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Valley palm

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VALLEY PALM

A Thesis

by

MELISSA E. KING

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2010

Major Subject: Creative Writing

VALLEY PALM

A Thesis
by
MELISSA E. KING

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December 2010

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ABSTRACT

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In the critical introduction of this thesis, I explore how choices and consequences affect a life, my life. This leads to a discussion of the struggle I had with labeling my work nonfiction. I also explore the effect structure has on the narrative arc and characters in a work, and discuss my process of deciding on a form for my creative thesis. Highlighted in this discussion is the influence of feminism and feminist authors. Finally, I intimate my issues with my cultural identity, and how this is reflected in my story and my place in the literary world. These are all aspects that have fueled and shaped my work, and are present in one way or another throughout the whole. *Valley Palm* is a memoir composed of organic memories thematically linked through essays and chapters.

DEDICATION

To Juan, for taking my hand and walking beside me

as I found my way out of this mess I made.

And to my family, for quite literally, I would have nothing,

this would be nothing, without you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Jean Braithwaite, for helping me find confidence in my voice and my story, for pulling the truth out of my ambiguities. I also thank my committee members, José Skinner, for always finding the one good thing I had to offer in everything presented; and Marci R. McMahon, for helping me find my place among the multitude of Chicana writers that influenced me.

Heartfelt thanks to my friends, to Shoney Flores and Daniel Sanchez, for putting hours upon hours into being my sounding-boards, my trusted critics, and my creative support. I don't think I could have followed through without you.

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INTRODUCTION

FINDING MYSELF

Valley Palm is about a life affected by choices, both personal and those made by others. Although most people view the concepts of free will and that of fate or destiny as opposing forces, when we examine a life closely it is easy to see how these two ideas seem to meld together in a way where they are no longer conflicting opposites, but partners in creating a story. In this thesis you see how a young woman makes choices, but that these choices are fueled by those of the past. Even when she makes decisions that she feels will take her further and stranger than she's ever been, she seems to always end up closer to where she started. *Valley Palm* is my story, an organic memoir based on my memories of important events of my life. Throughout the creative process I encountered many struggles. The main struggles involved whether or not to present my work as nonfiction and the structural organization of the piece, both affected by the question of my cultural identity or lack thereof.

When thinking of choices and how they affect a person, it is important to consider how they are both defining and life-changing, but not always in the ways we might think. A lot of people think a person is the sum of their actions, mistakes and accomplishments, but this can be misleading. One very clear example that comes to mind is from a film directed by Paul Haggis, *Crash* (2004). In this film, a white cop pulls over a black couple and after interrogating them proceeds to search the wife and grope her in front of her husband. This is a blatant abuse of power and even an act of racism. After this scene the cop is perceived by many, including his

partner, as a despicable man. Later in the movie, however, when this same black woman is trapped in a car that is about to explode, the cop who violated her risks his life to save her. The question is, then, which actions should he be judged by? The one that condemns him, or the one that makes him a hero?

I say both. I write about real people and in my portrayal of events I ask that you not be too quick to judge or condemn. This is my story and everything is told from my perspective. The characters are revealed to the reader through my eyes. And in pieces, flashes, glimpses. We are all capable of doing things we are not proud of. Many times we cannot even offer up a valid reason as to why. I certainly cannot speak for any character aside from myself, and even then there are still decisions and actions I struggle to understand. The real factor that should be evaluated is whether or not we learn. I would like to say that through the progression of life events, my narrator does learn. She learns how to come to terms with herself, come to terms with her flaws, her mistakes. Only in knowing her weaknesses can she fully realize who she is, become whole.

I find that my story can also be seen as a female struggle. She is a young girl/woman pushing against constraints she feels from her father, her (ex)husband, and society as a whole. A young girl must find her place culturally, spiritually, and sexually in a world where women are still viewed by many as the weaker or lesser sex. Many of these influential factors are conflicting, contradictory, as in the character of my father. He is both a force of liberation and constraint. One who shows me many freedoms, but still seems to keep some in reserve.

One of the most common criticisms I have received of my writing is that my stories have no setting. They could take place anywhere. I feel that this is a result of my fear of being completely straightforward about presenting my truth, but it is mainly affected by my lack of

strong cultural roots—growing up mixed-race (white and Hispanic) in a predominately Hispanic community. I stumbled across an interesting concept in a nonfiction workshop that really put my feelings into perspective. In one of the books we read, *The Nonfictionist's Guide: On Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction*, Robert Root discusses two terms regarding place: the term “insider” and the term “outsider.” He classifies an insider as “an inhabitant, a denizen, a dweller” (160). His description of “insider” makes me think of phrases like, “You can take the girl out of the South, but you can’t take the South out of the girl.” An insider seems to be so familiar with their setting. It just oozes naturally out of them and onto the page. An outsider is described as “a transient, a traveler, an interloper,” someone who may or may not be familiar with an area but is definitely not a native (160). The outsider has a more questioning eye and can present things that an insider might overlook in a fresh light. Root sees value in both approaches. I am a native of the Rio Grande Valley, but feel I will always be an interloper, an insider always left on the outskirts. It is an interesting, though lonely, position to be in, and I seek to utilize this unique perspective in my writing. I focus most on setting in the short chapter “Valley Palm” as I discuss a major feature of the Rio Grande Valley—the palm tree, and have tried to scatter other pieces of the Valley throughout the whole as well, such as the section “My Traitor Tongue” where I set the scene of the story in my small high school community dominated by Hispanic students.

Fact or Fiction

My issue with embracing the genre of nonfiction came about largely as a result of my upbringing. My family has always been one for sweeping things under the rug. As a result, I am not one for confrontations. I usually take to holding things in until my insides heat up like they do when I try to down too much chile in one bite. I choose to let it burn until I feel like I am

going to explode rather than cause awkwardness or a scene of any type. It seems as if airing dirty laundry, so to speak, in my thesis would be like a slap to the face for my family, confronting issues seldom spoken of all in one blow.

In “But Enough About Me: What Does the Popularity of Memoirs Tell Us about Ourselves?,” an essay that combines review of *Memoir: A History* by Ben Yagoda with a discussion of modern society and a defense of his own nonfiction, Daniel Mendelsohn presents several criticisms of the genre of nonfiction, the memoir in particular. Many intellectuals, including Sigmund Freud, who scoffed at the suggestion of writing an autobiography, consider memoir to be “the black sheep of the literary family...spilling family secrets, embarrassing old friends—motivated, it would seem, by an overpowering need to be the center of attention” (68). The claim is that the only concern of the author of memoir is to be the voice heard above the crowd, and on top of that, that it is not even a voice to be trusted. My initial reaction to such a strong statement is to ask: what makes me so important that I feel the need to put my struggles on display and think anyone else would value them?

This question brought me to the heart of another debate that has been in existence long before I was born. What is the merit of nonfiction over fiction (or vice-versa), especially in a world where many authors disguise truth as fiction (their “protective mask” as Mendelsohn calls it) and fiction as truth, claiming it “reflect[s] a reality present not in the world itself...but in the author’s mind” (72). There are many similarities, then, between fiction and nonfiction as forms that can be interchanged as easily as the two words can be interchanged at times. Both concepts express something we know to be true. Some people, such as Rigoberta Menchú, Latin American writer and activist, and the defenders of her memoir whose complete truth came into question, say it does not matter if it is fiction and represents “larger truth” as opposed to *the*

truth. But it is only *the* truth as held in nonfiction, as philosopher David Hume claims, that holds true “intellectual stimulation and illumination” for the reader (72). I believe that everyone has a story to tell, and if they can tell it well it can be a beautiful thing. There is a certain power in a story that not only reveals a truth about our world, our lives, but is truth.

In deciding to write *Valley Palm* as nonfiction, the biggest struggle was with my definition of truth. Aside from the issue that every nonfiction writer struggles with, the reliability of their own memory, was the concept of omission. When it comes to relationships, most people would agree that omission is betrayal. One also has to consider, however, the ethics of telling secrets that are not yours to tell. There are places in my story where certain details are left out because they involve information revealed only in confidence—a confidence I cannot betray. I have authority to share the factors that directly affected me and my life I feel, but when it comes to other details that more closely deal with other characters, especially my family members, I feel there are boundaries I must not cross. This is reflective of my personality as demonstrated with my conversation with my older sister Kiki at the end of the section entitled “Jesse”—the idea that I respect her secrets regardless of how often she betrays mine. Although holding my tongue does blur some of the storyline of my parent’s divorce and my relationship with N, I feel that I have made the right decision and have not compromised the truth I seek to tell.

Writing *Valley Palm* is not about justification, accusation, proving right or wrong. I merely recreate the world as I see it, as I’ve lived it, as I’ve always felt compelled to do. To give my life and be a writer, as Annie Dillard asks of her students in “The Death of a Moth,” taking inspiration from Virginia Woolf’s essay of the same title and a moth that was consumed by her candle light; I can’t be or do anything else. I write a world I would hope others can see

themselves reflected in, see themselves and realize, see themselves and learn to open their eyes to things they at first, or always ever, refused to see. I find sometimes it takes hearing someone else's story to recognize your own. My relationship with N is something I have hashed and rehashed in my mind trying to explain, trying to understand. Yet in every telling I saw myself as victim only. It wasn't until I had a conversation with someone else that had been in a similar situation but could speak from N's perspective that I could finally stop and see that I wasn't the only one hurt and used. So here I give you my life, as I see it, to read as you will.

Structural Integrity and Feminist Theory

Valley Palm took many different forms. I had many concerns: presentation, characterization, narrative arc. But the what most ate at my mind was what I did not want to be. I did not want to be melodramatic. I have experienced more than my share of spectacular and outlandish events, things that make people say, "And all that happened to you?," and didn't want to appear to be laying out the days of my life in a sensational or theatrical way. I wanted to be acknowledged as more than someone who had led a crazy life and survived. Many of the more significant and dramatic events occurred around the same place along the timeline, and I did not want them to appear as a slew of conflicts competing for the reader's attention. Take "Tunnel Vision," for instance. In that chapter I am balancing my struggle to overcome two injuries in which I hope to have revealed a lot about my personality, my parent's divorce—which I use my injuries to almost ignore—and the competition between myself and my little sister. If I were to take a directly chronological approach I would also have to include my relationship with Carlos and the beginning of my relationship with Jesse. I know from experience that all of those conflicts are too much for anyone to handle at once, and it muddles the impact each individual event had on my life. So I choose to separate them. I give each their own section and place,

with hints to reference time. The reader can ascertain that all of these things happened around the same time after a close reading, but it is not at the forefront of their minds and does not distract from the power of each character and happening. And being the erratic person that I am, I also felt that going the strictly chronological route just wasn't me. I was drawn to creating something that fused my past with my present—brought them face to face. I wanted the pieces to build on one another, bringing cause and effect more clearly to light as illustrated by the development of Jesse's character.

When considering plot and my storyline, I knew I wanted my reader to be caught up in more than “the what” and “the when” that Margaret Atwood condemns in “Happy Endings,” presenting plot as a mere string of “just one thing after another.” I wanted to address “the how” and “the why.” She reveals that there is not much to be done with plot events that have not already been done—people cheat, break hearts, and maybe find some happiness before they eventually die. The interesting part, the part that makes stories unique, is what drives the characters to do the things they do. I felt that giving my childhood and adult experiences equal footing, lining them up side by side, would delve into the motivations of my decisions. While plot is important, it is not the most important and this concept is what most greatly influenced my decisions on organization and structure. The most important aspect of *Valley Palm* is my character and the driving forces behind my actions—and the actions of others—that directly affected me.

I began the work as a series of essays and fictions that reflected segments of my life experiences. At first I was not ready to own my story. I had not yet been honest with my family or myself about some of the events encompassed in my thesis, particularly regarding the ugliness in my relationship with Jesse. While this approach did have the more disjointed structure I

desired, it seemed a little too much so. I didn't want my thesis to be too disjointed to clearly follow. I wanted a theme to shine through. While my story, the events included, seemed to shift and sway with each structure, it remained centered on choices and how they had influenced the person I had become. With that in mind, I decided to go with a memoir, something that more clearly connected the pieces into a single shape, a single life. In doing so I hope I have unified choices and their consequences, illuminating the impact of both.

Even with that decision, however, there were still various options available and I did not feel a chronological piece would reflect the person—the writer I am. I turned to several female writers for inspiration, specifically those that had fueled my interest in story and begun a conversation I felt compelled to respond to: that of the female experience as a whole and the Hispanic female experience, however hesitant I am to claim my share in this.

Margaret Atwood, along with her musings of the purpose of stories, is known for her portrayal of strong female characters. Her collection of short fiction, *Moral Disorder*, follows the life of one woman. While the collection follows a loose structure, I liked the way the main character develops while moving back and forth in time. Atwood begins the collection with a story that sets the stage of the narrator's present adult life. It establishes her relationship with a man, and establishes Nell, her main character, as a thinker, a dreamer. The two stories that follow go back to her childhood, develop her relationship with her parents and her sister. In the third story in particular, "The Headless Horseman," the narrator retells the events surrounding her last Halloween as a participating "child" while discussing the same situation with her sister, who is in the car with her. This story flashes back and forth between the past situation and their current conversation, revealing the tensions in their relationship and their varying perspectives on it all. After this story, the narrative continues in the past, working forward to her present

situation, the one presented in the first chapter. Each story, however, does have details embedded that connect it to portions the reader has seen of her childhood and her future. The reader understands why she lives and works alone as an adult, why she is unsure about getting married but still wants a relationship—even a child. With this strategy the story is not about how a little girl grew up, but how an adult is handling the realities of her future based on reactions to her past. I feel this is reflective of the way we meet and know people in life. Meeting someone as an adult and slowly learning about their past a piece at a time is very different than growing up with them. You know them in a different way, as a different person, than a childhood friend would. The focus is on the adult character and experiences. This is what Atwood achieves with Nell’s story, and what I hope to have done with my story as well.

Norma Cantú also influenced my thesis in regards to order and time. Her “fictional autoethnobiography” as she calls it, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, tells the story of family on the Texas/Mexico border through the use of memory and image. Though the essays are arranged in what would seem a random order, she discusses how the organization of the essays, the photos, mirrors memory as it is defined by the French philosopher Roland Barthes, the way “we live life in our memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance” (xii). This explanation spoke to my hesitance to go the chronological route. To do so would be fighting against a memory that grouped people and events together in its own order. I wanted my memoir to be true to my memory of my life, to the way I experience it and reflect upon it now, and to the way it continues to come back to me. I do not connect the events of my life in a straight line, in the order they happened, but in the way they have shaped and affected me, linking cause and effect, error and consequence, as they seep into my daily present.

I feel I drew from both Atwood and Cantú for the structure of my memoir. The way Atwood sets the stage for Nell's story and her use of flash backs gave me the confidence to move back and forth in time. In Cantú's discussion of memory, I realized that the only way to be true to my life is to follow the format of memory. For as Gabriel Garcia Marquez once said, "What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it." My memoir follows two timelines, roughly, one from the past and one from the near present, and works forward, though not always in a direct way. The first timeline begins, like Atwood's, with the narrator in a situation that is near the end of the timeline, and the second, always connected with the present in some way but focused on the past, could lead you right back into the beginning of the story. This helps organize events in a way that highlights the forces pushing and motivating the narrator and the connections between the chapters are based on how and when I recall specific events of my life, especially in the first half. There are triggers that take me back to specific moments, such as packing up my old power lifting trophies leading to "Tunnel Vision," and cleaning out the house I shared with Jesse leading to flashbacks of our marriage. Although not in the same manner as Atwood, I also highlight tensions through reflection and conversation, and try to embed those important details in an effort to blend past and present seamlessly. As the story moves into the second half, closer to the present, it picks up pace and almost overlaps as it comes full circle.

In Cantú I also found a model for characterization. Her essays are short, and, as previously mentioned, not chronological, but they are very telling and create vivid images of the many characters presented. They make each moment a present, lived moment, each character involved real, and those that are recurring seem to come together piece by piece. I play on this strategy in the third chapter of my thesis, "Blood—More Viscous than Water" in order to create

the most real presence for my childhood and my family, especially since this is the only chapter where the reader will find most of this information. Although I have a few recurring characters and attempt to make them real in each appearance, a combination of which should paint their whole picture, in this third section I use photographs to portray family life. I hope to have done justice to this style, utilizing it to give shape to my siblings, my parents, the relationships I formed with them, and my very different experience in a border setting.

Louise Erdrich is another writer known for her skill with characters and relationships. She is also known for her unique style and presentation, writing interconnected short stories and what have been called cyclical novels, such as *Love Medicine*. She was the first writer who pulled me to examine the development of character, the first to draw me in to the beauty that is found in dysfunction. While her stories are presented as a part of a whole, and even her bigger works are seen as being immersed in one another, “each story has its own integrity” as Hertha D. Wong (qtd. in Erdrich – Introduction) declares. This is what I hope to have accomplished, strong stories that tie together but can stand alone. Particularly in what I consider to be the third strand in my story, which includes the chapters that resemble flash nonfiction such as “Valley Palm,” “Secondhand Condoms,” and “Things from within Defile.” Though not quite out of touch with the other two threads, I felt these images worked best woven in as a third, an other, adding strength and bulk to what was already there. They flow chronologically and touch on similar themes, but do something different, at times linking past and present sections. An example of this would be the essay “Secondhand Condoms.” This story embodies the dysfunction of the narrator’s relationship with her husband, yet also provides a link between their life together and the previous section, “Boys, Boys, Boys.” It clearly demonstrates how her past is still affecting her. Another example, though more subtle, is that of “Do you Love Me?”. This story provides

some closure to the dissolution of the parents' relationship in "Tunnel Vision," but also provides a segue into the narrator's issues with love and commitment as seen in "Boys, Boys, Boys." I think I can thank Atwood, Cantú, and Erdrich for inspiring these interspersed bursts of familial, cultural, and female expression.

I would also like to comment on the theme of house and home. Throughout the memoir, there are scenes of moving in, out of, and fixing up a house I shared with my (ex)husband. It is tied to many memories. The house is the fuel for many scenes and revelations that flash back to oppression and abuse. I would like to acknowledge Sandra Cisneros and her inspiring book *The House on Mango Street*. While my experience is very different, the way she uses that house to shape her story, to represent identity and a sense of belonging (or longing), was a powerful example for me. Like Cantu's work, though not the basis of my entire project, a piece of her stayed with me.

In discussing such strong female influences, I cannot go without commenting on the influence of feminist theory on my work as well. The idea of women as property is an underlying thematic in several areas of my thesis. The narrator struggles with this idea with her father in "Excuse Me, Ms." Although he is trying to help her, it is clear he feels he "owns" her in a way. She is not comfortable with it, but also doesn't feel she can fight against it—at least not directly—because in many ways, her father's behavior is, ironically, one reason she has come to be so independent and headstrong. This idea is also evident in relations with her (ex)husband. His control of her, mind and body, is very strong. But she fights back, however secretly and passively, with both.

This idea of the female body and possession affects the narrator's decisions and relationships with men early on. Her first encounters with sex and romance are distorted by this

idea of the allure and power of the female body, and the equating of sex with love. In *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks discusses this common misconception affecting women vying for freedom, sexual freedom, who equated this with “sexual promiscuity.” She fights with this as she struggles to find who she is and learns to respect her body, herself, as a whole person. It is necessary for her to realize that a woman’s body, “[has] sexual value and agency irrespective of whether or not [it is] the object of male desire” (92). To learn that truly liberated sex is not in service of someone or in exchange for something, even “love.”

