was such a shame to bury so many young boys, their whole lives ahead of them – but Ronnie was even more of a shame, a life ended because of a second of misjudgment.

The cold air snaked its way through the long pea coat she had borrowed from Melissa. Her whole body ached. It was like the cold filled her up inside and turned her into stone. Mike squeezed her hand gently. Allen and Linda had walked to the edge of the ground where Ronnie would be buried when the ground thawed. They each knelt down and placed a rose in the snow, and then Allen placed one of Ronnie's favorite baseball cards, Luis Tiant, beside the flowers.

Linda had presented Kerri earlier that morning with Ronnie's teddy bear that had been given to him by the social worker the day that Ronnie and Kerri had been taken away from their mother. *He would have wanted you to have it*, Linda had told him.

Kerri clutched her own flower to put in the cold snow, and now she too, walked the few steps to the edge of the marked off plot. Her high heels sunk into the soft earth with every step. Her rose was yellow. The florist had told her it was symbolic of friendship. Kerri wanted to ask what the color was for forgiveness. *I'm so sorry, Ronnie*, Kerri whispered. *I'm sorry I ever came into your life*.

Ronnie had photographed a funeral once. He had taken two rolls of film, and had arranged it in chronological order in an album the color of granite. Kerri had been appalled by it at first, but then Ronnie sat beside her and pointed out things in the pictures that Kerri never would have seen for herself. There was the picture of a woman, Kerri

guessed the widow, clutching a small leather bound bible to her chest, black rosary beads dripping down from her fingers at the foot of the casket. Ronnie had zoomed in on every detail, the lipstick that smeared on her bottom lip, the wetness like an invisible moustache under her nose, and the withered skin of her hands, rippled like wet sand. A few pictures later the same woman was lifting a child up to her hip, a smile breaking through her sadness. “See? There’s good in everything, even death,” Ronnie had said to her, and tucked the album back into his bookcase carefully.

She tried to see the beauty now, looking skyward to the giant statue of the Virgin Mary at the entrance of the gate with spread open arms, protecting all of the souls in the cemetery. The shiny mahogany casket that Ronnie was inside of, buried in his leather jacket with a camera tucked under his left arm, a picture of him with his parents under his right hand. She wondered what where the casket would stay until they buried him.

The amount of flowers lined up around the plot indicated that Ronnie was newly deceased. The markers spilled over with flowers and candles, keepsakes and religious statues. Many of the other graves had Christmas wreathes still propped up against the marker, poinsettias tipped over in the snow. Someone had left a green and white tassel, his school colors, held in place with a piece of duct tape to a bunch of daisies. The sides of the tape were lifting up from the cold and the snow; soon the tassel would fall off and be buried until the snow melted.

Mike left his bouquet with the rest of the flowers, insignificant now among so many others. “I wish I had something to give him,” Kerri said.

Mike put his hand on her back. “I’m sure he was happy just to be able to find you again, like you found him.”

“It’s my fault,” Kerri said softly. The wind had picked up, carrying her words away from her.

“What’s your fault? You had nothing to do with Ronnie dying. No one can know when bad things happen.” He moved closer to her and put his arm around her, awkwardly.

*None of mattered*, she thought. She was never going to see her brother again. He would never know his niece, or his real mother. He would never take another picture again. And it was her fault. If she had just been honest with Mickey, she would have never had to lie to Mickey. She had caused the whole thing. Every time the thought flashed in front of her, she felt sick.

“Are you coming?” Mike took Kerri’s hand again. He had become a different person since Ronnie’s death. He hovered over her, protective, shielding her from anything he thought that could be the least bit unpleasant. He made her breakfast and did all of the housework. He had slept at Mickey’s house every night since the baby came home.

“Yes, I’m coming,” Kerri said. She turned and followed Mike, zig-zagging between markers until they got to his pick up truck and followed the path to the entrance of the cemetery. The statue of Virgin Mary statue sprung out of the snow like a great white wing.

“Will you come with me to one other grave?” Mike asked her, breaking her thoughts. She silently followed him to the children’s section of the cemetery. Mike walked past a few rows, using his boot to push the snow away to see whose name was on the marker. Finally, he stopped and crouched down, using his bare hands to scoop away

the snow. *Andrea Elizabeth Fitzgerald*, it said, *beloved daughter*. The marker was old, overgrown with dead grass and void of any trinkets.