As a result, sexuality is another undercurrent. Though the modern view of a woman’s sexuality is changing, many people still view men as the only ones with true sexual options without consequence or stigma. The narrator has to own the person she is and the decisions she makes in light of these perspectives. She goes through a period of sexual discovery, with both males and females, discovering the value of her own body along the way. This occurs in “Boys, Boys, Boys,” beginning with Carlos and continuing with her phase of revolt against Jesse through sex with other men. She reacts against his “control” over her body through his decision for her to have an abortion, but turns to a situation in which she is still not on equal ground—not respected but used as she is using. Even in N’s section, her encounter is different but still set up in a distorted struggle of manipulation and control.

This changes with Juan, a man who accepts her as who she is, and as an equal, and shows her that the equation she has been working with (sex=love) is false. Going from one man to another may not seem the radical change or transformation found in some feminist stories, but it is the truth, and in many ways more reformative because it gives hope for a world with men and women on level ground. This is actually a small glimpse of a world bell hooks champions. It is “a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always

equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction” (x). This is not to say that it is a perfect ending. There is still confusion and uncertainty as clearly demonstrated in “The Circle of Life.” But it does show that there are options, there is hope, there are ways to grow, to change, to find and become people who respect themselves and each other.

I would like to see my story alongside those of female authors I admire, Atwood, Erdrich, Cisneros, whose characters may not always take a drastic stand against the men in their lives but are strong. Whether it is a woman choosing to never get married, a desire for a house of one’s own, a house that does not belong to a man or a daddy, or even a woman who just has the strength to actually run away, they are examples. They fight back in the little ways, ways that also count in real life.

Culture and Identity

Hispanic, specifically Mexican American, culture dominates the Rio Grande Valley, where I was born, raised, and have lived all my life; culture here is nearly everything. I have always wondered where I fit into this setting. My dad is white. My mom is Hispanic. I grew up in a gray area of cultural identity. I don’t feel Hispanic, but I don’t feel white. Either way, it feels like pretending. Not completely accepted by either side of my ethnicity, I am at a loss as to where I belong. If you cannot come to terms with what culture you identify with, how can you project this to others? There is a timidness, a confusion that spreads into everything you do. Paisley Rekdal discusses this issue in her own memoir, *The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee*. Half white, half Chinese, she talks about how “appearance is the deciding factor of one’s ethnicity,” to most people it “determines how [we] should behave and what [we] should accept to be [our] primary culture” (16). She is absorbed into white American culture because it is all around her, and because she feels her Chinese features are not prominent enough. But is this

what she feels inside? Either way, “any struggle to assert [her]self as more than [she] seem[s] to be is exhausting” (16).

While the effects of my uncertainty in my identity is most prominent in my search for acceptance in “Pollito,” it also influenced many of my decisions, especially regarding relationships. This can best be seen in “Boys, Boys, Boys,” in the development of the relationship with Carlos and with Brooklyn, but is also present in the simple fact of my name. My last name, King, was something I loved throughout my childhood for its strength and uniqueness. Enter adolescence, however, and it became a stigma, marking me as different. Even the decision to put my name on my story was a difficult one for many reasons discussed in this section, along with my hesitance to embrace the genre of nonfiction.

Then there is also the issue of language. Both of my parents speak fluent Spanish: my mom practically from birth, my dad self-taught when he moved to the Valley. My inability to speak fluent Spanish is an isolating factor for me. Later in her memoir, Rekdal argues with a Chinese acquaintance that she is half Chinese, that her mother is Chinese-American, even though they cannot speak the language. Their lack of knowledge of the language causes her Chinese acquaintance to reject the idea of their sharing her culture. I feel like this at times. I like to say that if I were to be dropped off in the middle of Mexico, a Spanish-speaking community, that I could get by, that I could survive. And that is the truth. I could find the necessities—food, shelter, assistance in an emergency. But I lack the ability for the social interaction and inclusion allowed only to the fluent, the native. This is highlighted in the opening section of “My Traitor Tongue” and is touched on again in a few more places.

In his book *Brown*, Richard Rodriguez claims that everyone is brown in some way, that “there is brown at work in all the works of man” (37), that there is “nothing in the world ...that

does not ascend to brown” (38-39). It is a color that connects us all. While his argument has some merit in my eyes, not everyone sees things from this perspective. Hispanics, while viewed as a sociable people, have a very strong sense of identity and unity. At times, many are not very accepting of outsiders. But on the other hand, neither is the Anglo population. They have a history of dominating, at times nearly destroying, cultures that were unlike theirs. Our country is still living proof of this in many ways.

Rodriguez has a controversial perspective on the cultural conflict faced by assimilated Hispanics. He feels that his assimilation was necessary for success in the academic world. He does value his culture and his language, but had to trade it in for the academic voice he now owns. While he does express some feelings of isolation during his youth, through interactions with Spanish-speaking family members that teased him for his lack of use of their language, in a way this isolation was a choice. I connect with his feelings of being an outsider, of being ostracized in a way, but from a different point of view. I didn't choose the academic language I was raised with, though I value it, and was not offered the opportunity of inclusion into that community of Spanish-speakers that surround me every day. This is clear in my hesitance to speak Spanish in almost any situation.

It is a similar story when I read strong Chicana authors like Norma Cantú, Sandra Cisneros, Cherrie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, I feel a connection. I praise them for their unwavering pride in their roots. Roots that at times I feel I share. Then at other times I relate to them but in an entirely opposite way. As they recount the ridicule and cruelty Spanish-speakers face, for having an accent, for being a darker color of skin, for being the “other”, I join in their pain. As they express the feeling of never fully belonging, I too understand. Only my experience and understanding is fueled by memories of being *la gringa*, the one who couldn't

speaking Spanish without an accent, or even at all. The one who couldn't ever be in on certain jokes or conversations. The white crayon that's never quite useful.

I want to claim my identity as a Hispanic. But most of the time I feel like this would make me a fraud. I think this is clearly demonstrated by my choice of the term Hispanic. Many writers that I mention here, such as Moraga and Anzaldúa, prefer terms such as Latina and Chicana. Since I feel I am more Americanized, Hispanic seems to best describe the way I see myself now. And I don't feel comfortable calling myself white, either. I am lost in a sea of nothingness when it comes to cultural identity, and though not the prominent theme in my story, it is there. I feel it always there, and I think my readers will too. And this is the reason for my title, taken from the first of my short essays comprising the third narrative thread, *Valley Palm*, integrating a short history of one aspect of the Valley, with that of my relationship to my environment. In many ways this has been my identity reality.

My Place

One thing I feel I need to mention are the differences between my work and that of the Hispanic women mentioned above. Although I share an experience, in some ways a Hispanic experience, a border experience, it is very different than those that have come before me. I am a descendant of those who share their stories. It is through my heritage that our stories are linked, connected. Both of my parents worked in the fields and their experiences pushed me forward in my education. The negative experience my mom had with Spanish in schools influenced her decision to raise monolingual (for the most part), English-speaking children. These experiences are echoed in my own, but my place is a very different one. I feel I am part of a new voice, and a new generation that will recognize my experience, will see it as theirs. It can represent the story of Hispanics that have been Americanized and enjoy the benefits, but are missing something—a

connection to their heritage, a culture, that is warm and rich and inviting. Inviting, but always just out of reach.

This brings me to a final question, one that Richard Rodriguez asks about his work as an author: on which shelf will I be placed? Now that “most bookstores have replaced disciplinary categories with racial or sexual identification” (36), whom will I be grouped with? Latinas? Anglo-Americans? Bisexuals? For in many ways I can be labeled all of these things.

I would be proud to be placed on any one of these shelves, alongside men and women who attempt to not only tell their stories, but share an experience, reveal a truth through them. Narrating in a way that not just recounts events, but illuminates the driving factors behind them. I hope I have paid homage to the many great authors mentioned, while also shaping my place, my identity as an author. I hope that through my struggles with creating literature, through my negative experiences with life, through my journey to find and claim an identity, that I have found what Cisneros found in the creation of her first work, *The House on Mango Street*. My own voice.

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CHAPTER I

MY LIFE IS A CRACK IN THE WALL

I am exactknifing outlet covers. When the person who paints your house doesn't bother to take the covers off or tape them up before he royally screws the place, you have to replace them. Since they are painted onto the wall, you have to use the knife to cut them away around their perimeter or else the paint surrounding them will be pulled off along with them. They have been like this for almost exactly two years, but only now does it matter. Now that the housing market has crashed to an all-time low and, paradoxically, everyone is buying but no one seems to be selling for any decent amount, now that I cannot stand to be in this place for more than a few hours much less live here, I have to worry about blue outlet covers if I have any hope of selling for at least two-thirds what I still owe.

I hired a contractor to paint the walls moonflower. It's a pearlescent neutral I hoped would make the townhouse look brighter, more open, more appealing. When I first moved in with Jesse my creative flair called for ocean blues and bronzed accents, a.k.a the center stripes that ran the perimeter of the main living area. Stripes. Can you believe it? I don't know what I was thinking aside from the fact that it gave the place an interesting semi-Mediterranean feel. Interesting but dark, and pretty stifling. In my defense, I was 21. What do most 21 year-olds know about decorating houses? So, playing the part of a good and decent husband he painted it, stripes and all. But not very well.

That basically describes everything about this house and why I ended up purchasing it. A long string of not-thought-out-very-wells and rushing. It seemed like an easy solution to the living arrangement dilemma at the time. We needed a place to live and I didn't want to rent. I had my eyes set on a very big future and didn't want to throw money away on an apartment where I would see no return. I wanted an investment.

"My mom said Lilly's selling her townhouse," Jesse said. "What do you think?"

It seemed like perfect timing that my sister-in-law-to-be was selling her townhouse right when we were looking. "I don't know if that's a good idea. Isn't it kinda small? And the neighbors are a little too close for comfort. Last time we were over there I could hear the neighbor's vacuum."

"It wouldn't be permanent. And it's a great location. Anything in McAllen is better than Mission, and it's at the center of town. We'd be five minutes away from anything we wanted. Unless you want to rent. I'm okay with that too."

"How long would it take for us to get a loan? Can we even get a loan in time? We only have two months before we'd need to move in."

"They've already moved out. She's just finalizing her loan for the new house they bought and she said she could hook us up with her loan officer, that you should be approved since you're a teacher and would qualify for an FHA."

We went to see it even though we had both been there many times before. I guess I wanted to see if I could really envision it as mine, as ours even for a while. I let his sister give us what should have been a five minute tour but was extended by her detailed descriptions of all the "improvements" they had made on the house. New faucets here, fresh paint there, tiling on the kitchen counters.

It was small; two average-sized bedrooms and only one and a half baths. What would become the kitchen, dining room, and living room together made up one long expanse that stretched, unimpeded, from front door to back. But it was a starter home, one we could afford, and available. We had already been to see Roberta, Lilly's loan officer from Chase bank. After running the standard credit and income checks she informed us that if I would apply as the sole applicant, the one with the good credit and the stable job, I would be approved for the full loan amount.

His sister let us move in before the official date given it wouldn't occur till after our wedding. Especially since we needed time to paint. The mustard colored walls just weren't doing it for me.

"What do you think of blue," I had asked.

The contractor seemed decent. He came at the recommendation of my father and only charged 70 dollars a day. It seemed reasonable, until it took twice as long as anticipated to cover the horrid blue on the walls, not to mention the issue with the damaged molding. A four-day job turned into an eight-day job and all of a sudden my very affordable contractor was out of my budget. The good news is that all the walls in the place are now a uniform pearly pink, proving that in three years my tastes seem to have improved. The bad news is that I have to do all the little touch ups myself. Not very labor intensive, but very time consuming.

You know how they say love is blind? That you never really see a person for who they are until the magic is gone? It's the same with buildings. I guess I had first time homeowner's love. Now that that is over and done with, all the minor flaws that passed as characteristic quirks have become very obnoxious.

“Can you hit the switch out there? This room doesn’t have one.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t have one? You can’t turn on the light from inside?”

“Nope. You have to do it out there.”

Today was moving day. The paint was finally done and dry and we were trying to get settled in before the big day. “Well that doesn’t make any sense,” I said examining the switches next to the front door. “I thought your sister said they had hired an electrician.”

“They did. I guess whatever it was wired like before was even worse than this. We’ll just leave the switch on and use the pulleys.”

We had loaded the room Jesse was in, what had been his niece’s bedroom but was now to be our storage room, with boxes of photos, memorabilia, and clothes to be sorted out later. What we really needed to get to was the furniture. His parents had given us their old set of living room furniture, couches and rocker and end tables, and their old fridge. The couches were pretty light; the fridge was not. It was very heavy and also too big, at least for our place. We discovered too late that it did not fit through the back door, the one closest to the kitchen, and had to drive it around to the front.

“Aren’t you glad you aren’t marrying some prissy princess that is afraid to get her hands dirty,” I asked as I helped him lift the fridge off the bed of the truck.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” he said, backpedaling into the living room.

We shuffled to the kitchen with the fridge at an angle. He held the base, hands waist level, palms up while I gripped the sides and pushed forward from my shoulders. When we reached the counter we lowered it to the floor. We attempted to slide it through the opening between the counter and the wall but it didn’t fit, not at any angle.

“When they redid the counters, adding this tile made it thicker. There’s no way it’s gonna fit,” he said.

“What if we lift it,” I asked.

We took our previous positions, him in front, me behind, and he tilted the top end towards me. I caught it in my palms. Once he had a good grip on the bottom end we pushed together, lifting it over our heads. We carried it through the entrance to the kitchen and maneuvered it around the corner, stopping at the gap between the cupboard and the stove top. All that was left was to slide it into place.

“Hold up,” he told me. “What’s this?”

I peered around the fridge to see what he was talking about. He held a thin copper pipe about a foot long in his hand. It protruded from the wall and would prevent us being able to push the fridge all the way back.

“This is old piping. Probably from when the place was first built. Mid 70’s or so. I’m gonna break it off.”

“Are you sure you should do that,” I asked. “It doesn’t control anything?”

“Doesn’t look like it.” I heard a snap and then, “Shit.”

“What happened?” I looked behind the fridge again and saw water pouring out of the now two-inch spout.

“Shit,” he said again. “Get me something to catch this.”

I ran outside and found an old bucket. When I came back in he was on the phone.

“There was an old pipe where the fridge goes. When we pushed it back into place it snapped and now water is leaking everywhere.”

I put the bucket under the spout and went to look for a towel.

“You’re still covered on the insurance though. It’s still in your name until we get back next week and sign the papers.” He was using his diplomatic voice, but was clenching his jaw. “Well then say it was you. It was an accident. It’s not like it matters who did it. It’s still your house and your insurance needs to cover it.”

When they hung up he was still pissed. Apparently his brother-in-law’s insurance didn’t cover damage caused by people other than him and he was too “righteous” to claim the accident happened otherwise. “Holier-than-thou” was usually the term, had been used since he had a disagreement with Jesse’s dad and had left their church. Things hadn’t been the same in the familial relations since.

“We are not calling a plumber,” he said. “They overcharge.”

And so we went to Home Depot. He tried to find something, anything that resembled the piece of pipe he had snapped off, but when he couldn’t he settled on some rubber tubing and a C-ring.

“That should hold it,” he told me back at the house.

But it didn’t. That same evening we came back to a floor covered in two inches of water. The neighbors had called his sister to tell her their house was flooding as well. We spent the rest of that night sweeping water out the front and back doors. We rented a carpet vac from the nearby H-E-B to suck the water out of the bedrooms.

When we came back from our three-day San Antonio honeymoon things were back to normal. His mom had called a plumber to patch the pipe while we were away. We spent our first day back moving in the rest of our stuff. He was wearing his Spurs jersey; I was sporting the shirt he bought me on the River Walk. A black ribbed tank that had “I ♥ My Husband” spelled out in rhinestones.

Exactknifing takes a certain skill most likely not practiced since kindergarten, a certain steadiness of hand that comes with age and developed motor control, to trace a perfect rectangle around the edge of a cover and the wall. If you let your hand slip you can scratch the paint off the wall in a visible area. If you don't press hard enough, the cover will not come off. Tedious work, (and who knew such a small place would have so many outlets and switches) but easy enough. Until you take shortcuts. I discovered that if you push hard enough the knife begins prying the cover off the wall immediately. I can get the job done quicker. It does cross my mind for a second that maybe there is something to taking your time to do tasks like this, speeding things up might lead to a mistake, but ultimately I opt for the path that will take me to the end result quicker.

I begin moving from room to room, cover to cover rapidly. Finally, I am at the second to last one. The end is in sight. I press my knife behind the cover and halfway down the side I hear a loud snap. I scoot back and take a look at a crack the length of the cover an inch to the left of it. The new outlet cover will not be able to conceal it. I will have to repaint it. It is a fairly small crack near the base of the wall, but feelings of anger, remorse, and stupidity begin to overtake me. Why am I so stubborn? Why am I so dumb?

This is where Juan walks in. He has been helping me undo the damage Jesse left behind. He is great with his hands. He has been drilling, driving, basically everything besides what I was doing. I'm sure he has come to check on my progress but he finds me lying on my back with my hands over my face. I have been contemplating my shortcomings and attempted shortcuts over the years. This crack in the wall has brought on a mental montage of everything that has led me to where I am now.

“What’s wrong,” he asks me. He offers his hands and pulls me to my feet.

“I feel dumb.”

“Dumb? You’re only dumb for feeling dumb,” he says, wrapping me in a tight hug.

“What happened?”

“I messed up,” I say, but it is muffled by laughter. Somehow having to verbalize my error has brought on a fit of laughter.

“Messed up how?”

And then it all comes flooding back. The remorse, the mistakes. “I can’t talk,” I say.

“I’m doing that weird cry-laugh thing again.”

He squeezes me even tighter and I can tell he is smiling though my face is turned away from his. “Just tell me what happened.”

“I cracked the wall. Look.” I take his hand and guide him toward the outlet. “I pressed too hard and it came away from the wall. I guess the pressure it put on the other side caused it to crack.”

“It’s okay. We can fix that up easy.”

“I know but it’s not just that, it’s everything,” I say, hiccupping sniffles coming back. I was so desperate to make it on my own, to get away from my family - I just rushed into everything. I made such a mess.”

“But without that mess you wouldn’t appreciate what you have now,” he says, placing his arm around my waist, his warm lips on mine.

“I know, you keep saying that. I just wish things could be easier.”

He tells me to take a break while he finishes installing the new covers. I take a look around at the rooms that he has finished. I have to say, they look pretty nice, comparatively. I need this time and attention to detail to pay off in a sale. Soon.

“Babe, can you come help me real quick? You missed one over here.”

I grab the knife off the counter and head back to the spare bedroom where he is currently replacing the cover I had cracked the wall with.

“This last one over here is still stuck tight.”

I sit in front of the last outlet in the room and begin tracing its edges with the exacto-knife, slowly and carefully.

CHAPTER II

EXCUSE ME, MS.

“Are you ready?” my father asks.