“She was my best friend’s kid,” Mike said. “It was her second birthday, and everyone was over my house. Me and my buddy Tommy, Andrea’s father, invited most of our friends. We didn’t know too many people with kids. We were just barely in our twenties anyway.” Mike was silent for a moment, staring down at the marker. Kerri crouched down beside him and pulled her coat tighter against her body.

“It was really just an excuse to get loaded, but we still had fun with her, blowing bubbles on the porch and letting her run through the sprinkler. After it was all over, Tommy put her down for a nap in my room. We figured she would sleep for a couple of hours so we sat on the porch and got high. When Tommy went to check on her, she wasn’t in my bed. We found her in the laundry room. She had gotten into a bottle of antifreeze.” Mike looked up at Kerri, tears running down his face. “I left the bubble stuff next to the antifreeze.”

He stood up, brushing off the cuffs of his pants. “I blamed myself for Andrea’s death. I was twenty five years old. Careless. I know that it was an accident, but I’ve never forgiven myself for it. I’ll never let myself be a father because of it.”

Kerri nodded. “Are you still close with Tommy?”

Mike pointed over to the west side of the cemetery. “He’s over there. He killed himself on the first anniversary of her death.”

Kerri took his hand again. It was warm inside of hers. “I’m sorry.” She knew there was nothing she could say to make him feel better. Simple words were the best answer.

“I know this is terrible to say, since Mickey is my friend. But you gotta make sure your kid is around good people all the time. You can’t let just anyone be a dad or a mom. Some people just aren’t cut out for it.”

Rose flashed across Kerri’s mind. “I know.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Mickey's life was now reduced to numbers. Seven steps from one end of his cell to the other. Three and half steps wide. Twelve bars that blocked his view. Fifty six white painted bricks on the wall next to his bed. He recited the numbers in his head over and over again. The numbers made sense to him, more than the events in his kitchen did. *Ronnie had the gun in the end, he thought. He had pulled the trigger on himself.* Of course, no one would believe Mickey. That's what the lawyer who came to see him last night said. *You have a history of shooting people. You're not getting out of here for a long time.*

The first opportunity he had for visitors, he had called Rabbit to come see him. Mickey waited patiently on the wooden chair, his hands cuffed in front of him. After what seemed like an eternity, the door opened.

"Hey man," Rabbit said. His voice was raspy, dry. He carried a can of soda in his hand and popped open the top.

"Hey," Mickey said. Rabbit's eye on one side was swollen shut, his lips bruised and cut.

"Look at me. Pretty messed up, huh. Not gonna be getting any girls for awhile am I Mouse," Rabbit said, and he tried to chuckle.

"What happened to you? When I couldn't get a hold of you I had to call Mike to look after Kerri."

Rabbit squinted one of his blue eyes at Mickey, and tried to lick his puffy lips. “After that party, I went out for a beer when you dropped me off. When I came back, a bunch of the guys at the party were waiting for me in their cars. They jumped me. ‘Cause of the whole Tracy thing. I remember being on the ground, they were kicking me. I got all banged up.” Rabbit shrugged. “Now tell me what the fuck happened to you? You kill that kid, Mouse?”

“Nah, he did it to himself. But we were fighting over my gun, he grabbed it. It was an accident.”

“Well shit, tell them that so I can bail you out or something.”

“Can’t. I’m screwed man, they’re gonna charge me with murder. My attorney said my best bet is to plead guilty to manslaughter.” Mickey’s voice choked. He had run the scenario over in his mind again and again, but saying it out loud made it real.

“What are you going to do?”

Mickey squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. He had been trying to think, figure out what to do. Rabbit was the one with the ideas. Rabbit was the one who picked out the cars they would take, strutting through parking lots like he was at an auction. Rabbit always seemed to know which cars would be unlocked, which ones would have full tanks of gas. He taught Mickey how to blow smoke rings their freshman year of high school and how to unhook a girl’s bra under her shirt. Rabbit was the only one who visited him every week —on Sundays — while he was in jail. Mickey waited for the visits like an impatient lover, missing Rabbit the instant he put the phone back in the cradle and left the room, leaving Mickey to listen to the dead air. It was the same sound as the conch shell his father had given him, the hum of empty space.

Rabbit leaned over, resting his weight on his elbow. “Shit. Well Mike told me that Kerri had a girl. They’re doing okay.”

“That’s why this whole thing started, man. Ronnie told me that kid ain’t even mine. When I heard that, I lost it.” Mickey wished he could smoke a cigarette so badly. He had bit all of his nails down to the wick in the past few days since he had been booked.

Rabbit dropped his voice to a whisper, even though they were alone in the room. “Mike’s been staying at your place since Kerri got back.”

Mickey swallowed. A heavy, sour tasting lump settled in the back of his throat. He tried to take a deep breath, but ended up forcing a gag back down. He ran both hands up the side of his face and hair roughly. Mickey pictured Mike feeding the baby, cuddling it in his arms. He thought quickly of Mike kissing Kerri in the kitchen that night months ago, his hands on the waistband of her pants. Mickey’s hands started to shake. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. “ He’s been playing house with her since you left.”

“Is he,” Mickey could barely get the words out. “Are they sleeping together?”

“Don’t know. I got your back though. I’ll take care of him, Mouse.”

Mickey knew what that meant. He had helped Rabbit take care of people before. It usually meant jumping them when they were alone, and beating them until they were so scared they would never turn them in. “No way Rabbit. I can’t let you do that for me. I can’t have you in here too. Kerri would know it was me behind it anyway.”

“Well I feel like I gotta do something. I can’t let you sit in here.”



Mickey looked closely at Rabbit through the glass window. Rabbit was the only real friend Mickey had ever had. Growing up, Mickey played with other kids, but no one had stayed by his side like Rabbit. They had been bound together since the day the house had burned down. The bum's body had been in between them like the third twin ever since. Other than the his year in jail Mickey hadn't gone more than a day or two without speaking or seeing Rabbit since he was fourteen years old. They were the perfect tandem pair, anticipating each other's movements, thoughts. Mickey didn't know what he would do if he didn't have Rabbit in his life.

Mickey flexed his cuffed hands and shifted in his chair. Images of Ronnie's body slumped and bleeding flashed through his mind all of the time. "This is where I belong," he said to Rabbit. The guard came over then and escorted Mickey back to his cell.

After lunch was served, all the prisoners got a half hour outside on the blacktop. There were fenced in basketball courts and bleachers to sit on, but otherwise, it was cold and wet outside. Mickey went back to the spot he used to sit in when he was in jail last year. Groups of inmates were huddled together, smoking cigarettes and trading contraband. Mickey brushed the snow off a section of the bleachers away from everyone and sat down. The cold and wet that lingered came right through his jumpsuit, and spread out through his body. Snow covered the blacktop and the roof of the jail. Spring was right around the corner, but last week the March sky had opened, dumping another foot of snow over the world.

Snow in the spring reminded him of the winters he spent in Iowa. The snow always crept up like an intruder, freezing the landscape overnight. Mickey had no

window in his little closet room, but when he went into the kitchen for breakfast the frost covered the window above the sink. The snowflakes pressed against the glass like wax paper rubbing he made of leaves in school.

His mother once said that the snow gave everything a fresh start, and his father put down the newspaper he was reading and peered at her across the table, his glasses sliding down his nose. "Snow doesn't give anything a fresh start. It just covers it up, freezes it in time till the spring comes. Whatever is underneath that snow doesn't go away. It just thaws and comes up again, like always."

Mickey had been eleven years old that morning. When he got dressed for school that day, he squirmed to view his backside, trying to see the two scars on his back, one over his left shoulder blade, the other just above his waistline. The skin had been split open too many times in those spots. Now they were like faint red snakes burrowed deep in his skin, covered up but still there, faded now to a soft pink, but never disappearing.

Mickey was overcome with emotion at all of the things Rabbit had told him about what had happened the last few days. *I have a daughter, he thought. A sweet, pink swaddled baby girl.* Ronnie's words rang through his head. *She's not yours, man. It's someone else's kid. Why did Kerri have to lie?*

Mickey fished a damp cigarette from the breast pocket of his jumpsuit and lit up. He had never felt so alone. A crow landed in front of him on the snow, staring at Mickey with its beady eye. Mickey kicked a clump of snow at the crow, but it simply hopped out of the way, unafraid. Mickey had hated crows since he was a little kid. They picked through the trash and made a mess, and Mickey's father would make him pick it up

before school. During the winter, it was so cold that Mickey's fingers and toes felt like they would freeze off when he had to go outside to pick the trash up.