I know I’m supposed to respond with something like, “Ready as I’ll ever be,” but right now I’m not sure what that even means. That I never have been or will be as ready as I am now? I was very ready 60 days ago, but now that the required time has passed I’m not so sure.

Earlier this morning, my lawyer reviewed all the questions he would ask me before the judge. It began with basic, harmless questions about my name and age, the year I got married. A few questions in, however, I began to feel the juice I drank this morning burning its way up to the back of my throat.

“Are there any children as a product of this marriage?”

“Almost,” I want to say but don’t. I don’t think it counts to have almost had a baby. No matter how much I wanted it, he didn’t. And so we didn’t.

“No,” I respond.

“Are you currently pregnant?”

“No,” I say again, after a long pause.

“Right now we are just in my office, but in the courtroom you need to make sure you answer loud and clear. The judge needs to hear you and see that you are sure about this.”

After rehearsing the same questions with my courtroom voice he asks me one more, a question I have to convince myself to answer with the response I know he wants.

“The dissolution of this marriage is due to irreconcilable differences?”

Really? Is that what you call it? I guess we couldn't reconcile the definition of a marriage, couldn't agree that a marriage is not one person out partying all night while the other is home waiting, worrying, and wondering. If that's what you call it—

“Yes,” I say.

The calm and collected individual I have been presenting myself as the past two months has disappeared. Although Mr. Salinas had assured me the courthouse would be fairly empty on a Thursday morning, the thought of standing before a judge and a roomful of whatever minimal amount of people to publicly declare my personal failure has my muscles twitching in anticipation.

We pass through security quickly. I had left my purse in the car and the officer tells me removing the two pieces of jewelry I am wearing was unnecessary. The night before, lost somewhere between unsure and uncaring, I surfed the web for wardrobe advice. The idea presented on most of the websites I scanned was to look presentable and professional without appearing to be trying to look attractive or promiscuous. Don't dress like a slob or a sex addict. Got it. But there are so many options in between. Luckily, an article on *about.com* discussed some guidelines in detail. Pants are preferable to skirts; I wore black ones. Shirts should not be too tight or cleavage-revealing; I wore a near shapeless, drapy, A-line blouse. Stilettos are for strippers; I wore flats. Hair should not call for attention; I pulled mine back. No outrageous jewelry; only a bracelet and my ever-present nose stud adorned my body.

My father and I decide to sit on a bench in front of the elevators on the first floor, right next to the entrance to the 275th district court where my lawyer told us to wait. My dad attempts to make small talk, commenting on the absurdities of legal language. The bulletin behind us has

postings on delinquent hearings. “The State of Texas vs. 2006 Chevrolet Suburban” and “The State of Texas vs. Two Horses and One Goat.” We laugh a little too hard at the thought of the specified vehicle and animals actually appearing in court. Once that conversation dies out we resort to people-watching. We are in a prime location for the sport.

An array of people from every part of the spectrum seem to have some sort of legal dealings today. Women dressed in heels so high they can hardly walk in them and outfits that look like they were worn the night before hold children to a chest, balance them on a hip, or drag them along by one arm as they wobble towards the elevators. Men in ill-fitting suits and tacky ties greet them in a loud and overfriendly manner and hold doors for them, taking just a split second too long in following after. Other women in power suits take the stairs as opposed to waiting or being waited on. Some men stop to chat with everyone in the room: the lawyers, the clerks, the marshals—my father. It seems that ever since my father accepted the prominent position he holds in the Rio Grande Valley’s education system, everyone has a favor to ask, a comment to make, a pat on the back to give. He should be used to it, but it still can catch us off guard. Like the time a man stopped us on our way into a church service to complain about the lunches at his kid’s school. I am glad he doesn’t feel the need to explain why he is here. Or that I am with him. With all the coming and going and brown-nosing around me, all the women that feel this place is a runway or a breeding ground, I am able to fade into the background. Thank you, Google.

“This should be quick and smooth,” Mr. Salinas, my lawyer, says when he arrives 40 minutes later. “I checked the court files and he didn’t respond, which means there is almost a 100% guarantee that he will not be here today.”

“Good,” my dad says.

“Very good,” Mr. Salinas says. “That means the divorce will go through uncontested and everything will be allotted as we planned.”

“Now how do we go about getting him out of the house?” my dad asked.

“You start with a letter of eviction. You give him about 48 hours to get up and out. If he doesn’t respond you can wait, try another letter, or get legal. With that warning and a copy of the divorce decree, you can get the Sheriff to forcibly remove him. I’ve seen it done before. They go in there, knock the door down, cuff him, and throw him out on the street along with all his belongings. It’s rather entertaining.”

I cringe but my dad laughs out loud.

“I’ll bet,” my dad says, pausing just long enough to get the words in. “That would be something to see.”

I had almost gotten used to the way they talked as if I wasn’t there. Most of the decisions had been made that way. I figured they knew what was best. I was the one that decided to marry him, after all. Even after everything though, I couldn’t quite stomach the image of him being hogtied and thrown out into the street. I wanted him out of my house, that was for sure. Although I had been the one to move out after the split, I had still been paying the rent and the electricity while he lounged off the fruits of my labor. The mortgage was in my name, he couldn’t afford the payments, so the solution seemed simple enough. He would move out and I would sell. There was no way I was going to continue to support him. Refusing to fund his boozing and lethargic lifestyle was a necessity, but publicly humiliating him? I wasn’t as comfortable with that.

The way everything was panning out wasn’t looking so hot for me. I was getting most of the “assets”, a mortgaged townhouse, my car (a gift from my father), a timeshare we still owe

most of the value on, along with all of the debts. They seemed to think there was no use arguing to split it when he would not pay and it would affect my credit. From the looks of his actions the last 60 days, it looked like they were right. The amount of debt I am in seems pretty humiliating to me.

As we sit in the court room waiting for the judge to arrive, I remember a line from a romantic comedy my soon-to-be ex and I watched together three months ago. “Do you know how humiliating it is to get divorced by yourself?” But maybe it really is better this way. I didn’t need him begging me to stop this before it was too late, or showing me how much he didn’t care. Getting divorced by yourself, I guess there are worse things. I try to come up with something. Getting married by yourself? I think about this. About feeling this alone on the day that’s supposed to be the happiest of your life. I imagine myself trying to convince the pastor that I’m in it for the both of us. But that wouldn’t really work; you are not allowed to do that. I guess it’s just plain old getting stood up. You are, however, allowed to get divorced alone. And here I am.

The judge finally walks in and we rise. The room is much smaller and much less formal than I imagined. “It’s not like they show it on TV,” my lawyer kept telling me in our meetings. I heard him every time but I guess you really don’t realize how different it is until you are there.

It happens just like he said it would. The judge asks if there are any cases that have any pertinent changes. Mr. Salinas explains to the judge that he has an uncontested divorce case. The judge asks if his client is present. This is my moment. He waves me up beside him. After I am sworn in he asks me all the questions he said he would and I answer just as practiced. I think the first question the judge asks is if I understand English. The last question he asks is if I am sure I want this divorce. I say yes. He signs and we are done.

“How do you feel?” my dad asks me as soon as we exit the building.

“Fine,” is my response. Again I do not know what this really means. Am I fine? How do I feel? What do I feel? Nothing. The truth is I feel no different than when we had walked in there a little over an hour ago. Am I supposed to feel something?

As the day passes it seems to be the most popular phrase on everyone’s lips. “How do you feel?” That and, “Are you doing okay?”, which makes me wonder if there is something wrong with me. Was I supposed to experience some grand catharsis as I exited that courtroom? Was I supposed to collapse in tears of joy or pain?

When I return to work the next day, I begin to feel like I am marked somehow by society. Am I supposed to get a scarlet ‘A’ and emblazon it on my breast? I am reminded by my coworkers, however, that this is not really necessary. It has already been done for me, at least on paper. According to the version of English grammar that the secretaries and parent volunteers in the front office adhere to, I must now refer to myself as a Ms. My marital status will be indicated by that addressor. These women decorate the teacher’s lounge and workroom for each holiday during the school year. Valentine’s Day being the most recent, hearts and cupids decorate the walls and cupboards that greet me each day as I get my morning coffee. I glance around at the red and pink laminated hearts, one designated for each teacher or administrator at our campus. There is one for Miss Gutierrez, Mrs. Saenz, Miss Humrichouse, Mrs. Aguilar – Ms. King. Why is it that only women get the stigma of the variations in title? I can’t help but notice that all the male hearts have a Mr., despite what I know of certain personal histories. Man gets to be Mister regardless, while a woman has to juggle Miss, Mrs. and Ms. depending on whether or not there is a man in her life and the reason for her manlessness.

So divorced and left with all the bills I had paid for all along anyway, the only thing that has changed is that I am Melissa King again, only now with a Ms. instead of Miss. And that people all around me compulsively feel the need to check if I am okay. And I live with my dad again. He keeps telling me that now that he has taken me back he is never giving me away again.

CHAPTER III

BLOOD — MORE VISCOUS THAN WATER

My older sister is getting married in a couple of months. I'm really happy for her. And I don't mind helping her with everything she needs. Except for the fact that the dissolution of my own marriage to Jesse has only recently become finalized, and people feel the need to compare her upcoming wedding to my now inconsequential one.

We have come to get fitted for our dresses at Alfred Angelo, one of two chain bridal stores in the Valley. I have been dreading it all week but know I have to be here. She helped me with everything, although one could argue it doesn't really matter now, and I need to do the same for her. So here I am, assuring her that the purple she chose is not too purple. That having varying shades of purple will still look unified under the purple theme. That I will wear whichever color no one else wants so she won't have to hear them complaining. And then, as we wait in line to be measured, the matron of honor, who was also at my wedding, and, as best friend of the bride, has the entire insider's info to my recent proceedings, begins a line of questioning about it.

“Your color was blue, right? That was so pretty.”

Fortunately, she also has the grace to answer her own question. I move towards the closest rack of dresses and become absorbed in the detailed beading on a fuchsia cocktail dress.

“What kind of dresses did your bridesmaids wear?” Now another bridesmaid is in on it. She is a friend of the groom and probably doesn’t know better. This doesn’t stop me from wanting to punch her in the face.

I answer and pretend like it doesn’t bother me, moving on to the shoe display that is a little further away. I manage to make it to the front of the line with only one more reference to my Grecian-themed wedding and no acts of violence on my part only to find that bridal sizing is not the same as normal sizing. Although I have been working hard on my figure over the last year and have lost around forty pounds, they say I need a size 10 dress. You’d think that on what is supposed to be the happiest day of a girl’s life, myself excluded, they’d want to make a girl feel better about herself, not worse.

“But you’ll be able to wear it again and again after,” the sales girl is telling me. The classic bridesmaid’s dress pitch. I grit my teeth, order the 10, and head home to tackle my next duty.

As bridesmaid and sister with the technologically-inclined boyfriend (Juan), I have been volunteered to make a slideshow for her first bridal shower. I have already gone through a lot of my photos while cleaning out the spare bedroom in the townhouse. Those boxes we had placed temporarily in that room that had once held the potential to fulfill so many dreams never moved out.

Jesse had installed some wall hooks to hold his guitars a few months after we moved in. “They take up less space that way,” he had said, but I know he had hopes of turning it into a music room. But after he lost his gig as a permanent substitute and stopped giving guitar lessons at the Boys and Girls club we really didn’t have any extra money to invest in the equipment necessary to make that a reality. I spoke of the possibility of making it a library. All my books

were already in there anyway. But what I really wanted it to be was a nursery. I asked him several times but was always met with the same response. “I don’t think we’re ready.” We weren’t very careful as far as protection was concerned. I was on the pill but wasn’t good at remembering to take it. But the tests were always negative. That room was supposed to become something inhabited, useful, but time passed and the only change was the extra dust collecting on the boxes.

I had already thrown out all the photos of Jesse. The ones of the honeymoon were the hardest. Immediately after our wedding we had gone to San Antonio. I had planned and paid for the trip months in advance. Just a couple of nights at a hotel on the river and tickets to see the Spurs. The real trip was to come later in the summer. My dad gifted us a European cruise. A trip to Greece to match our theme. In these photos he was posing in front of so many beautiful things—pretending to be pushing over the Leaning Tower of Pisa, pretending to be holding up the Acropolis, pointing to the gonads of a statue in Pompeii—some of them with me. But they all went in the trash. It was better that way.

I tried for some type of organization of the rest, but a big cardboard box doesn’t give you many options. I sift through them again now, looking for the whimsical, sentimental, and romantic.

I look through my baby album first. This is where I will find the best ones of us at a young age, before our family slowly started falling apart. As I open the book a misplaced photo falls onto my lap. It is one that has been pulled out on many occasions. Its image has been ingrained in my head, a snapshot of my childhood. It is one of my strongest, earliest memories.

Kiki and I are sitting on a pale blue corduroy-textured recliner. She is five and I am three. My hair is a mess, a mini amber afro with a bow stuck precariously on one side (My mother is on bed rest; a third sister has just been born. We like to visit them in their dim sanctuary, stare in wonder at her foreign, emerald eyes. “Stephanie,” we said when they asked if we would name her. Stephanie, our ballet teacher at the time, is beautiful.). My sister’s hair is curly as well but longer, darker and better maintained. Hers, also held by a bow, is half-up—half-down. We are wearing matching white floral print dresses, frilly socks, and patent leather Mary Janes. The identical look my mother enforced lasted for several years before my sister began to complain. People thought we were twins; at times we almost convinced ourselves we were. We laugh now about how we used to think if we traded glasses we could trade places. And all the ways I used to trick her into wearing the same outfits as me. Her laughter at this, though, still sounds a little bitter.

We are both leaning forward, into the camera, although me a little more so. It’s almost like I am already trying to escape the protective arm she has around me, the shelter I will keep trying to avoid for so many years after. The uneven balance of our love and trust; her secrets always kept, mine always told. *I just want what’s best for you.*

“I know you told dad,” I say. “Why do I trust you with anything?”

“I’m only trying to help. He’s not good for you,” she tells me.

“Maybe I should do the same.” *I found your letter. I know.*

Silent in the corner, two green eyes witness this familiar battle. This struggle of wills that I know I can’t win.

I won’t, I never do. You can have your perfect reputation. I still know.

“But maybe if you had told just once I wouldn’t be where I am now,” she will tell me one day.

Kiki and I are waving our outer (free) arms at my father, behind the camera. Each calling the eye’s focus in our own way. The untainted smiles on our faces, the contentedness at being two that was already at its end. A flash of disillusionment reflected in our toasted honey eyes (or maybe only in mine, now). We have struggled, but in this moment we are forever this inseparable pair.

As I continue searching I remember an essay she wrote a while back, when she was still in high school. I wish I had saved it. It had been in the storage room but unfortunately ended up in one of the boxes containing most of his stuff, so it was gone. Taken along with anything of value that could be pawned or sold.

I asked her about it after I realized it was gone. An assignment to record what she did the night before a major paper was due. I guess she was supposed to be preparing, but I came crying to her door. I remember that night. We didn’t talk much. She tried to prompt me to tell her what was wrong, I gave only vague answers. I had learned.

“Why are people so dumb,” I ask. *Aaron just wants me for my body*, but I can’t say that out loud. I really just wanted to be held. And that is what she did. For hours. Listening. To what I couldn’t say.

I only got the chance to read it once before losing track of it, but the first few lines still flash in my mind.

Melissa, her name flows from your lips like water. If only she knew how beautiful she is.

If only—

There seems to be no end to the shots of me and my older sister together. We had just clicked from the very beginning. If you could find your soul mate in your sister, I would have sworn she was it. The ones with all three of us, however, seem to be more scarce. It's not that we didn't love Stephie, or that we didn't try (at least most of the time) to include her. It was just always different.

I'm not even sure what I'm doing anymore. Everything looks different on film from what I remember. I feel the need to distribute the screen time evenly. I start back at the beginning.

I am caught crawling across the carpet, sock in mouth. My dad's again; always my dad's. Light pink terrycloth footie pajamas help me gain traction. After capturing just how little hair is covering my scalp (my aunt called me Elmer Fudd till I was a year old) my mom gets down to my level, gets my attention. My dark eyes open in wonder at the bright flash of light.

She tells me I was obsessed with my dad from day one. I couldn't wait for him to get home. She tells me I would ask for him and sometimes I would cry. Sometimes I would kick and scream and punch as she held me.

I had a good internal clock from the beginning. Followed a regular feeding schedule, would sleep through most of the night. Not like Kiki. At 8 o'clock every day, no matter where I was, I would shut down. And every day at five I was by the door, ready and waiting to leap at my daddy's feet.

You were so cute, Mom tells me. But sometimes I wish it could have been me coming home.

“Daddy, am I sexy,” I hear myself asking as I pose one hand behind my head, one resting on jutted out hip. I don’t know where I picked up that word, but when I asked him he said it meant pretty. He had to say yes after that. I was three then, but already wondering why my hair wasn’t red. I had freckles like the little redheaded girls on TV. But mostly it was for Jessica Rabbit. “I’m gonna look like that when I grow up,” I would say.

A few years later I strike the same pose for the camera my sister is holding. A Barbie camera, one of her birthday presents. I am oblivious to the fact that I have already entered my awkward phase. Large round glasses take up the middle third of my oval face. My hair is pulled back in a ponytail, my attempt to tame the wild waves. But flyaway curls frame my face. “Why didn’t you comb my hair?” I ask my mom every time I see the photos that capture me during those years. “You wanted to do it yourself,” is what she always tells me.

The jean jacket I’m sporting, probably Kiki’s given the sleeves are rolled up twice, is open, revealing the neon pink and electric blue bikini top. The white knee-length jean shorts are pulled up past my bellybutton and rolled up at the bottom forming a thick cuff. So early nineties. Later I will do a wardrobe change, a floral sundress, to pose with my boyfriend. Donatello, Kiki’s favorite Ninja Turtle, plays the part. The piñata my mom purchased for our latest party is the perfect size. Arms around his shoulders I give my left leg a little kick backwards as I plant a kiss on the too white rectangular teeth that have been plastered on his face in lieu of a mouth.

It’s our birthday. Officially mine I think, April 25th. Kiki’s is the day after. I was born one day before two years later. She’s shared her party ever since. Both wearing bubble gum pink puff dresses, rosettes at the waist, lace at the collar, we stand on chairs to be tall enough to

be pictured behind our cake. A rectangle frosted to match our outfits. “Happy Birthday, Elizabeth & Melissa!”

When Stephe arrived a year later, two weeks after our joint celebration, it would be judged close enough to add just one more to these birthday events. It would be easier on the family. Our shared cake became three individual ones: chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla. Each choice, it seems now, reflected in our color. All of us inherited my dad’s natural curl. Like our skin color, it seemed to follow birth order. Kiki had my mom’s chocolate skin and dark, tight curls. Sometimes my mom even called her chocolate, or negra. I, the middle child, was a blended caramel complexion, and had hair slightly less curly than my sister’s. And Stephe, she got my dad’s white skin (she is also the only one with colored eyes) and light wavy locks. Can you guess what my mom called her?

Other choices were more reflective of our personalities. We loved watching *The Muppet Babies*. Kiki was Kermit, I was Miss Piggy, Stephe was Animal. And later when we hit the tomboy phase, began watching sports with my dad (basketball and usually the Chicago Bulls) we had our favorite players. For Kiki it was Scottie Pippin, for me, Michael Jordan (I still have his jersey), and for Stephe, Dennis Rodman.

We tend to do our own birthday things now, though Kiki and I will usually still share a joint lunch or dinner (it’s still easier on the family). Well two—one with my mom and one with my dad. This year Stephe had a BBQ. She and my dad made a feast to christen the new pit. Kiki and I were invited and we went to eat, to chat for a while, both of us with our men (our shields) in tow. Things have never been the same. Since the divorce. Since N.

It's Christmas. We are wearing our Christmas dresses—still in the matching phase. Red, green and white plaid, bib front, long sleeved, cuffed at the wrist. (These will become very hot later in the day as Christmas in the Valley can be just as warm as any other holiday.) We are ready to head to Harlingen to spend Christmas Day with the Kings. My parents had the holiday schedules all worked out. Every year it was Christmas Eve with the Rangels, my mom's family, and Christmas Day with the Kings. The years we hosted at our house, the Rangels were welcome too. It doesn't work like that anymore.

Christmas Eve Day, as we called it, was always very busy. My father would let the smell of his holiday concoctions rouse his three little sous chefs. Each year he made either the Christmas turkey or Christmas ham. Although they were always good they were never quite the same as the year before. He made his own gravy and glaze from scratch and he added ingredients by instinct, by taste. We were in charge of stirring, chopping, mixing. He made his own stuffing and fruit salad as well. Sometimes one or two of us would abandon the kitchen for my mother's bedroom, where she would be wrapping presents. Kiki has since taken over this job; she is a gift-wrapping queen.

That night we would open most of our presents at my Aunt Euna's house. We would eat the mix of the traditional holiday meal, a turkey that my father cooked, a ham made by my aunt, the usual trimmings, along with the orange rice and tamales my Aunt Liz would bring. She was from Guadalajara and always made sure to bring something that would remind her of home. After we ate, before we were allowed to open presents, we would read the Christmas story and sing some carols. My grandpa, Paca, as Kiki had dubbed him when she was two, would read the nativity scene from the book of Matthew. When we were small he would read it in English and

only during prayer would he revert to his native Spanish. But as we got older, as the diabetes kicked in and his eyesight began leaving him, he began to rely more on memory. We had Christmas in Spanish until Kiki had to take over. He relinquished his role to the granddaughter that was following in his footsteps, was on her way to becoming an ordained pastor as well.

Christmas at the Kings was an all-day affair. The cousins, as we called them, were three as well. Three boys. Boys that loved to play outside. With them we learned the rules of street hockey, horse, secret tree houses until it was time to eat. Here, grandpa, or Papa King as the cousins taught us to call him, would read the Christmas story (always in English) and play Santa. Presents from Santa are wrapped in red, the rest in the Sunday comics. The stockings Mom Mom hangs on the fire place (a small artificial one used to heat the small home) are passed out right before we leave. We dig through the oranges and Dollar Store toys to get to the bag of Mexican candy at the very bottom.

Papa at Christmas is what I think of the night they called to tell us he had passed on. I am in high school now but I still feel like the little girl that was just getting to know him. His funeral was one of the few times all ten of his sons and daughters and all of their children were together in one place. Several days were dedicated to his memory. We would all gather together in the church where the service would be held, aunts and uncles sharing stories of the grandpa I hardly knew, cousins getting to know each other again or for the first time.

I couldn't help but notice how short me and my sisters were in stature, how thick of frame, compared to most of our cousins. While Stephie ran off with Bethany, one of our cousins who shared her eyes, Kiki and I lagged behind. When we overheard ourselves being called the brown ones, we spent the rest of the time side by side—noses in a book.

My mom, my chaperone at all school functions and “dates” I wasn’t allowed to have yet, stands next to me in the piano room, in front of the baby grand purchased for Kiki on her 16th birthday. Arms around each other, cheek to cheek. Same smile, same freckles, same eyes. She even let me borrow her eyeliner for this occasion, the band banquet held at the end of the year. The year we won the state competition.

“Are you sisters?” people ask us everywhere we go. My mom laughs her laugh as she corrects them, as they tell her she’s too young to have a daughter my age.

I find a photo of three pairs of feet digging into the sand. We are at the beach. It was the summer just after my high school graduation. Kiki was in college, Stephie had just finished freshman year. It is the last time we all got together voluntarily to do something like this, before the big rift. Our first time traveling there alone, we got lost on the way and had to buy a map. When I finally directed us back on course we were frustrated but determined to make it work.

We get to the beach and realize we actually do want to get into the water, though we didn’t bring suits. We buy \$10 bottoms at the local Wal-Mart and take turns taking pictures, two at a time. Kiki tells me and Stephie to lie on our bellies, side by side. Chins in palms, feet up and crossed at the ankle we are all smiles. We look happy. That’s what people want to see, right?

We were girls, so it’s not like we beat up on each other or were unusually cruel, but Stephie still sees herself as a victim to our solidarity. What can I say? Three’s a crowd. I know

it happened. It's hard enough juggling two wills and opinions, let alone adding one very loud, firm, uncompromising extra.

But we had our moments. My older sister and I were sometimes on the outs, and Stephie had her choice in alliances. I was never sure if she had an alternating schedule or if it actually came down to which side of the issue she agreed with, but it always ended up about equal. At least that's what I remember. Kiki and Stephie seem to feel I was always the middle man, the go between. Maybe I was. All I wanted was for us to get along, not to fight, though that hardly ever worked out.

We had our common interests, Stephie and I, and we were closer in age than her and Kiki, but there always seemed to be something between us. My role with Kiki was clear cut from the very beginning. I don't know if I actually remember this or have seen the home videos and heard the stories enough times to convince myself I do. But Kiki was the boss. She had the idea to turn the box Stephie's baby swing came in into a plane, so naturally she was the pilot and I had to flap the wings. And every Christmas and birthday for a few years, after thanking the person for my gift, I'd take it straight to Kiki and see if she wanted to play with it. These aren't bad memories. She was bossy, forceful, but she always had my best interest at heart. Her insistence that I learn how to read because she knew how resulted in my ability to memorize long lengths of texts and eventually, with my dad's help, my mastery of the actual skill.

With Stephie it was different. She wasn't the willing little sister. And I wasn't about to let the baby tell me what to do. (She already got her way whenever parents were involved.) This clash of wills, this competition, manifested itself in many ways. The back and forth was littered with flashes of loyalty (the only fight I ever got into in high school was for her), but ended in two sisters vying for one heart. Blood may be thicker than water, but this? Viscous.

CHAPTER IV

VALLEY PALM

We were on our way back from the beach when I asked my dad about the palm trees. I liked asking him questions. He always had an answer. And a story.

Every time we had a road trip, usually to Harlingen to visit the cousins and my grandpa's church, he had a story for us. We had a suburban, blue with gold stripes, and would fold up the middle seat so we could lie down if we got sleepy. That didn't usually happen to me until the way home. On the way over I would sit on the edge of the folded seat with my arm around my dad's headrest. Sometimes he would warn me that sitting there wasn't safe, but once he got talking he forgot all about the seatbelt rule.

I learned a lot about my dad this way. And myself. How I was half German, a quarter Scottish, and a quarter English. On my dad's side. Momma made sure we didn't forget her Mexican contribution. Then daddy pointed out how there was probably some Native American in there too. I learned that he was actually born in Delaware and moved down to Rio Hondo when he was five years old because his daddy wanted to start a church and do missionary work for the people of Mexico. How my grandpa, and later he, had taught himself Spanish so he could communicate, an important skill my dad had somehow forgotten to pass on to his own children. (Here momma didn't interrupt. This part was her fault too.) How there wasn't always money with a church salary and ten kids but they made do. With donations. Or money made from working in the fields. My sisters and I remember this story best because of Kiki's Bugs Bunny

doll. It was one of those dolls that would talk when you would squeeze its belly and went with us on every trip. We laughed when he would ask us, “What’s up, Doc?” But one of his other phrases was, “Now wait just a cotton pickin’ minute.” Every time he said that one Kiki would cry. And then I would cry and daddy would tell us that it was okay. It wasn’t so bad because he was used to working hard. Was still working hard so we would never have to.

During our two-hour trip to the beach the stories were different. Like the one he would tell us as we crossed the Santa Isabella causeway, the bridge linking Port Isabel to South Padre Island. Every time we had to drive over that long stretch of water we would get a little uneasy. I asked how he knew we wouldn’t fall over the edge. Or that the bridge wouldn’t collapse beneath us, plunging us car and all beneath the salty waves. I could already feel the brine at my feet as the suburban filled up with water. How would we get out? And once we did, what if there were sharks? But he would always comfort me with the story of how the bridge was made, the fact that he had been one to help set the huge pillars in place in the sand underwater. He had worked as a part-time construction worker/diver during college to make money. His daddy couldn’t pay for him to go like he was gonna do for us.

But this time I wanted to know about the palm trees. There were so many of them and they were everywhere. At the beach and home. I asked him how they were able to grow both in the dirt and the sand. How they knew to grow all in a row like that along the buildings and streets.

He laughed. “They don’t, sweetie. People planted them there.”

He went into the story of how people wanted to attract visitors to the Valley. They wanted to give it a more exotic look, a traveler’s appeal. While there are two types of palm trees native to the Valley, this wasn’t enough. They imported many exotic varieties and planted them

all over. Along the expressway, at the entrances to most cities, along the beach, lining the old highway leading to the border.

But a few years before I was born, in 1983, there was a big freeze (in 2010 still the biggest freeze to date), something so rare in our mild climate it wasn't anticipated. A lot of plants died, including these imported palms. They weren't as strong as the Valley breeds. This is when the Valley went native and decided that all the species planted to replace the destroyed trees would be from here. But there are still people who have exotic palms, even some which survived the freeze.

"How can you tell the difference?" I asked.

"Most people can't."

The rest of the way home I examined the palm trees that got bigger and bigger until they streaked past my window. How nice and natural they looked, clumped in twos and threes along the highway, on traffic islands, in most yards. Most were tall, long brown trunks slanting to the right or left, topped by a brilliant green fan of leaves. Some were short. Their trunks were just as thick as the tall kind, their foliage just as big from what I could tell, but they looked as if they had chosen to grow down instead of up, as if hiding the rest of their long slanting trunk underground. Regardless of shape or size, I couldn't tell. Couldn't tell which were the ones that belonged. To me, they all did. Had been here as long as I could remember.

This story stayed with me for years after. I wasn't surprised when I learned that there were many cross-pollinations of the foreign and domestic palms. A combination of exotic appeal and native strength. But I still wonder about the palms that survived the freeze. The ones that didn't belong but held on anyway. I've always felt that their story was my story. That of a stranger. Not native, but home.

CHAPTER V

DISHES

I remember the first time I went back, after the divorce, after my dad had delivered the papers saying Jesse needed to move out. I hadn't seen him since the day I left, and even then I didn't really say good bye. But he knew. Or else I wouldn't have gotten all those calls; he wouldn't have left all those messages.

“You better call me back. You better come back.”

And even now I couldn't come alone. It wasn't a good idea. Juan was with me and he circled the multiplex twice before parking in the back carport. We unloaded the large Tupperware containers from the trunk of my jeep, the ones my dad had bought me the first time we had come for my basic essentials: my clothes and my books. And my dog Lucky. He was staying with me at my dad's until I could find a better place for him. Juan carried the containers into the house while I called my mom. She had said she would come help as well and I was making sure that was still going to happen. It was the reason I had declined my dad's offer for assistance.

The first thing that hit me as I entered the townhouse was the smell, and the emptiness. Almost everything was gone. The couches, the dining room table, the fridge, the stove. I quickly surveyed the rest of the house. In the master bedroom the dresser with the mirror was still there, too heavy to carry out quickly I guess. And the bed frame, the one I had brought from my dad's house when we first moved in. But in the place of the Sealy mattress we had chosen at

Lack's was the inflatable air mattress that had been in the living room. The one we actually slept on. The armoire and night table were gone as well. All of the things from Lack's, the loan I was so proud to have just paid off after a year of work, gone. Even though the court awarded them to me. Even though my dad made sure to point that out when he delivered the news.

The spare bedroom was empty, but it had always been that way. The only things left were my boxes of pictures. The guitars were all gone. Even the pink Daisy Rock electric he had bought for me. That was fine. I walked back out into the living room, empty except for the two tall, black bookshelves we had used to store DVDs. Those were gone, even the ones of mine he had complained about having to watch. The only things that sat on the shelves were the mementos saved from our wedding. Across from them our wedding portrait still hung on the wall adjacent to the front door. I'd deal with that later.

As I walked back to the kitchen the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Juan said. We both knew it was my mom. They said their hellos and I think she said something to me as well, but I was distracted.

"What the hell is this?" I had found the smell. The kitchen sink was filled with every dish in the house, all dirty. There were pools of water in some of the larger ones. All of them dusted in an almost white crust, like bleu cheese.

"What are we doing with this stuff," my mom asked. She was behind me now, ready to work.

"We are going to throw it out," I told her. "We brought trash bags, right?"

"Let me go get them," Juan said.

"Some of those dishes are good. I can help you wash them."

"I don't want them."

“We could sell them. Your sister is having a garage sale for the church.”

“Not this. This is disgusting. There is no way I am washing these dishes and you aren’t going to either.”

I held my breath and tried not to gag as I poked around in the sink. The smell alone was enough to turn anyone green, as if he had taken the big dumpster from outside and tried to force its contents down the disposal we didn’t have. But I couldn’t keep the smile off my face when I noticed the casserole dish at the bottom containing the remnants of a lasagna I had made before I moved out. Almost three months ago. I hadn’t really planned out my departure, but the dishes wouldn’t have made my list anyway.

I was going to have to take out the trash. It wouldn’t take long for the fish I threw out to begin putrefaction. And broccoli was worse. I knew better than to make it but I made it anyway. A few hours ago. When Jesse was still answering. Still promising to come home. Now that it was sending me straight to voicemail I was done.

“Have you ever thought that maybe you’re the reason I don’t come home?” he had asked me.

“How can you say that? What do you mean?”

“Listen to you. And look at our house.”

It wasn’t in the most presentable condition. We had both been neglecting it lately. I found it hard to balance housework with my teaching job. There was always work to bring home. And then there were my night classes as well. I had started working towards a Master’s in Creative Writing the summer after our wedding. One professor I had, Professor Williamson, held the opinion that every student at UTPA, probably the entire Valley, was underread and he

used his class, Form and Theory of the Novel, as his attempt to correct this. Every week a different novel to read, The Arabian Nights, Jude the Obscure. I was always behind on either my reading or my grading. And to be honest, I didn't really like cleaning. Especially doing the dishes. And I figured since I was the one doing most of the cooking it was only fair for him to handle the clean up. But that only lasted about a month. Then everything dealing with upkeep of the house seemed to be my territory. His cleaning sprees were reserved for those nights he came home too drunk to sleep. I never understood how that worked but it seemed to be his way of saying sorry.

And so I had spent the last few hours trying to be a good wife. At least what he said he wanted a good wife to be this time. I had done three loads of laundry, made the bed, thrown out all the trash – the water bottles and paper plates littered throughout the house. I even considered giving Lucky, our pit bull, a bath, but settled on spraying him with his puppy cologne. The dishes were saved for last and I was just about done with those.

All this was before he turned his phone off. Before I got mad. Sure he worked a couple of nights a week, but what about the rest of the time. That was spent either on the couch or in a bar. The last part I only gleaned from the intercepted bank statements. He never admitted to where he'd been unless I already knew.

But I wasn't going to let him tell me I didn't know how to do my job. Not again. And so I finished the last dish and wiped down the counters, even took out the trash before heading to bed. Well, mattress.

I thought about calling Sara. Asking what the hell to do now. I had tried to follow her advice about setting boundaries, limitations. Apparently my grown husband was just as rebellious, if not more so, as her son Eddie. But it was already 1:00 a.m. Too late to call, but he

wouldn't be home for another few hours or so by the looks of it. I switched on the T.V. in the living room and settled onto the mattress, Lucky right next to me. He had gotten used to sleeping with me most nights. Jesse said Lucky was spoiled, but what did he expect? I hated sleeping alone. I usually watched reruns of *Everybody Loves Raymond* or *The Nanny*. Maybe *George Lopez*, depending on the night. I had seen this episode of Raymond a million times. The one where Ray, who doesn't know how to balance a check book, screws up their finances and their electricity ends up getting shut off. I lowered the volume to background level, also conscious of neighbors, and began to read. This week I had been assigned *The Suffering of Young Werther*. Only about 100 pages. This was my chance to get ahead.

The sound of oversized tires spinning loose gravel woke me up. It sounded like someone was popping bubble wrap. I hated those tires and that jeep. He had argued that it would be more economical than the Durango. It was manual transmission. I didn't see how much that could counteract the size of those tires. I had to use a step to get in and they always left a black streak right below the back pocket of my jeans on the way out.

The whine of electric guitars and a low, looming voice confirmed his arrival. He was the only one I knew who listened to Type O Negative. I only knew of them because of him. It seemed to be his band of choice on nights like this. *Am I good enough*, he crooned. *Am I good enough for you?*

The music ended abruptly and I sat up, muted the TV. He hated Fran's voice. I rushed Lucky to his kennel, it was always better that way, and went back to the mattress. After the familiar jingling of keys at the knob, he stumbled through the doorway, almost tripping on the welcome mat. "Shit," he said as he continued into the house, moving towards the kitchen, and dropped his keys on the counter. Resting his hand beside them for a moment, he steadied

himself. The shoulder cap tattoos on both arms were exposed; the large, Celtic designs, protruded from the sleeveless black tee he wore when he wanted to look tough. I had helped design and taken him to get all five of his tattoos, all gifts from me. On our one month anniversary we had each gotten the other's name carved onto our right wrist. In Arabic, because it looked cooler, he said. Or maybe so it couldn't be read.

I wasn't trying to hide the fact that I was awake. I just didn't know what to say. All the things I was dying to ask never led anywhere. No where good.

"Where were you," I finally asked. That couldn't be right.

"It sure stinks in here," he said.

"What are you talking about? I cleaned. I cleaned everything."

"It doesn't look like you did a very good job."

He made his way to the couch right next to me, bringing with him the smell of stale urine and old ash.

"What's wrong with you," I asked him.

He removed his belt and his shirt, discarding them on the arm of the sofa and lay down on the beige cushions. "I'm screwed up, okay," he said. "I'm fucked."

"You're fucked? How do you think I feel? Why do you turn off your phone? Why don't you answer me?"

"Do you know how annoying you sound right now? I can't even stand your voice. And then you want me to answer you. Jesus."

"What the fuck, Jesse? What the fuck kind of answer is that? I'm sick of your shit already."

"Keep it up. Keep talking to me like that and I'll walk right back out that door."

“You really wanna do that? You wanna play that? I can leave too you know. I can leave right now. Then you can see how it feels to be left wondering.”

And then he looked at me with that face. That face he had given me when I had told him I wasn't sure I believed in God anymore. “So you're gonna walk out. You're gonna be like your mother?”

“Don't you dare start with that shit, Jesse.”

“You are. You're just like her. You even sound like her.”

“You're such a fucking ass. A fucking loser. Everybody was right. They said you'd never amount to anything. What have you done?”

“I'm not the one trying to prove myself to my daddy. I'm fine with what I've got.”

“And what's that? Aside from me, nothing. At least I've graduated. And I'm about to do it again.”