He watched the crow bounce over the snow, its footprints melting tiny holes in the snow, like air bubbles. Each hole brought Mickey closer to a truth, and his stomach began to tighten.

He did love Kerri. Before she came along, the only person he had ever loved, ever been faithful to and made sacrifices for was Rabbit. He had for so long wanted to be part of a family, and when he finally decided to take Kerri in, he realized how relieved he felt. His mother and father abandoned him; his Aunt had been driven mad from her grief over Peter, and Caleb's life had been forever altered by Mickey's actions. Kerri and the baby had been the second chance Mickey had to make something of his life. *And now I ruined it.*

A tidal wave of grief rose up from the bottom of Mickey's cold feet, constricting his throat, his stomach, rising up hot and painful behind his eyes. There was nothing Mickey could do except to let it out. He cried for everyone; for the daughter that wasn't even his, and for his parents, who decided he was too much of a bother and sent him away. He cried for Kerri, whose life he had no business getting involved in and then shattering because he was selfish and lonely. He cried for Ronnie, an innocent boy that didn't deserve what Mickey had caused him, and for Caleb, whose life he had ruined. Out of everyone, the only person he did not cry for was himself.

At the jail cell blacktop, Mickey cried until he was covered in snow, shaking from the cold, and the crow had long since flown away.

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The county jail was one town away, surrounded by woods and tall, barbed wire fences. The sky was overcast, and Kerri shivered when she finally parked the car and stared at the drab building. She was led into a room with a glass wall with booths and phones so that she could talk to Mickey. He came out in his blue jumpsuit, his hair pulled back in a tiny ponytail. The jumpsuit made his eyes bluer than she had ever seen. Just seeing them brought on so many emotions for her. One on end, she hated him for what he had caused with her and Ronnie. On the other, she felt so guilty that she had put him here, lied to him. And after all that, she still loved him.

She picked up the phone and could hear him breathing on the other side. “Hi,” she said.

“So? I heard from Rabbit that you had a girl?” Mickey smiled at her, and she felt even worse. She wanted him to hate her. She wanted him to get upset and yell like he had done when he found out she had lied. But here he was, cheerful as ever.

“Yes. I named her Rhonda.”

Mickey nodded. “Ronnie would have liked that.”

Kerri looked down at the scratched countertop. The past few days had been so hard for her. Rhonda was so foreign and delicate in her arms, the slightest cry and Kerri would panic. She had barely gotten any sleep. Even when Mike had offered to wake up and feed Rhonda, she lay in bed and listened to his footsteps on the kitchen linoleum. Mike’s words still echoed in her mind, that some people just weren’t meant to be parents. She wasn’t so sure she should be a parent either.

“I forgive you,” Mickey said. He pressed his fingertips against the glass that separated them.

“What?” Kerri whispered. Mickey wasn’t supposed to be like that. He was supposed to hate her. It would make her leaving easier.

“I know you didn’t lie to hurt me. You lied because you were scared. I was scared too. Shit, I’m scared now.” Tears fell from Mickey’s eyes, and he sniffled. “I wish I could come across that glass and hug you, Kerri. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen, I swear.”

“Me either,” Kerri whispered.

“Do you think you can bring the baby in sometime so I can see her?”

Kerri closed her eyes for a moment. She couldn’t bear to lie to him again, but she didn’t want to tell him the truth either. “Yes,” she said. She crossed her fingers in between her legs. It was a childish thing to do, but she couldn’t help it. That would diffuse the lie, even a little bit. “I’ll bring the baby next time I come to see you.” But the truth was, she would never visit Mickey again, and he would never see her baby. She got up from her chair and said goodbye, and walked back into the sunshine outside.

## Chapter Sixteen

May, 1979

The last two months had been the hardest of her life. Kerri had stayed out of the diner since Rhonda had been born, leaving the house only to buy diapers and formula and food. She had been ashamed to come out and face the world.