“And what do those things mean in the real world? You're still here, with me. Crazy and insecure. On my case all the time.”

“You'd have to be here all the time for me to be on your case all the time. All it will take is one call to my dad. His friend's a lawyer. I can be out of here, quick.”

“You know you can't leave me, right? You can't ever leave. After everything we've been through. Everything you've done. No one else would put up with that shit. Not like I did.”

“I can't do this anymore. I can't. Not like this. I'm tired,” I said, wiping my eyes and turning away.

“I'm just no good, alright,” he said. “I feel like an Oreo cookie. The middle scraped out, the ends squashed back together. I'm no good for you.”

“So where does that leave me?”

“You deserve someone better. You should’ve listened to your parents, to everyone.”

“So now you’re just gonna prove them right. You’re not even gonna try?”

“I don’t know what else you want me to say. At least I’m being honest. I’m better alone. I’m not happy like this. My life-”

“Our life,” I said. “Don’t you think that is something you should have said before we got married? You had plenty of chances.”

“I know, I know. How could I forget?” he asked. “I wanted to be better, to make it work. I love you, but I can’t do this anymore. Any of it. I always told you you were a shooting star and that I’d be the one to drag you down. You’d be better off without me.”

I hated when he did that, hated when he tried to make it sound like he was doing me a favor. I felt the anger flaming up just below the surface of my skin. Almost made me want to hit him, grab him and shake him until he realized how stupid he was. But I knew better than to open that door.

“Right. So tell me again how it’s best for me to be home alone waiting for you. Wondering where you are. Having to pretend that everything’s fine when my whole world is falling apart around me.”

“It has nothing to do with you. I’m unhappy and I deal with it the only way I know how.”

“By hurting me. Hurting me makes you happy. That’s good to know, although you don’t have to go anywhere else to do that. You do plenty of damage within these four walls.”

“It’s not about hurting you. Don’t you get that? I don’t have to think or worry about anything. I can just hate myself, by myself.”

“How original. Drowning yourself in your sorrows? You’re better than that.”

“No, I’m not. Most of the time I can’t even stand me. I don’t know how you do it.”

“I don’t know either.”

“Sometimes I wish I would just die. I should just get a knife right now.”

“Shut up,” I said. “Don’t be stupid.”

“You think I’m kidding but I’m not. Wouldn’t that be easier for you? Just to have me gone. Bring it to me and I’ll do it.”

“Just stop. You’re not going to do anything. You think you’re the only one with issues around here? You think you’re the only one with an inclination for self-loathing?”

“What if we did it together? Just left everyone and everything behind.”

“Now that’s an idea. Pretty fucked up, but tempting.”

“It would be just me and you. I couldn’t do it without you.”

My mom held the bag while I dumped the dishes inside.

“We’ll still need to wash the sink,” she said. “Looks like some roaches have been nesting in here.”

While we cloroxed the sink, Juan was transferring my photos and awards from the weathered cardboard to the Tupperware we had brought.

“These big trophies aren’t going to fit,” he told me. “What’s this one for anyway?”

“Powerlifting.”

“Well, we’re going to have to make another trip.”

I hated the idea of having to come back again, but I was already so tired.

CHAPTER VI

TUNNEL VISION

I am taking my afternoon run around the block. The neighborhood my dad moved into after finally making the decision to sell the house I spent most of my life in has nice organized streets and even a well-vegetated gravel walking path. I make my rounds through nature trails and two-story houses I hope to one day own. I have been trying to work out on a regular basis for a year now. I have never been a skinny person. I had never really been fat either, until I got married.

Most people find this hard to believe, but my favorite sport in high school was power lifting. I can understand, since I am not really built like a lifter and most people upon hearing this expect to see something akin to the bodybuilders on television. But I was very strong, physically and mentally, and determined. Last summer Stephie convinced me to join her gym and get back into the old routine. I began lifting five days a week and running almost daily. It was the miracle I needed. The pounds began disappearing as I rebuilt my muscle and strength. I even got back into competition, until I realized that my 24-year-old body could no longer do what my 17-year-old body once did with ease. The deadlift, once my favorite, now worked my back into a knot. And my trainer wasn't even allowing me to squat heavy, sometimes not even at all. I managed to beat some of my old records but not without much more effort and pain. Pain I don't really find worth it any more. So, after a good year and two meets, I stopped. I took the word power out of my lifting, anyway. I still work out, but mostly running now.

Yet even in this my body has betrayed me. It used to be easy for me, five miles every day. I could keep going and going. Even my knee injury didn't really stop me. Now it takes so much longer to warm up. Each step I take feels restricted, as if someone is behind me holding two elastic exercise bands, one around each ankle. They are pulling, holding me back, allowing the movement but not without tightness and pain.

My success in every sport was always more mental than physical, and as the sun sucks the moisture from my skin I fight to keep moving.

It was Christmas break and we were doing a lot of scrimmaging; we needed to stay on our toes while real games were scarce. The coaches would combine the Freshman and J.V. teams and pit us against the varsity. We underclassmen saw it as a chance to show what we were made of; the upperclassmen felt the need to defend their spots. In other words, we went all out.

I was the best defender our J.V. team had, which naturally put me above any 9th grader, so I covered Siggy, our school's all-star point guard. She always eagerly accepted the challenge. We were very physical players, the kind that dove for loose balls, and in these situations the coaches gave us a little extra room to push.

Loose balls were my favorite. They are the easiest way to turn the ball over to our team, maybe even go for an easy layup if it played out right. So naturally, when the bright orange ball came zooming my way I leapt at it. As I was reaching for the ball, I realized my right foot was close to the boundary line and I planted hard. Tight in a wide lunge, my back to the other players, I didn't see Siggy coming full throttle. She couldn't stop in time. The front of her knee made contact with the back of mine, clipping me and shooting my legs out from underneath me.

My right knee hit the metal plate that surrounds the court with a loud “crack”. I felt a sharp, pinching pain in the back of my knee. I was quickly surrounded by a huddle of girls.

The athletic trainer was out for the holidays so the coaches just wrapped my knee and put some ice on it. They were certain it was just a sprain. I was still required to come to practice but stuck to the sidelines, passed balls for drills or just sat and watched. Siggy managed to come check on me every once in a while, during a water break or on her way to the bathroom. Sometime I met her in there. “I’m so sorry,” she would whisper when no one was looking. She’d show me with her lips when no one was there.

I had started talking to her on a dare. An implied one. At the beginning of the year, all the girls talked about how we should stay away from her, how she was gay. I didn’t think that was right. Being gay didn’t mean she would attack any girl that came her way; just like being straight didn’t mean they liked any boy they saw. They didn’t get it. So I went to show them. I went to be her friend.

When a week later I still couldn’t run, couldn’t plant-and-go without my knee buckling, they sent me to the doctor. The drive to the office was a long and quiet one. I was so nervous that both of my parents felt they needed to be there to support me. When I finally had my turn on the examination table, I knew it was bad. He was pulling and bending my leg with a grim look on his face. He recommended an MRI to make sure, but said this was an injury he saw often, especially in female athletes.

The doctor grabbed a model of the knee that was sitting on the desk in the corner of the examination room. It was a standard model, patella and tendons exposed and detachable to allow access to any area of the joint. My dad always got queasy around blood or open wounds, but this wasn’t anything too graphic. It was all plastic bone and cartilage. But when the doctor

pulled back the knee cap to show us the exact ligament I had torn, the anterior cruciate ligament connecting lateral fibula to medial tibia, he hit the ground. “I think we need some help in here,” the doctor said and very soon several nurses rushed in. “I’m okay,” my dad kept insisting though his voice was small and his eyes kept rolling up towards the back of his head. “I can’t believe you did that,” my mother would tell him later. “It was just a model. Instead of helping Missy, you just scared her.”

When the nurses were sure everything was fine the doctor came back in to talk about my options. The room seemed much smaller and I was finding it hard to breathe. There were only two choices really. Do nothing and wear a brace any time I wanted to so much as take my dog for a walk or play a friendly game of beach volleyball. Or have reconstructive surgery. Though methods had improved (this type of injury used to leave people with a scar running from mid thigh to mid calf) it was still pretty invasive, would require a long recovery. But it was the only chance I had at a near full recovery. “About 95%,” the doctor said.

I was prescribed weekly appointments with a physical therapist after my surgery.

“We are basically going to have to teach you how to walk and use your leg muscles again,” my PT told me during our prep meeting the day before the procedure.

Fortino immediately gained my trust. He smiled when he talked, but not in one of those creepy or artificial ways. And he was attractive, fairly young looking, smooth bronzed skin and lean muscular body, though his hair was already mostly gray and receding slightly just above the temples. What I really liked about him, however, was his attitude. I liked how he didn’t make a big deal out of being sorry for me or try to make me feel like this was going to be easier than I knew it was. He made sure to emphasize the amount of work I could look forward to beginning the day of my surgery.

That was my only guarantee. I had taken this route because of the chance to compete in contact sports again without having to wear a brace, though it was suggested, because in the world of high school sports it's basically like wearing a big bull's-eye on your weak spot. I had been warned repeatedly that it would be difficult, a challenge, but nothing could have prepared me for that first night. As my mom was helping me get into bed I sat with knees bent up towards my chest, inspecting the change. My right leg was definitely smaller, skinnier than the other. As I shifted my weight the tears began to stream down my cheeks.

“What happened,” my mom asked, rushing to my side. “Did I hurt you?”

I showed her how my skin and muscle drooped and jiggled. It was also already beginning to turn a sickly green. (Later it would become a rich blue and then a painful black as the blood and fluid made its way through my leg and lymphatic system.)

“I look like an old lady,” I said.

At the beginning, my mom had to give me a shower in a chair. She would even shave my legs for me, which I didn't mind so much. As she carefully removed the hairs above and below what I referred to as my Frankenstein scar, the two inch line of sutures that centered the front of my knee, she discussed the possibility of scar removal. The rest, however, I did mind. I hated being helpless. I tried to walk on my own once, before my PT said I was ready. I ended up flat on my stomach in the hallway outside my room and had to drag myself back to my bed. At my next session, Fortino told me a story about a girl who fell in the shower only two weeks after her surgery. Needless to say, she wound up back in the operating room. I don't know how true this was, but it was enough to keep me from pushing ahead on my own again.

Things were even worse at night. I am a mover and a shaker, in bed. I would kick during my sleep and wake up screaming. My mom started sleeping with me.

I got special treatment at school, though. They gave me five extra minutes to get to class, even let a friend escort me. I had my crutches, but on days I was tired I could borrow the nurse's wheel chair or just get pushed around in my English teacher's rolling chair. They even let me wear shorts, which is a big deal in a high school with mandatory uniforms. We were only allowed to wear our school polo with either jeans or khakis. Girls could wear skirts only to the knee or longer. No capris, and definitely no shorts.

My PT sessions were pretty tough, though. They had me using ankle weights and elastic resistance bands. Bending, straightening, lifting my leg in every direction. The bending was the worst, especially while the sutures were still in. As I dragged my heel across the table, inching it closer to my buttocks, it felt like the new ligament constructed out of my patellar tendon and stapled to my tibia and fibula was going to pop. I imagined the scraping I felt in my knee was the two industrial staples grating each other. With each bend the line of sutures felt like it was going to rip open, as though if I tried to go even a millimeter further I would be staring at my bone and flesh instead of the inflamed two and a half inch incision. I always had to tough, and I never complained. I made myself pull closer and closer until my heel was pressing into my lower glute. That meant I was ready to start walking.

Fortino would always joke with my mom while I was doing my routine. "I know this has to hurt her," he would say, "but not a peep. I have some football players with the same injury—she makes them look like wimps."

Mom took me to all my sessions. Even though I was already getting more than my share of workouts divided between Fortino and the school's athletic trainer, she got her friend (Stephie's former 5th grade teacher who worked at the school where she was the school nurse) to help me after school once I started lifting weights as part of my recovery. We were allowed to

stay in the school's weight room as long as we wanted. My mom's friend was a coach and knew a lot about weights; my mom insisted he take over my weight regimen.

I really got into the lifting. I liked the feeling of strength and control it gave me, at least over this one thing, and didn't want to stop, even after making a full recovery. The power lifting coach had noticed me and the time I spent with the weights. He spoke to my now personal coach and agreed to let him work with me if I would compete for the team. That first season I was surprised when I both qualified for and placed third in the state competition. I had always worked hard on anything I attempted, but I hadn't been planning on this. I was a junior in high school, in the best shape of my life, and it felt good.

It made the second time around both easier and harder. I was protecting my injured right knee in an off-season basketball scrimmage and hurt the other leg. My basketball coach had been warning me about my uneven plant, landing on my left leg just a split second before my right. It wasn't as strong or smart. But when I came down from blocking that shot all I could think about was not exposing my weakness. The Boys and Girls Club gym had a tile floor that had apparently just been waxed and when my left foot made contact, it began to slide. My foot went one way, my hips went the other, and I felt a snap before I hit the floor. Even though my mom tried to pacify me, told me only a doctor could diagnose me, I knew what I had done.

After this second surgery, I was consumed with recovery. It made me want to work harder, recover faster than before. The pain at night was worse. I ended up sleeping in the living room, or with Mom who would stay up with me when it became too much. Only now do I realize why she was all too willing.

I did get to running a lot faster. And the weights too. I was determined to be ready for my senior year. My neighborhood was a perfect oval and I began running laps. My dad had

bought me a weight set, a treadmill, and a bike, but nothing compared to the stress, physically and psychologically, of having to carry your own weight on solid ground while suffering under nature's elements. Most of the time I would run alone, but sometimes my younger sister would join me. I usually didn't mind. She would coach me, push me. I was closer to full out running than ever before. She would run right next to me, but then came the day she pulled away.

We were about a quarter mile from the house when Stephie began to push it. You can't catch me, I think she said. Or maybe I only imagine that now. But I did try. I opened my stride and pushed harder than I had in months. My staggered steps were still distributing the weight unevenly, and my labored breathing was completely out of control now. She looked over her shoulder, face red yet composed, the hint of a smile in her eye. I tried to gain control of my heaving lungs, mouth open, eye brows drawn together. She turned back and hauled it even more. I felt a tug at my knee, a warning shock sent up my quivering thigh. I jogged up to the house about 10 seconds after her.

"I beat you," she said, a big smile on her face.

I began lifting even harder than before. Just two months out I was already squatting more than the other girls that came in. They would take turns squatting the bar between giggles and waves to the football players in training, while I loaded plate after plate onto my back in the lifting rack next to them. After a week they stopped coming.

I spent most of my free time in the weight room or on the track. My mom's friend would still come in to help me, or more like supervise now that I didn't really need him. But he always came. He and my mom would talk while I sweated. Stephie was usually with us as well. She used to come along to keep his kids company, but now she was working out alongside me. We'd follow a similar workout, though mine a little heavier, a few more reps. I made sure of it.

Our after-workout dinners always included the four of us, sometimes his kids. Tia's became our place. "What a nice family," our waitress would sometimes say. No one corrected her. Afterwards we would go to Champs or Academy. His boys usually needed something—cleats, bats, or other equipment. It didn't take long to notice that my mom always paid. I probably should have said something, but I didn't feel I had the right.

As the summer passed I continued piling the weight on the bar and on my back. Nothing feels so good like lifting twice your body weight and more, being in the weight room and having guys stare at you not just because of how you look but because your workout puts them to shame. Even with daily cleanings from the janitorial staff, there was always the stench of sweaty bodies and old gym socks mixed with chalk and metal. I came to welcome that smell, to crave it. Here, you didn't need anyone else, didn't have to rely on anyone else. The only thing that matters is you and what you can do.

Lifting isn't the easiest sport. It has its set of rules and procedures, its specialty gear and safety regulations. In order to compete, you have to wear a power suit made of thick, inflexible nylon that gives you the support you need while pushing and pulling massive amounts of weight. They also need to be at least three sizes too small. Getting into them was always a challenge. The girls' bathroom turned into a jungle gym come dressing time, with girls hanging by their straps from lockers and doors, anything to allow them to wriggle their way in. And putting on the bench shirt was a three-man job; the lifter and two others had to navigate the sleeves that looked like they would only case the arms of twig-like models and force them over bulging, sculpted muscle.

But the fight with the wardrobe was worth it. A good squat suit makes it feel like you're sitting in a chair as you bring the weight down, and a good bench shirt helps your arms pop right

back up after the bar hits your chest (though you look like a hunchback Neanderthal the whole time you are wearing it and need to keep your arms over your head to avoid cutting off your circulation, making your arms go numb). After a meet you could always expect to see red and purple welts along the inside of your arms and thighs. All part of the fun of the sport. We would usually compare the size of them to see who had suffered through more for their win. Stephanie's pale skin provided the best backdrop for the bruises, though hers were usually smaller than mine.

And then there were the wraps. Everyone uses wraps to squat. They protect the knees from damage. I was the only one, however, that also used them in the dead lift. I wasn't taking any more chances. An anomaly, these wraps contained an elastic that allowed them to be yanked and pulled around a leg of any size several times. Once tied in place, however, they were rock solid. They made your legs look like linked sausages and left a raze that made carpet burn enjoyable in comparison.

Making it to state this year was a given. I had jumped all over the board, competing in weight classes from 104 to 123 trying to stay on top of the competition across Texas. I stayed at 123 for state because I was at my strongest there. My little sister had joined the team this year but didn't quite make it. She bombed out at regionals. I had tried my best to help, but she still had three more years. This was my last shot.

My family all came to support me but we travelled separately. My mom drove me and Mom Mom King up to Killeen the day before the meet; my dad and sisters were to follow. I reclined my seat and closed my eyes, let the hum of the road soothe the nerves that no amount of preparation could erase. But then my mom called my trainer—these calls were becoming more frequent these days—and what began as a courtesy call to let him know we were on our way ended up lasting the whole trip. I couldn't sleep. It took a lot of focus to translate the Spanish I

assumed was used to prevent my grandmother from understanding. She still didn't look pleased. The tone said enough. The one I had to listen to on the way to school every morning. The one she used behind closed doors in the house. The one that meant you can knock all you want but I can't hear you.

At the meet the next day, everything went as I had trained for. I was hitting all my lifts. Then came the dead lift, my best lift. My coach went to check the stats and I was tied for first. He bumped up my first lift to 305. I shrugged it up with ease. The girl was still on my tail though, and my next lift was 320. It seemed to take a little longer but still slid up without a hitch. As I was preparing for my last lift my coach came up to me.

“We are gonna have to push it,” he said. “She’s doing 330.”

“What do you wanna do, coach? Put 340. I can pull it.”

“I don't wanna risk it,” he said. “This is your senior year. We will go 335, but you are gonna make it look easy. Finish strong and get your gold.”

They called my number; I chalked up and approached the platform. I would like to say I strutted up there with confidence, but I was wrapped so I know it looked more like a waddle. Add to this my nerves and the fact that my belt was pulled as tight as I could stand it, and I probably looked like a drunken penguin holding its breath.

When I reached the bar, I squatted low and placed my hands on the grooved metal that demarcated the ideal gripping area. Right hand over, left under, I adjusted my grip, steadied my stance and pulled.

I pulled and pulled, harder than I had ever had to pull before. You never realize how much difference five pounds can make until you add it to another 300 or so.

“Finish it,” I heard my coach screaming. “Don't you quit now, finish it.”

I closed my eyes, gritted my teeth, and didn't stop till I was erect—back straight, hips forward, shoulders rolled back. I had done it. I had my gold.

The awards ceremony is hardly more than a memory of me agitatedly waiting to hear my name called. Don't ask me who got second or third because I can't tell you.

I ran to my family to share my ecstasy. I have a whole album of pictures of us hugging and posing and laughing. Me lifting my sisters onto my back, cradling my aunt in my arms, holding up my medal and making a muscle. Hugging my parents. They look happy—for me.

The next year I stayed on to coach the girls, mostly my sister. My dad convinced me it would be a good use of my newly acquired free time, and that Stephie really needed support since my mom had moved out and we were no longer speaking to the trainer. She only got stronger and stronger. She never directly mentioned anything, but others would tease me.

“How does it feel to be helping your sister beat your records?”

“Why is your sister stronger than you?”

I never had to compete directly against her, but I had my doubts. I remembered how it felt to have the weight on my back. My struggle not to buckle under what she could now push in practice with ease. It had to be the knees, right? It killed me that I would never know.

“Try doing what I did with two reconstructed knees,” was my most popular reply. She was also in a higher weight category, 132. They were expected to pull more.

But in those questions all I could hear was her voice as feet pounded pavement.

I beat you.

As I round the final lap the elastic bands around my ankles have turned into weights. My diaphragm feels like it's about to collapse under the weight of my overworked lungs, lungs heaving to get oxygen to every blue cell in my body that is screaming for relief. I can feel the lactic acid building in my muscles, tightening, slowing my already heavy steps. It feels good, but I know that will all be over a few minutes after I stop, when my runner's high has faded.

I feel my form slipping. Although a fairly successful runner throughout my schooling, I could never quite master the streamlined form of a natural, even though I technically had three chances to learn it right. I was fast, but my small steps produced more sideways motion than was desirable. Expended energy, my coach would tell me. Wasted heat, which on a track equals wasted speed. I tried to fix it, to lengthen my stride, but it never seemed to feel right.

As I enter the house Stephie is on her way out. Off to the gym, I think she says and I wave. She still lifts, semi-professionally. She competed at World's last year and placed second. She's on her way there again this year. What I thought I would be working towards my junior year in high school, before my second injury, she is accomplishing now. I am proud of her. I really try to be.

CHAPTER VII

DO YOU LOVE ME?

We were on the couch in the living room; the navy blue leather was sticking to my thighs. It was last time we would be together in this house. The house she spent years furnishing. She was leaving. Had already told Dad there was nothing he could do, nothing left to fight for. And so he didn't. He'd keep the house, daughters included; she'd take the money.

But things were different for us. Not so simple, I thought. She couldn't just walk away. And so I asked her. I asked her to stay. But not for Dad. For me.

I looked into the hazel eyes I'd always wished I'd inherited, the freckled face I did, and told her I'd take care of her and love her the best I could. I knew it was different, but she didn't have to do it alone. She had to see. Had to see how this man was just using her, exploiting her love. I would make sure everything would be okay without him. Without either of them, if that's what she wanted.

But she said no. Said I was too young to understand. No one loved her. No one put her first. Only him.

And so she left. Went to play mistress to a man that treated her like a maid. Went to cater to a family she had no hand in creating but every potential to destroy. Like ours.

I had asked her. Asked her why I wasn't enough. Even though I knew it wouldn't help, wouldn't matter. I didn't ask her the other question though. The one I wanted to hear the answer to most.

But I will. One day. I hope.

CHAPTER VIII

MY TRAITOR TONGUE

Pollito

My mom was driving a little fast, rushing so as not to make us late on our first day of school. We exited the highway with its speeding SUVs and groups of palm trees lining its ramps and turned onto deserted Shary Road. Each side was lined with rows of corn, cotton and empty fields divided by mounds of fertile earth that rose above the flat land, home to the canals created to irrigate the crops. Hardly anyone travelled here. It only led to three places: the bodegas and ropa usadas on Old Military Road, the international bridge, or my new high school in Hidalgo. After a few minutes, the scenery shifted from warehouses and eighteen-wheelers to trailers fenced in yards littered with everything from toys to furniture and old kitchen appliances. In front of many of these homes were low-rider cars with rims that glistened in the sun. I wondered how they could afford the automotive accessories, how they could put so much effort into their upkeep, when the house, to me, needed so much more work. We turned left at the park and enter the brick subdivisions that lead to the central street in town, and my new campus.

The hallway was crowded but I managed to maneuver my way in, out, and around the clusters of friends greeting each other with hugs, kisses, and special handshakes, catching up on any changes summer had brought. I stopped to study my schedule, now wrinkled and a little moist in my clenched fist, and made my way to the eighth grade hall for my first class, IPC. I

found an unassuming seat towards the back and prayed this teacher didn't believe in seating charts.

The bell rang and I found myself immersed in the animated conversations, one I now served as obstacle to. As the teacher approached the podium at the front of the classroom, the cacophony of shrill voices and bass grunts lowered a few decibels.

“Good morning and welcome,” the stout man standing before us said. “I'm going to start by calling roll. Let me know if you prefer to be called something other than what I have on my list.”

I never did this. It was bad enough they had to say my name out loud. I wasn't going to prolong the spotlight by giving my nick name of preference. They could call me whatever they liked.

At first glance I assimilated well. Aside from the few people I recognized from the week I spent in summer band camp, no one seemed to pay me much mind. Brown hair, brown eyes, skin fair but not quite milky, didn't really set me apart from the norm but I knew it would not be long before my name betrayed me. It was a fairly diverse class, alphabetically that is. There are always fewer names at the beginning of the list, but there were a few students representing most every letter. It still wasn't long before he reached the G's – Garcia, Garza, and Gonzalez (there are always plenty of these), H – one Hernandez, and then-

“Melissa King?”

I felt all eyes on me as I raised my hand. It didn't help that my dad, who had worked for this school district the last seven years, had made my last name (the only Anglo one) close to famous around here. Fortunately, the teacher had a lot planned for the first day and I could immerse myself in the mundane memories of summer vacation, ignoring the whispers and stares.

It was the same in every class, and with the way high school goes, mine was the most frequent name on every student's lips by the end of the day. I pretended not to hear or understand as I walked by. That's what they expected, right?

Mira la gringa.

De dónde vino?

It went like that the next few periods. I worked hard in every class, walked fast, avoided eye contact. Then came the lunch line.

A couple of girls from athletics asked if they could cut in line. What did I care? Contrary to what the school district believed, having a choice between crap and crap is not what a 14 year old considers buffet. I said yes. They whispered for a while then turned to me.

"You're Melissa, right?"

I nodded. As if they didn't know.

"Sit with us," the tallest one said as she collected her plate. The other three girls, somewhat smaller and softer spoken nodded in agreement and trailed after her, like ducklings following their mamma.

I hadn't been looking forward to sitting alone, so I agreed to join them. As I attempted to cut into the dry Salisbury steak on my Styrofoam plate, I felt as if I were on display, observing but not participating. That's when it started.

"Do you know Spanish?"

"A little. Not much."

"Say something. We want to hear you."

"I don't know. What do I say?"

"Say *pollito*."

“*Pollito.*” There was laughter. “What?”

“Nothing. You just say it funny.”

“You sound so cute, like a little girl.”

I didn’t get what they were talking about. I knew the rules, how the double l makes the y sound. I thought I had done it right

That was the day mamma duck took me under her wing. I was adopted into her clique and given a nickname. *Pollito.* They always made me say it and it always made them laugh. It also didn’t help that I was the fastest girl in the 8th grade. The distance between me and all the girls behind me as we repeatedly lapped the gym just gave them a better view of my waddle. Apparently my duck-like running form just gave them more reason to grow attached to their ingenious nickname. It stuck.

“*Pollito.* Over here.”

I made my way to the already crowded lunch table. A small girl I had for Math class gave up her seat, putting me in the center of the crowd.

“Listen to this,” mamma duck said. “*Pollito, say perro.*”

This was another favorite. I knew this one too, but unlike the double l I was fully conscious that the double r escaped me. The necessary rolling sound and motion fell flat on my half-Anglo tongue.

“*Pero,*” I said. The resulting laughter informed me I had done it again. It sounded like I had said *pedo.*

“Isn’t she great,” mamma said. “*Qué chistosa!*”

Besides having me mispronounce simple words repeatedly, another favorite game was having me say bad words. Some I knew, some I didn't, but I repeated them all. *Culero, pendejo, cállate el hocico*. Especially *cállate el hocico*. It figures.

My popularity increased all the while. They always talked about me as if I wasn't there, talked to me like a child learning to speak for the first time. It even trickled into Spanish class; the teacher made us all read aloud in class. She always complimented me, but for some reason or another I always heard it later.

“Did you hear *Pollito* in class today?”

“*Qué curiosa! Bien confident y todo.*”

I found myself thinking like that. Sometimes only Spanish words make sense. Somehow there is a difference between embarrassed and *agüitada*, emotional and *sentida*. Yet when I tried to get in on this code switching, it just became another joke.

“Mom, why didn't you teach me Spanish?” I asked one day.

“You know Spanish, mamita.”

“Not like the others,” I said.

“We wanted you to learn English first. That was very important. When I went to school I only knew Spanish and they used to spank us and sit us in the corner. I couldn't speak in class until I learned English. You don't have that problem, Mia. You're lucky. You know both.”

She didn't understand. She couldn't see how her choice marked me with a stigma I couldn't shake. I eventually decided to stop speaking Spanish in front of others, a decision I have maintained to date. My popularity slowly faded seeing as I was no longer a source of entertainment I became more of an object for envy or disdain. “Did you hear what she said?”

quickly morphed into “Look what she did.” It was hard to accept how easily they judged and dismissed, but I couldn’t speak Spanish and I couldn’t change my name.

Boys, Boys, Boys

Carlos. With him this tongue that lacks a certain flare learned to do something right. They poked and teased, but his arms were always open wide. No judgment. No questions. As a young couple we had our share of controversy. There was my dad. There was Oscar (A kiss is just a kiss, right?). People and their rumors. But when his lips found mine everything was better.

The first time we went upstairs in the band hall, the percussion room, where his section leader told him he could find some privacy, we were scared. We progressed from up against the wall to rolling on the floor—me on top. But his mouth stayed on mine, hands on my waist. My heart was thumping like a rabbit’s, caged, caught. And I had this feeling in my bladder, the same feeling I used to get when riding the swinging boat at Mr. Fun’s.

The second time his hand found its way up my shirt. His fingers traced the curve of my waist, the lining of my bra. My breath caught in my throat and he quickly moved it away. I firmly placed it back, slipped it underneath, pushed my tongue further in, let him know it had been a good thing.

When my hand went down his pants I didn’t know what I was looking for. I felt coarse hair, and warmth, and then something hard and wet. I drew my hand back. It took a little while for me to venture in again. No backing out this time. I gripped it in my hand and it was his turn to choke.

In the practice room, dark and cool, he asked me if I was ready; I said yes. We’d been here many times before but I’d always back down. This time he took a different approach. He

told me to wear a skirt and had slipped it up onto my stomach, spreading my legs, pulling my underwear aside. He kissed my lips as he undid his pants and then straddled my head. As he prepped me with his tongue, I began to tremble. Not nerves this time. I tugged on his pants, asked him to turn around. I tasted my tang on his lips as he pushed it inside. It hurt. It hurt but it was worth it.

At our school, in a border town with a small population, where most teachers are returning alumni or dinosaurs that have been teaching so long they taught the parents of their students, new teachers are big news. To be fair, I don't think she knew what she was getting into. To be honest, she was unforgettable.

Miss Sahadi was to be our English III teacher. Maybe it was bad timing. It was our junior year and we felt very comfortable with ourselves and our surroundings. Some of us joked that we had contracted "Junioritis". She didn't stand a chance.

She walked in that first day an eccentric mess. Her hair was a frazzled cinnamon mop. Her bright, Precious Moments eyes were divided by a long, wide upturned nose. Her hobo un-chic attire did little to enhance her pear shaped everything - torso, arms, legs. She wore hiking sandals everyday and waddled around the room as if she had just painted her toe nails and had forgotten to remove the cushion separating her toes.

She made a lot of first year mistakes—like telling us it was her first year among other things. The question and answer session most teachers tolerate on the first day while reserving the right to withhold anything they feel is too personal seemed more like a session of truth or dare. Her unfiltered responses egged everyone on.

When we asked her what she had done before this she told us about working for her father, at Sahadi's, a local ethnic food shop. "But that was before my 'vacation,'" she told us. Further prodding revealed this was really a stint at a mental facility. We were curious about this, wondering what would have brought on this "vacation" she was not afraid to admit to.

This year of our English course was devoted to American Literature. She was so excited when we got to the autobiography of Malcolm X. "Oh I love him," she told us.

"You mean you love his story," someone said.

"No. He's my boyfriend."

No one had a response for that.

Another thing I noticed, another first year mistake, was that she made enemies quickly, and the wrong ones. After giving the day's assignment she would begin a conversation with some of the boys in the class, usually about how she loved driving her father's Volvo. This began a discussion about foreign cars, even though the one she drove looked more like an old jalopy. They never got around to their work and even when other people—usually females like me—were done, any talking sent a squinty-faced frown and ten points off the assignment our way. Which meant that when she finally decided she wanted to get real work done, no one listened to her.

The only time she had our full attention after the first day was during her weekly rounds of fortune telling. "I have been blessed with the gift," she told us one day. "I can see into the future." We all looked around in confusion, but after that first day, whenever her spirit was sensitive, we could all be found in our assigned seats, waiting patiently for the bell to ring and the advice to begin. She had won most of the girls over during her first session, when she told them how lucky they were to be Hispanic.

“Men love Hispanics,” she said. “They have the most beautiful bodies of any culture in the world. Your natural curves are the envy among other women.”

All the girls in the room smiled and giggled. I joined in until as well.

“But Melissa,” Miss Sahadi said, “you only half qualify.”

I always seemed to be singled out with her. Used to playing the role of teacher’s pet, it was hard for me to understand why she disliked me so much.

Many times her fortunes were generic, but it was still fun. Listening to who was going to be rich and famous, who would get married first, who would never have children. And then she turned to me.

“Melissa,” she said. “You are very open.” This first statement made everyone snicker. Carlos the loudest. He had become a real jerk since our latest breakup. “You need to remain open to possibilities.” At least that cleared things up a little. I was beginning to think she really had it out for me.

“You are like Rapunzel locked up in her tall tower. So many people try to reach you but they just don’t know how.” This was sounding promising. She had never been this detailed before. “Nine people will propose to you before you finally let down your hair to the one you are supposed to marry.”

I was shocked. I knew better than to take things like this seriously but it was a little arresting, hit eerily close to home.

That was one of the few times we actually had a pleasant encounter, and that’s not saying much. As the weeks passed people grew bored with her psychic show, her unpredictable personality, especially the boys. One week she hardly talked, said she was depressed because of her recent break up with the man of her dreams.

After that things really started to get out of hand. I hate to admit it, but I stood back and watched. Our classroom routinely turned into what looked and sounded like a feeding frenzy. Paper footballs flew back and forth across the room, shrieks and shouts carried down the halls. Every day one of the senior level teachers came in to get after us. Especially the times Miss Sahadi walked out and refused to come back. Even I stopped turning in assignments at the end. No matter how much time I put into crafting the kind of answers she said she wanted, she always gave me B's.

By November she was gone. Our sophomore English teacher filled her spot. We were all pretty happy about that. Some students swore she had a nervous breakdown and went back to the loony bin. But we don't know for sure.

I don't know exactly what became of her. When I think back on it all, I feel sorry for her, mostly. I think about her every once in a while, when memory brings her to the forefront of my mind. I hate to admit this, but I have found myself counting. As I get closer to number nine I wonder if she was right.

"What's your name, chica?" Brooklyn asked me. We had been dancing for a while. We were at Mint, the club Liz and I had been frequenting the past few weeks. Tuesdays were when it was hot. I had taken to spending most weeknights with her. She dormed at Pan Am and her roommate was never there. She had moved in with her boyfriend shortly after the fall semester had started.

Jesse and I were on the rocks again. Things hadn't been the same after Cynthia's funeral. Then the abortion. Liz didn't know about that, she just knew I needed an outlet and this was it. We weren't old enough to drink, but we were old enough to flirt with and be picked up by the

guys. Like the one I was dancing with, Brooklyn. He was one of the Dorados football players, part of the big changes happening in the Valley since the Dodge Arena opened, and we had been eyeing him all night.

“Melissa,” I said, moving in a little closer, arching up a little higher. He was almost six feet tall.

“You sure do know how to move, Mel,” he told me. “You’ve got to have some Latina in you.”

I just nodded as I swayed my hips. After studying Shakira and a few video lessons, I had almost perfected the basic moves of belly dancing. I didn’t want to get into that conversation if I didn’t have to. As long as he didn’t ask to hear me speak Spanish I was fine.

And he didn’t. Just took me back to the condo all the team players that were down here were provided with. The same ones I had been to a week before. Jesse would see. See that other people did want me.

He asked me to excuse the cloud of smoke surrounding his roommate in the living room. I had never smelled the plant before, but I recognized it anyway. He declined the joint offered him and led me up to his room. Turned the radio to the same station they had been playing at the club.

He showered with me after and took me back to his bed. We talked for a while. About his little girl and baby mama back in Detroit. And his shoes. He had a collection of Air Force ones that could rival my own shoe fetish. He didn’t go anywhere without them. But I left soon after. I knew the rule. I called Liz but she wasn’t done yet. I wasn’t allowed to enter her room without her, dorm policy, and so I waited in my car.

I had my 80's hits CD in. I wasn't born when most of these songs came out, nor was I old enough to remember when they were big. But my dad only allowed us to listen to the Christian station or the oldies station, and so, in a way, I still grew up on these songs. They usually brought comfort. But not on an empty night like tonight. Not listening to that line by the Thompson Twins about the perfect world we'd never find. And so I grabbed my phone out of my pocket, thinking to call Jesse. I called N instead.

CHAPTER IX

SECONDHAND CONDOMS

The condom I found was upsetting for two reasons. Not only did we rarely use them, we had stopped having sex in cars years ago. There was no way to explain this away. Not even for him.

It was 5:30 a.m. I didn't have long. He would be back from his night shift at the Mission jail soon. And I knew I would have to fess up to the search and seizure. There was no other way. I had to know.

The turquoise rectangular package had made its way from the change compartment of his jeep to my pocket to the trash to the couch, underneath the cushions. I couldn't make up my mind.

And then he walked in. He was tired and wanted to hit the shower, but I couldn't wait.

"Why was there a condom in your car," I asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about this condom. I found it in your jeep. Why do you have it?" I slipped the condom out from under the couch cushion and displayed it for him in the palm of my hand.

"What the hell is that? It's not mine," he said, snatching it up. He examined it closely, eyebrows furrowing, forming rounded ridges like the circular disk protruding from the center of the package. "I would never use these. Look, it's a snugger fit. That's for guys with small dicks."

“It was in your car. I don’t know what you expect me to think.”

“You know what? I bet it’s Charlie’s. He’s borrowed my jeep a couple of times during his break.”

“What? Why would you lend him your jeep? You said you hated him.”