When Kerri had gotten back from the hospital, she ran through the house. She ripped pictures off the walls, and smashed anything that was breakable. The house had absorbed too much pain, her old memories; everything that she and Mickey had gone through, it was etched into every wall, floor, and piece of furniture. Kerri tore up Mickey's pictures, smashed his guitar, threw dishes against the ground and watched them break apart and skim across the floor. Rhonda had started screaming, injured by the noise, her face red and wrinkled like an overripe tomato.

When Kerri was finished, she gathered up all that she had broken into garbage bags and set them beside the kitchen door, stuffed and lumpy. She had filled every garbage bag she could find with Mickey's clothes, his records, toiletries, and lined the bags up outside on the walk.

But even after the bags were taken away and there was no trace of Mickey anywhere in the house, Kerri couldn't quite get rid of him. Rhonda sensed something was wrong too. It took her two weeks to finally sleep for more than an hour at night. Kerri would try to nurse her, and her little hands would push Kerri away, her eyes roaming, looking for someone else besides Kerri. Rhonda seemed to prefer when Mike Kaeding held her. She fussed and cried, and then Mike would take her into his arms and

she would quiet down and smile at him. Mike hadn't left the house since he drove her home from the hospital. Kerri was grateful to him for his help, even though she knew he cared for her more than she did for him.

Kerri had just begun folding laundry when she heard a knock at the door behind her. She peered out the living room window. It was Ronnie's mother, Linda. Rhonda gurgled in her bassinet next to the couch and Kerri touched her face gently. "Be right back," she said, and stood up to open the door.

Linda had aged since Kerri had seen her last, at Ronnie's funeral. Her honey blond hair had streaks of grey in it now, and the skin around her eyes had grown puffier and sagged. She impeccably dressed in a sweater suit and heels, her hands clutching a brown leather purse and a handkerchief.

"Hi honey."

"Linda. Hi." Kerri set the laundry on the counter and walked over to her. They hugged; a brief, awkward embrace. She knew that Linda had tried to call her several times, leaving pleading messages on the machine. But Kerri had been too consumed with guilt to call her back. After all, if Kerri had never showed up, Ronnie would be alive. She had set in motion the very events that had led to his death, and in it she had come to understand she was the catalyst for the whole thing.

"I've been worried about you. This is too much for you to go through by yourself," Linda murmured.

"I've been doing okay. Took some time to figure out this whole mother thing, but I think I'm getting better."

Linda sat at the table and placed her pocketbook on the chair next to her. “Do you have time to talk?”

Kerri smiled. “Of course.” She ran the pot under the sink and began to spoon coffee into the machine. Her hand shook slightly. She didn’t want to start answering a bunch of questions about what had happened in the kitchen just a few months prior.

Linda walked over the couch and paused in front of the bassinet. Her face lit up, for an instant she was the Linda that Kerri had met months earlier. “Kerri, she’s beautiful.”

“Thanks. She smiles a lot now.” Kerri set two coffee mugs out on the counter, and then reached for the flowered sugar bowl.

Linda smiled, but her eyes were watering. “That’s good. May I hold her?” Linda snuggled Rhonda under her chin, and walked around the kitchen, rubbing her back. Kerri watched the way Linda held Rhonda. She was so graceful and natural. Everytime Kerri went near Rhonda it was a struggle.

“Do you hate me, Linda? Do you and Allen hate me?” Kerri blurted.

Linda stopped pacing the kitchen. She shifted Rhonda to her other shoulder and set her down in the bassinet without even waking her up. “It was an accident Kerri. You didn’t do anything on purpose.”

“But it is my fault. If I had never come looking for Ronnie, he would be alive. Happy, doing what he loved. I just feel so selfish.”

“The important thing is that you’re safe. You and your daughter. You have to move on, and think of her.”



“I don’t know if I can. Now I’m living the same life as my mother, the one person I’ve always hated.”

“Do you know I met your mother?”

Kerri blinked. “How could you have?”

“When Allen and I asked to adopt Ronnie, we had to meet with your mother so that she could sign over the parental rights to him. She said that she had no idea who his father was, so it was just her that needed to sign.” Linda reached down and snapped open the clasp of her purse. She retrieved an old folded up tissue, sand and dirt clinging to the underside. Linda wiped her nose, and stuffed the tissue back into her pocket.