“I do hate him. That son-of-a-bitch can’t keep his pussy little mouth shut. Always talking about how he had you first. Asking if you’re still real tight. If I’m sure you still love dick.”

“We already talked about that. It was high school, and he’s an ass. I don’t give a shit about him. I just need to know why there was a condom in your truck.”

“I told you. It’s Charlie’s. Last time he went out on break he said he was getting some action, took my jeep so his wife wouldn’t get suspicious. I told him it was fine as long as he cleaned up after himself.”

“I don’t get it. It doesn’t make any sense for you to do that.”

“I have to act cool in front of the other jailors. I can’t have them thinking I’m a pussy who can’t handle his shit. You think it’s easy hearing him night after night. His little comments here and there about how he’s had my wife. It makes me sick.”

“I’m sorry that he can’t just be a mature person and be respectful of the decisions that we’ve made. But all that’s in the past. Please just ignore it. It’s not worth it. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“I never told you, did I? What happened last week? I almost got fired. Charlie just wouldn’t let up. I can’t even tell you half the things he said. But I couldn’t take it. And so I shut him up. I grabbed him by the throat, pinned him to the wall, and asked him to tell me.

Asked him to tell me about all the times he fucked you. But he didn't. All he said was that he was sorry. That he was so sorry and that he would stop."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What does it matter? He went crying to the chief. They told me they'd let me off this time, but it could never happen again. And now Charlie's back at it, just like before. Only this time I can't even be a man and shut him up. I have to just take it. Laugh like it's funny. And let him use my jeep to show there are no hard feelings."

"He's the one that's not a man. I can't believe he's like that. He was never smart, but that's just stupid."

"I would've guessed that a pussy like that would need a snugger fit condom. He's got no balls and a small dick." He began tearing open the package.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm a man, right? I'm your man," he said, dropping pants and boxers.

"You want to have sex? Now?"

"What, you don't want to? You always want to." He slid the condom over his now hard penis. It was a perfect fit.

I didn't say anything as he joined me on the mattress, pulled at my underwear, slid the warm, slick condom inside me. The condom he claimed was Charlie's. The condom he never would have used if it was.

CHAPTER X

BURNING LOVE

I take care of the things on the bookshelf the same way I did the dishes. The miniature Ionic columns used as centerpieces for the tables at the reception, the figurine of a husband who has just swept his wife off her feet and now holds her in his arms that accompanied the sign in book on the gift table, a framed copy of our marriage license, our wedding program, the box his nephew carried with our rings.

I wasn't surprised when Jesse didn't get down on one knee to propose. The fact that he was holding the ring I had picked out and paid for didn't exactly leave much room for that. Still, when I had dropped it off with him that morning at the auto parts store I at least expected a day's worth of thought to go into it. I didn't expect for him to be doing it right here in front of O'Reilly's after I brought him his dinner.

"I think we are both at the point where we have realized that our relationship isn't perfect, will never be perfect," he had said. "But that doesn't mean we don't belong together. Love isn't perfect. It's not about being perfect. It's about finding that person who makes you feel a little less crazy. Someone who, when it gets to the point where they can't do that anymore, is willing to jump feet first into crazy with you. I can't promise you the moon or even that I can make you happy more than half the time, but I'm willing to be your crazy."

I pause to look at the program before tossing it into the black trash bag along with everything else. I remember working on that program for months. Choosing the proper font and

order of names and events. The Bible verse to be included. I had settled on a less traditional one. Not the powerful yet trite definition of love found in 1 Corinthians 13. Not the verse from Ephesians about the wife being submissive to her husband. At the time I had thought we were both on the same page with that one. But one from Song of Solomon. One that was more fitting of what I thought we shared. “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, as unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.” I had liked the comparison of love to fire. Fire is what I felt for him then. What he said he felt for me. Our wedding song, the one I walked down the aisle to, was called Flames. He had dedicated it to me when we had first started dating. It spoke of me being the only reason for him to live.

It made sense to me then, but not now. When things were starting to fall apart I was teaching Romeo and Juliet to my students. Not that I wanted to torture myself reading about a love worth dying for. It was the required reading for their freshman year. That’s when I finally understood Friar Lawrence’s advice to Romeo about moderate love, not violent love like theirs, like ours, being the love that lasts.

I’m trying my best to be the bigger person. Trying not to hate him for making me believe in something that wasn’t real. They say the power to forgive brings the power to heal. Maybe they are right. I haven’t had the strength to test it out. They say the best way to get back at an enemy is to love them. That this will be the equivalent of heaping burning coals on their head. As I try to focus myself on positive energy, on sending love his way, I fall into a kind of Gregorian chant.

“No ill will,” I repeat. “I will him no ill.”

These asinine words bring the bile from my gut up to the back of my throat. The burning sensation almost makes me choke. I don't understand.

The unrelenting headlock he has me in is now completely cutting off my air supply. I try to wriggle free but can't move because of the angle he has me positioned in, making it near impossible to put up any form of decent fight. Being a fan of UFC seems to have worked out in his favor. He had secured a triangle around my neck in a matter of seconds, heightened the damage by flipping my legs up over my head.

I scratch at every inch of skin my fingers can reach but it is not enough to release the iron grip from around my throat. I can feel the walls of my trachea scrape together as it attempts to expand and inhale. A rough, uncomfortable feeling settles in my chest. Panic shoots through every nerve in my body. I scratch harder, fight harder to break free yet only manage to make the situation worse. The more I struggle the tighter the choke hold; the room seems to be growing dim.

And then he lets go. Sits on the couch behind me.

"I told you to just drop it," he says, shaking his head. "Why do you always think you're so strong, so tough? You know what happens when you come at me like that."

My pulse is pounding in my brain, bringing pain as it sends the oxygen rushing back. My breaths are shallow, as if my lungs are still afraid to fully expand.

"Don't go through my stuff. My phone, my mail, it's none of your business. You need to just trust me. If we don't have trust, we don't have anything."

So many things I want to ask. Who is she? How long? None of it mattered now.

"Would you look at me," he asks, but I know it's not a request.

I close the bag and tie a big knot in it, like the one in my throat, convincing myself nothing good will come of breaking things. They say if you can't forgive you give the object of your hatred power over you. If you can't forget, you'll never move on. Obsession keeps you stuck in a prison of your own creation. I think I see their point. I focus my soul on well wishes. I aim for a love strong enough to make him burn.

CHAPTER XI

THINGS FROM WITHIN DEFILE

The picture on the wall is crooked again. Even though I made him straighten it before bed. Just like every other night. It is our wedding portrait, hanging in our living room, where we sleep on an air mattress on the floor. It is a professional one; the kind that makes it look like it was created by brushstrokes, while the exactness of the detail lets you know it is only an effect provided by Photoshop.

In this light, however, our faces look shifty, distorted. Almost unreal. We have tried switching out the light bulbs several times, but the previous tenants installed fixtures that were rustic, yellow, muted. They had the same effect on the light, we discovered, but we couldn't afford to replace them.

Still staring at the portrait, I sit up, rub my chest. The air feels dry and thick, like my pillow. It is piling up on me and now I feel as if I have to reach out and grab a fistful of it, thick and grainy, like cotton, and force it down my throat.

The way the light is shining on the furniture, the couches that surround our makeshift bed like a fortress, makes them look awkward, slanted, looming to one side. Crooked like the portrait on the wall. Wrong.

As I turn to look at him, back to me, still sleeping, I remember what the pastor said. About people possessed. How they seem to be themselves, just not quite right. Things will be going along just fine and then they'll just shift, snap. They'll refuse to acknowledge a problem,

refuse to go to church. But it will continue to fester, spread. Defiling their soul and those around them, people, places. A darkness will set in. A strangeness hard to shake.

I reach out slowly and place my hand on his back. The warmth startles me. I close my eyes and begin to pray, command whatever spirit that has taken hold of him to leave. The demon that has stolen his love, love for me, is rebuked by God.

“In the name of Jesus I declare his freedom from the darkness. The darkness within,” I say, barely a whisper.

He squirms beneath my hand, grunts and swats me away. I open my eyes. And there is the portrait hanging crooked on the wall.

CHAPTER XII

JESSE

The summer before my senior year in high school wasn't my best. Carlos, who now referred to himself as Charlie, didn't want anything to do with me. I spent my days calling, emailing, begging my mom to drive me over to his house. She caved a few times and he always let me in, but it didn't change anything. He kept me in the living room. No frenzied escape to the bedroom or to the shed outside, even when his parents weren't home. We just watched whatever movie was playing on Starz until my mom came in and told me it was time to go. It was over and I wasn't taking it very well. I wasn't taking it at all.

Kiki was taking summer classes at Pan Am, but suggested my mom take me to volunteer at VBS. Our church was sponsoring a youth group from Missouri in their missionary quest by allowing them to set up their Vacation Bible School at our church. They offered our church members, mostly the youth, to help navigate the neighborhoods as they picked up children and to interpret for the ones who had Spanish-speaking kids in their group. Kiki couldn't help during the morning sessions, but would be there in the evenings and on Saturday, their final day here.

I don't know how my mom convinced me to go, but I got dropped off at the church property on the outskirts of Mission and made my way to a group of youth that I had been friends with since our junior church days. We hadn't talked in a while. I had only been going to church sporadically since the break up, claiming my knee hurt too much for me to sit in the pews

for a couple of hours (on some days it did). But they brought me up to speed quickly and I began making name tags and introducing myself to the missionary group and the VBS kids.

When the church van pulled in with the last group of kids, I couldn't believe who was behind the wheel. It was Jesse, the pastor's son. I had known him all my life, though we were never really friends. Six years my senior, he was too old for that. And I had always been an awkward, shy girl. With chin length jet black hair, guitar skills to rival those of any musician I listened to, and a singing voice that never left my head, he was the movie star crush of my prepubescence. I had never forgotten the day he had asked me to join him in his Christmas special. We sang *Silent Night* in what many church members still referred to as a perfectly angelic duet. But upon hitting 18 he had moved to San Antonio. Some say he went to college, others say his dad kicked him out. Either way I didn't think he would remember.

It took me by surprise when he called out my name. Asked how my recovery was going. If I had already been assigned a group. The VBS classes were being divided by age and designated a specific mesquite tree to sit under. I always found it odd that the trunks that had been whitewashed to ward off bugs still seemed to teem with them. I said no and he adopted me into his. I spent every moment after that following him around, catering to his needs. Offering him water in between his sets (he was always on call to perform), serving his plate so the food wouldn't run out before he got some. When we took the Missouri youth to the beach on their last day with us, we shared our first kiss.

My dad didn't approve, however, and our relationship consisted of stolen moments. Looking back on it now, I don't blame him. Jesse's dad made it a point not to hide family problems, used them to make a connection with his congregation (who were composed of mostly relatives of some form so already knew anyway). The battles with his rebellious son, the baby of

the family, his namesake, were often a lead-in to sermons on honoring your parents, keeping your body pure and holy for God, and how not to fall into the wicked ways of the world. But I wasn't one to be reined in. I became devoted to the church, got back onto the praise team, rededicated myself to the youth group he barely still qualified to attend. I'm sure it was obvious, but under the group supervision my dad let it be.

Christmas was always my favorite holiday. At church this meant the Christmas play. Practice was held Sunday night and Wednesday night after service. A year later he was still six years older, and though eighteen I was still not allowed to date him. More time at church; more time with him. Naturally, we both volunteered. I didn't expect to get the roles we did, Mary and Joseph. His sister Lilly was in charge of this year's performance and I guess she took pity on us.

When I found out that this year Mary had a speaking role I was nervous. Not only would we be presenting the nativity scene, but important scenes from Jesus' life as he grew. We were to do the scene at the temple, where Mary and Joseph have lost track of their son. When we find him I was to say, "*Hijo, hijo mio. Por qué nos ha abandonado.*" So it wasn't a monologue or anything, but it was Spanish.

My favorite part of it all was the Nativity scene. Each time we practiced the procession I got to walk with Jesse, arm and arm down the aisle, a pillow pushed up under my shirt to serve as my pregnant belly. We were already talking of marriage, as soon as we could get my dad to see that what we had was real. Had already decided on baby names—Titus and Melia. And each time we practiced this scene everyone told me how beautiful I looked as a mother-to-be. How pregnancy was going to suit me. I always smiled; he never said a word.

The room was filled with young girls, most of them accompanied by their mothers. The way they grip the arms of their chairs, the red rimming their eyes that I am just able to glimpse before they look away—they look like little girls afraid to fall asleep because of the monster underneath their bed. I think, like me, they should have been more worried about who they let inside it.

I had felt uncomfortable leaving the house in the only outfit I could squeeze into, exercise pants and a t-shirt, but as I glance around I realize I seem to be following the new trend. I sign in at the front desk and take the seat he saved for me.

“It’s going to be okay,” he assures me.

“Easy for you to say,” I think.

We sit silently for a while, I fidget with my hands, my teeth tear at my cuticles. Then, a door opens and a nurse calls my name. I follow her to a small office. I sit in front of a kind yet tired woman who is responsible for making sure I know what I am doing. She asks the routine questions and I find my mouth saying the three letter word even though my heart is screaming no.

But that was it. What they call an advisory counseling session couldn’t have taken more than three minutes. She gave me a shot to begin the anesthesia and handed me a small white tablet I was instructed to insert between my bottom lip and gums. I am escorted me back to the waiting room. As I walked back to my seat, my heart began to pound like a drum line cadence, loud and rhythmically uneven.

“Please don’t make me do this,” I said placing my hand on his arm. “Please take me home.”

“Don’t do this to me,” he said. “You can’t ask me that.” The disgusted edge in his voice carried some sting. We sat in silence, me dissolving the chalk along my gums, until they called me back again.

The room was cold and my legs were shaking. I had never been this scared before. I was positioned the same way I had been when I got myself into this mess: on my back, legs propped up and open, staring into a man’s face. I tried to breathe just like they told me, slow and deep, while they asked their pointless questions meant to carry me to sleep.

“What’s your name, sweetie? Where do you live?” They would never see me again. My eyes grew heavy and my throat felt as if it were closing. The air grew thick and the bright yellow lights muted. They dimmed down to extinction.

Then there was pain. Alarm and resistance cut through the fog in my head. I heard a soft, pathetic whimpering coming from somewhere. My eyes grew wet and sticky as they attempted to open.

“She’s awake,” one of the nurses said.

“It’s okay, honey. Go back to sleep.” My mouth was cupped and the air grew thick once more.

I was awakened and ordered to dress. Still groggy from the gas I stumbled to a chair, fumbled to put my clothes on. I almost collapsed as I tried to slip my legs through the openings of my underwear. I was taken to another room occupied by a few other girls, all in similar states. Their eyes were glazed over like animals that had just been put out of their misery.

A nurse checked my vitals and gave me a snack. The cookies were chalky, stale, and the juice was too sweet. I was allowed to rest for only a minute before they ushered me into a back hallway. There was a door that led to the back parking lot where he was waiting. He tried to drive as smooth as possible as he took me home.

“You don’t even spend time with me anymore,” she was saying. “It’s like you don’t even care.”

“How can you say that? You’re my sister. I love you.”

“Not like you love him. Everything’s about him.”

“I can’t love you like him,” I told her. “That’s different. You’re my sister and I love you so much. I always have. You were the only one that mattered to me when mom and dad fell apart. I didn’t stay with dad because I thought he was right. I stayed with dad because you did. I was going wherever you were going because I loved you most. But this is different. I am going to marry him.”

“You’re not even going to think about it? You’re just going to do it? Missy, you are so much better than that.”

“You don’t know everything. You don’t know what I’ve done. He knows and he loves me. I won’t find that anywhere else.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t tell you anything. All you do is go tell Dad or anyone else you think can change things. Well, they can’t. No one can.”

“You think I’m so horrible because I was looking out for you. What about you? Maybe if you had tried telling on me just once, I wouldn’t have gone through a lot of what I did.”

“I’m sorry that I respected your privacy, that I thought you deserved the right to decide on your own. But I was always there for you and I still am. But I’m marrying him.”

We sat in front of my father for the third time this year. He let me do most of the talking, the explaining of how this time we really were ready. I could tell he wasn’t happy, I could see it in the way his lip was curling slightly as he spoke. A sign that usually meant to duck and cover, but I ignored that now.

“If you are determined to do this, then I’ll help you,” he told us. “But know that I really think you should wait.”

I knew why he wanted me to wait. After all this time he still didn’t feel Jesse was up to his standards for me. He was still unsure that N was out of my system for good. But his answer, the not quite yes, was all we needed and the planning began.

CHAPTER XIII

CYNTHIA

I had been driving up and down Shary, between 495 and 107 for the last thirty minutes. No one was answering. I tried to convince myself that no news was good news but it wasn't quite working. I had already called Jesse asking what he thought I should do. He told me to go home, that my driving didn't help. He said he would look for her. But I didn't believe him. He was in a jam session with his band. I didn't think he was all too concerned either. He had been pushing me to create some distance. Said it wasn't healthy for me to be with her all the time. I love her like a sister, I had told him. You already have two, was his reply. When he mentioned Siggy I was pissed. That was different, I said. Cynthia is not like that and neither am I, now.

I decided to go to her house instead. Her mom was the one that had pulled me into the search. She had called me looking for Cynthia who hadn't returned from church. No one had heard from her, and there was news of a wreck. I took Shary to 107 and turned left. But when I got to the house I had practically been living in the last six months, no one was there. Buddy, her brother's dog was barking up a storm, dying to be let out. I let him out onto the front porch and hustled back to my car. Where could they be?

I took Bryan Road this time, deciding to finally take Jesse's advice. As I crossed the intersection of Bryan and 3 Mile Line a flashing red and blue illuminated the otherwise black night. As I inched closer to the obstruction in the road the police officer was guarding, an amorphous object began to take shape. Suspended in mid air a few yards from me was a

demolished black car, a black Nissan I had ridden in many times. I felt my body go limp, numb. A familiar figure approached my car. I recognized him as Cynthia's uncle from the New Year's party he had hosted a few days back. I lowered my window.

"Where is she? I need to see her."

"I'm so sorry mijita but you can't. She didn't make it. They took her to the morgue about an hour ago."

I couldn't believe it, couldn't speak.

"Can you make it home? I should take you. My car is over here."

He removed my keys from the ignition and led me to the Mercedes that was parked a little further up the road. I felt dizzy and lost. We were only two miles from my house yet the ride seemed to take a lifetime.

"She was such an amazing girl," he said. "I don't understand how this could happen. And she was such a good friend to you."

I wanted to tell him how I had been lost without her, yet all I could manage was a nod of agreement.

"I don't really believe in God or anything," he told me, "and I've never been faithful to the church, but she was. She was so dedicated to Him. I just don't understand how this could happen to her."

Another nod, or was it a shrug? I couldn't tell.

"I just don't understand. There are so many teenagers out there that drink and do drugs, hell, they even drive drunk and high and all that shit but does anything happen to them?"

I knew all about her devotion, her grace. She made me want to be better, more like her. What was I supposed to do now?

“Is this your house, honey?”

I mustered the energy for one last nod.

“Let me walk you to your door.”

Somehow he managed to get me out of his vehicle and onto my front porch. He rang the doorbell and the lights went on inside. I heard the click of the door being unlocked and opened, saw the worried look on my mother’s face as she demanded to know what was going on. I felt her arms being wrapped around me. I heard the man who drove me here politely excuse himself after handing over my car keys and telling my mom where my car was. I felt the moisture I had been holding back hit my face. Felt my legs collapse beneath me while my mom tried desperately to keep me from falling. I felt the cold hard cement beneath my body.