Kerri was shocked. Her mother knew who her father was. She had told Kerri all about him.

“We begged her to sign over the rights to you too, Kerri. We tried so hard to adopt the two of you.”

“What?”

“Your mother refused. I don’t know why.”

*A boy needs a daddy, but girls, they need their mothers. I wanted to be the only mother you would ever have.* Kerri knew exactly why her mother didn’t have the strength to give up both of her children.

“That’s why I came over here tonight Kerri. I want you to know that you always have a place with us. You and Rhonda. Allen and I have discussed it, we want to be part of Rhonda’s life. We can help you with the baby, give you a chance to process everything that’s happened.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Kerri, you have always felt like our daughter, even if you weren’t around. Ronnie was planning on looking for you too as soon as he found out he had a sister. You just beat him to it. You are a part of the family.”

Kerri hugged Linda and started to cry. “You are so generous, Linda. I wish you were my real mother.”

Linda smoothed Kerri’s hair out of her face. “Everything will be okay, Kerri. You’ll see.”

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Kerri slipped out from Mike’s arm when Rhonda woke up the next morning. “I’ll get up,” he murmured, and she kissed him on the cheek quickly. “I have her, go back to bed.”

She held Rhonda in her arms for a long time that morning, on the edge of the bed in the old bedroom she shared with Ronnie as a child. The twisted braid of rope still hung from the dogwood tree out the window, even though the tire had long ago been taken down. Kerri watched the tail of rope swing gently from side to side.

She had made a decision after Linda had left. Kerri felt stronger now, and surer of herself. She hadn’t felt that way since she had gotten pregnant in the first place. “Remember, I’m doing this for you,” she whispered to Rhonda. “I’m doing what I wish my mother had done for me.” Mickey’s polar bear was tucked beside Rhonda in the carrier. He had wanted to give it to his kid when they did something he could never do. *I have to have the strength to do what no one else can*, she thought.

She had already packed most of Rhonda's things. They were stowed in a bag in the backseat of her car. There was a note on the table to Mike that she was doing errands. Kerri had hidden a longer note to him in the pocket of his work jeans. He would find it, she knew, later that morning when he reached for the pad of paper and pencil that he always had in the back pocket. But by then it would be too late.

When she got to Linda and Allen's and knocked on the door, Linda greeted her warmly. "I was hoping you could watch her for awhile," she said to Linda.

"I would love to," Linda said. She hoisted the baby bag onto her shoulder and took the Rhonda's carrier from Kerri's hand. As soon as Rhonda passed from her hand to Linda's, Kerri knew she had made the right decision.

Linda hesitated for a moment. She looked at the bag in her hand, and at Rhonda's sleeping face. "When are you going to be back?" she asked.

Kerri bit the insides of her cheek as hard as she could. *Linda had to know*, she thought. "Soon."

"I'll take good care of her Kerri," Linda said. She held Kerri's eye for a second, and nodded her head slightly. Something passed between them, and Kerri nodded her head back. Part of her wanted to rip Rhonda from Linda's arms and reverse out of the driveway as if she had never come. But then she thought of raising the baby with Mike Kaeding, working in the diner the rest of her life, and never leaving the old house on the corner of Pine and Maple Street. Kerri thought of her own mother showing up sporadically for Rhonda's whole life. When Rhonda grew up, she would ask about her father, and what would Kerri tell her? She could never be a good example for another

person. "I'll be back soon," Kerri said, and she turned away and ran down the slate steps to her car.

She drove away from the house, with Ronnie's stuffed bear beside her on the seat. She didn't know where she was going to go now. She did what she knew how to do best, leave.

The lines of the road flew past her, and after a few minutes, Lakeville was behind her, and she crossed into Oakwood. The trees were covered with buds that had not yet bloomed, but brave flowers had sprouted in some of the gardens Kerri passed. Every so often, she passed by a child's bicycle in the yard, or a covered grill on a deck. Spring was here, and life was starting all over again.

Rhonda would have a better life than Kerri could ever give her, and she would never have to lie to Mickey again. She would never have to pretend to love Mike Kaeding, or feel ashamed if she saw Mr. Kent. She was a survivor, just like her mother had told her after all. She was strong.

She was a dandelion girl.