And then, “Why?”

“Why,” was all I could ask.

“I don’t know, baby, I don’t know. Everything happens for a reason. Maybe it was just her time.” That would be echoed by every adult I knew. Didn’t they realize it wasn’t enough? It didn’t explain anything.

“But I still need her.”

“I’m so sorry mamita. It will be okay. You’ll be okay.” She was gently rocking me now.

“It just won’t be the same. It won’t ever be the same.” I was nearly choking now.

“I know baby. You just have to breathe. Just breathe. Breathe.” She took my hand and led me into the dimly lit house.

CHAPTER XIV

N

I don't know if I ever would have noticed her if it hadn't been for Sister Eva. Sister Eva seemed to have no boundaries when it came to sharing her own personal life and felt that welcomed her into everyone else's. She was forty and had never had kids, never been married; I didn't blame her. Usually.

"Just say hi," she told me. "No one's made an effort to get to know her and she might not come back."

She was just one person, but to a church that reached its maximum capacity of 100 only on a good Sunday morning, an Easter Sunday morning, or a Christmas play morning, and was more than half empty the rest of the calendar year, it was a big deal.

And so I said hi. I went up to her that same morning and said, "Eva was worried you couldn't make friends on your own and told me to come tell you hi."

She smiled, laughed a little. Made me feel like I should have noticed her before. She asked me if I would be at church that night. I was always there. But I said maybe and she said she thought she could make it as well.

I invited her to the Wednesday night service. Usually a very dry teaching on the laws of the Old Testament, the last few months anyway, but our youth pastor had begun a study on *The Purpose Driven Life*. He would take the youth to a room in the back to discuss it. I thought she would like it. She didn't have to sit next to me, but she did.

For some reason my mouth felt she needed to know everything about me, including how to reach me, just in case. She asked about my boyfriend; it was bound to come up. He wasn't really my boyfriend, not at the moment, not after Cynthia, but he sat beside me whenever he could make it, most of the time. When he couldn't, she sat with me.

I don't know how I knew. Maybe when she told me she was in a relationship. She said, "I'm with someone also." Someone. As if she were teasing me. Just daring me to ask. And I did.

"Erika," she said the day I wound up in her car. The day I had a headache and needed caffeine. She convinced me to let her take me. Couldn't stand to see me in pain. And so we went.

"Her name is Erika."

I don't know why that was so intriguing to me, why that was the kind of answer I had been waiting to hear. I hadn't felt like this, thought like this, for a long time.

In a small church like ours, everyone wears many hats. Pastor also means groundskeeper and janitor. Any member of the youth knows they are on call for nursery or junior church duty. It never bothered me having to help out. Especially at night service. The night we went on our caffeine run we had been helping out. There were a lot of other helpers, but since we disappeared for a while they stuck us with clean up. I asked her more about Erika as we tossed Styrofoam cups and crumpled napkins into the trash, folded brown metal chairs and lined them up against the wall.

She began teasing me about my pseudo-boyfriend. Asking how I could stand him. How I could stand to kiss him. I told her not to talk about him and she obliged.

“You know what I’ve noticed,” she asked as we were finishing up. “I’ve noticed that you stare at my lips a lot.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“I think you’d like to kiss them but are too afraid to try.”

Again, she had me. Dumbstruck. Hand gripping chair until fingers began to pinch.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I just thought I’d put it out there. I’m not really one for keeping things to myself. It doesn’t mean you have to do anything. I didn’t think you would.”

“But I have,” is what finally came out. “I have before. Kiss me. Kiss me and I’ll show you.”

“I’m not gonna kiss you. But I won’t stop you if you try.”

But she lied. When I moved towards her she moved back. I stepped closer and she pulled away, backed up until she was against the wall and couldn’t anymore. I took the last few steps that brought my face to hers and to my surprise she still resisted, lips firm and sealed. But as I placed mine on hers, over hers, between hers, they softened, opened. Smooth and warm like fresh pressed silk.

Kiki was also very involved in church, only more so. She was in charge of the youth praise team, Sunday school class, and even took over the Thursday night preaching once in a while. She was planning a worship night, an hour and a half of songs and bible readings. She wanted to include a dance, was trying to open our traditional southern Baptist church to the modern notion that dance was not only of the devil. It had only been a couple of years since they had allowed a drum set through the doors.

Since I was her sister and had been in color guard for two years in high school, she asked if I would dance. The choreography would involve a swing flag, a short thin pole draped in fabric that grazed the floor when held out to the side, perpendicular to the body. Kiki was choreographing the sweeping motions accompanied by lunges, leaps, and twirls. But we needed flags, and I needed a partner.

“I know how to sew,” she said.

“Do you know how to dance?”

“I know how to follow.”

We needed to practice if we were going to do justice to the performance, usher in the right ambiance. And so as my sister and her team laid out the set up on the altar, ran through the songs they were to play until they sounded just right, we danced. We stretched and laughed, had only the first couple of lines of the song memorized because of how many times we had to restart it.

She was supposed to be watching me, mirroring the arcs of my arms, the sway of my torso, the swirl of the fabric as it enveloped and then revealed. But I was watching her.

When we finally got to the chorus we were sitting in what some called a swastika position (both knees bent on the left side, right foot touching left knee), right arm arched over head as we bent over towards the ground, face down, like the song said. Then we pulled up, body sweeping to the left, right arm wrapping over head, left coming up to meet it in position five (both arms slightly bent at the elbow, curved, and extended straight up) as we centered, torso and head erect. I had my hair pulled back, but hers was loose, long raven waves brushing the floor and then sweeping back before settling on her shoulders. The ends seemed to form

parentheses around the breasts I couldn't help but notice, voluminous and very present in her v-cut spandex tank, pale olive flesh brightened between the black cotton.

“We missed our cue to get up,” she said. “How were we supposed to do it again?”

This signaled my attention to her lips, slightly chapped but glistening with moisture left by her tongue. “We are supposed to find a creative way to do it without looking dorky, but I couldn't really think of anything.” I pushed off the ground and headed towards the CD player; the song had circled back to the chorus. “Do you wanna take it again from the beginning?”

“Okay, but can we get some water first?”

The church is laid out like a lower case “t”, a cross or a plus sign really, with a fat middle trunk that housed the sanctuary and the social hall, one large square room divided by a beige accordion partition, usually kept closed, like it was now, to prevent distractions and at least lessen the travel of sound. The sanctuary, where my sister was practicing, had a red carpet runner aisle leading to carpeted stairs and the altar. Wooden pews with red plush cushions on either side of the aisle. The social hall was an empty tiled room. The same brown chairs used in the junior church and Sunday school rooms lined the wall next to brown foldable tables ready for our church dinners and meetings. Each arm of the church, a narrow hall lined with doors on both sides, contained the classrooms. The right side opened with the kitchen, where we went to get water.

After we had filled our cups I followed her into the 3-5 year old classroom, the one right across the hall. We sat in the red wooden chairs that put our knees at chest level as we drank. The five ounce cup emptied quickly and I got up to throw it away. The trash can was next to the door and I lingered, waiting to see if she was ready to go. When I turned to check she was in front of me, startled me a little and I pressed back into the wall.

“You know what’s not fair,” she said. “You got to kiss me, but I never got to kiss you back.”

She pushed herself up against me, warm breasts kissing mine.

“Unless you don’t want me to,” she said.

I reached out and pulled her face to mine, fingers tangled in her dark hair. Her lips, the tip of her tongue, still cool from the water, but warm, warm, warmer the deeper I went. My clenched hands released her hair and travelled down her spine. I slid my legs a little further open as I pressed a little harder on the small of her back. Her hands traveled down my side and then back up, thumbs reaching out each time she crossed my breasts. She gripped my waist, my hips, my ass as my body pulled hers in.

And then we noticed it was quiet. The music had stopped. I breathed her in one last time and then we rushed back into the social hall, breathing hard and a little shaky. I heard my sister’s voice instructing some changes. I picked up my flag and headed to the CD player.

“You ready to go again?”

There is something so different about making love to a woman. The desire, the passion, the attention paid to every inch of skin. Any shift in speed or force had nothing to do with a man’s primal urge to pound the pressure from his package, and everything to do with deciphering my moans and silences, my kisses, my grabs.

She asked if I would stay with her always. I could never say for sure. Didn’t think I was ready for that yet. But in her car, under the moon, everything changed. She would turn to face me, half in shadow half in light, and her skin would call to me, dominate me.

Lip to lip, to chin, to neck. Lip to chest, tongue to chest. Groping hands—caressing skin, grasping hair. Knee to seat belt, back to steering wheel. “Let’s move to the back.” Breast to breast, hip to hip. Moist lips, smooth tongue working down my neck. Humid breathing, heavy breathing. Wet, warm, massaging lips, massaging tongue, tugging teeth. Reaching, yearning, pressing closer. No voice, no thought, only breath. Breathing in breath breathed out. In and out. In and out.

Not that there was never conversation. There were many. About love. About life. About Cynthia. Like the time she took me to the cemetery at midnight. We laid a blanket over Cynthia’s grave, in front of the headstone I had picked, and just sat. She listened to me cry, listened to me breathe, held me as I asked what the point of it all was.

It never seemed to work as well when the sun was out. When others were around.

“Just stay with me,” she would say. “I’ll take care of you.”

I hadn’t meant to go through Stephe’s email. She had forgotten to sign off. When I saw that she had just submitted a personal writing assignment, I got curious. The screen began to blur as I read through a description of a familiar room, N’s room. I could feel anger and betrayal slowly working my stomach into an acidic, nauseous tumult. I barely made it through the lines of what it said they did together there. I rushed to the bathroom and choked on salty chunks of things I didn’t remember eating.

I tore off my clothes and stepped into the shower. As the cool water hit my face and began to run down my entire body, I began to shake. I grabbed the bottle of body wash and nearly emptied it of its contents. The words “get off of me” escaped my lips as I began washing all the places she had touched and kissed, yet it was not enough. These four words consumed my

being as I waged war against the memory of her inside me. Over and over, louder and louder, I repeated these words.

I had to ask her, ask N if it was true. But where would that get me? We had discussed this before and I didn't understand any of it at all. My dad said they had kissed the day he told me our friendship had to end. He said she was playing some twisted game. N said they had only been friends. That Stephie had told her she liked her but N had said it could never become anything more. Stephie didn't say anything. Until now.

We were sitting at the long, oval dining room table, my dad and I, which was bare. It was a table we had possessed ever since I can remember. There were water rings and crayon markings across its face, and several of the chairs look like they would collapse if anyone sat on them.

My dad sat at the head of the table, in one of the two chairs with arms. I sat in an armless chair to his right. Regardless of the roundness, it still seemed as if he sat in the judgment seat.

"I don't understand you," he told me. "How could you do this to your sister?"

"I didn't do anything to her. I didn't mean to. I didn't even know they were talking."

"I told you. I told you they had been texting and you know she was with Stephie when she ran away." He had had his suspicions the night Stephie disappeared. She went for a jog around the block but didn't come back. That same night I was supposed to go with N to the movies but backed out. I backed out and she ended up bringing Stephie home instead. I always wondered what would have happened if I had just gone, as if I could have prevented it all.

"I know, but N said she had just found her. Nobody confirmed anything different. And I asked her about the texts. She said Stephie had expressed an interest but that she had told her it

couldn't happen." My dad never showed me the texts like he said he would. The one he claimed insinuated they had kissed. The one N said was only about a dream. He never showed me.

"If you knew even that, why would you continue? She's your little sister."

I knew it would come to this. It always did. I was older. I should know better. How could I have known this?

"What about her? She knew I was talking to N when all this started. How could she do what she did knowing what she knew? I didn't know anything was going on there. I knew she had run away and you mentioned those texts to me once, but how was I supposed to know the extent of it all? I couldn't have. All you see is how Stephie is the victim, of N and me. But what about me? So I consciously chose to have a relationship with someone that was involved with my sister? I never would have. It's not fair that all this was kept from me."

I was yelling now, not just at him. She said she loved me. I trusted her. Her eyes, her hands, her lips. I felt like throwing up. I wished I could just get away from all this, once and for all.

And then he went into his spiel about how he was talking to Stephie, too. How things with our mom had affected her differently. I knew all of this. And what about me, I wanted to ask. Being older doesn't make it easier. But he had moved on to N. How he had talked to her as well. How he was considering getting the police involved.

"What are you going to do, then," he asked. "I know you are still talking to her. Is that going to stop?"

Why did he have to say it that way? As if I had a choice. I was nineteen and he was treating me like I was five, again. It hadn't been too long since the last serious talk we had, the

“sex talk” that came three years too late. The accusations, the restrictions, the not once “are you okay?”. Where were you, I wanted to say. Where were you when *my* world fell apart?

“Yes,” I said.

“It better,” he told me. “You are both smart girls. I don’t see how you can let someone mess with your head.”

“Have faith in me,” she said. “Give us a real chance.”

“How can I do that?” I asked. “Everything is fucked now. She says you did it. She says it’s true.”

She looked into my eyes and said, “You’re all I want. All I’ll ever want.”

“That doesn’t make this go away.”

“I’ll take you away.”

“No,” I said. “I can’t.”

“You’re in love with me,” she told me. “You always have been. You always will be.”

But as I looked into her eyes I saw a flicker of heat, a glimpse of obsession, and I knew it wasn’t true. But it would continue haunting me, holding me. Took me a while to be set free.

CHAPTER XV

SACRIFICIAL BED

I lie back on the bed as she undresses me. After undoing my jeans she slides them down my legs along with my panties, and her fingers enter the warm crevice between them. I close my eyes and exhale my welcome. As she works her way deeper inside she straddles one of my thighs; she is a firm believer in giving while receiving.

At first it is going very well, the firm curves her thumb traces against the small folds above her buried fingers make me moan. The path her tongue and teeth travel along my neck makes me quiver. But as she begins to find her rhythm, find her pleasure in the friction of my skin, the pressure slackens, her fingers nearly still. She sits up a little higher and air hits the moist trail left from chin to chest, turning it sticky and cold. My eyes flutter open.

She is working harder, I can feel it in the sweat that begins to drip from her forehead to mine, see it in the way she has her eyes pinched shut and her lips parted, slightly curled: the face of hard work and pleasure rolled into one. But her motions stiffen to a simple back and forth that works comfortably with her rocking on my leg. Does she notice this shift? Can she tell that my cries of approval have been replaced by her own?

As she works her way to ecstasy my mind begins to wander. Was it always this way? I seem to remember a time when it gave her pleasure just to see me writhing beneath her, to have me beg her to stop her licking and finger-fucking before I exploded. And now here I am, barely exerting extra breath, while she wails like a wild animal above me.

“Oh yes, baby. You are so fucking hot. You like it like that, don’t you.” She claws my skin, grips my shoulder to keep her grinding focused and firm. She continues the half-hearted attempts to find the spots inside that make me quiver. Can she really believe this is working? I remain silent.

When she finishes she collapses on top of me, caresses my hair, breathes hard into my neck as she attempts to kiss it. “Was it good for you?” she asks and I wonder.

I wonder whether to lay silent on this bed and keep the peace or tell her the truth. I wonder how she can seriously ask me that question. I wonder, strangely, if this is what Jesus felt like—as he washed the filth off feet that pledged to follow him yet found their own way.

The lights were already off when I entered the sanctuary. The music inhabited the thick air around me, swayed against my body as I found an empty seat. As the music grew louder, the drum beat seemed to enter my body, take over, sync with my heart, my pulse. I closed my eyes and exhaled. I lifted my hands.

Lead me to the cross where Your blood poured out

Bring me to my knees, Lord, I lay me down

Rid me of my self I belong to you

So lead me, lead me to the cross

People began to fall around me, some on their hands and knees, some face first on the ground. As the words of praise rolled off my lips I was moved to tears as well. I bowed my head and lifted my voice a little higher but was stunned to silence by an overwhelming wail. I looked up.

A young woman on the altar had fallen to the ground. She was clutching herself as if trying to control the body-wracking sobs exploding from some invisible earthquake within her. To anyone unfamiliar with this scene her convulsing would look like that of an epileptic overcome by a life-threatening seizure, her screams those of an unaccepting widow at her late husband's funeral. The pastor and his wife laid their hands upon her, an attempt to soothe her while praying for her. It did not work. She only became more volatile, volume and movement increasing until they could only stretch a prayer blanket across her body and leave her to her worship.

The song came to an end and the music stopped, the lights came on, and the pastor made his way to the pulpit. Praise and worship was ended with its usual prayer and call for offerings, and the sermon began. He opened with a reminder of the importance of our personal relationship with God, began to read from one of the many exchanges between the Pharisees and Jesus.

“Do not be like the Pharisees with their holier-than-thou attitude, whom God saw as hypocrites, cleaning the outside of the platter till it shines, till it calls the attention of those around you, without ever noticing that the inside is full of muck and grime. *Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity*, Jesus tells them. It's not about us and how we look, it's about Him and how we make him look to others, how we can exalt Him. *Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.*”

“Oh, God,” I say and she smiles.

“Now it's my turn,” she says as she pulls me towards her.

CHAPTER XVI

JUAN

These Hands

We are sitting side by side in the purple plush movie theatre seats. Our legs are propped up on the rails in front of us, our knees touching. I take some of the M&M's he offers, though I don't really want them. Our fingers graze as the bag changes hands. This is the first time they touch even though it is our third date. Should I go for it? Should I reach for his hand? But –

“There's more,” he had told me. “More than this.” More than what I have perceived as love as long as I can remember. “We can have more if we would just wait.” Wait is what he told me. I was still waiting.

The movie begins and I sigh, settle back into my seat, swallow the chocolate and mounting frustration. As the movie progresses from opening credits to introductory scenes, establishing characters and conflicts that only halfway register in my mind, our hands slide from our snacks to our thighs to our knees. The backs of our hands rest against one another for a few minutes. I keep as still as I can as my pores drink in the warmth of his skin.

And then he takes me, fingers every groove before our palms finally meet, kiss. I cannot get enough. My fingers search his, desperate to learn every crevice and crease. I trace the fault lines of his palm, as if just one more go will prevent the length and depth from ever escaping my memory. Our fingertips meet and his work their way up and down, back and forth along my skin, drawing a path from fingers to palm to wrist and back again. I catch my breath as my

forearm begins to tingle. My heart cannot seem to find a steady pace and my breathing remains short and shallow. He pulls me in a little closer; he cradles my elbow in his. Our arms lock into place, flesh to flesh, fingers intertwined. We remain in this position until the last of the ending credits begins to roll off the screen.

And then he relaxes his grip, lets go. We exit the theatre. Placing my hand in the crook of his arm, he ushers me to the car. He opens the door for me and makes sure I am comfortably situated before rounding the car to the driver's side. He starts the engine and our hands find each other again. We sit in silence, leave the talking to them. These hands. These hands that seem to turn back the clock of innocence and discovery. These hands that erase a history of hurt and rushed affairs. These hands that teach me what I always should have known but never really understood, until now. These hands.

Family Ties

I have been invited to eat at Juan's house. The first thing that catches my eyes, strikes me as odd, is that as they spread out the food and utensils on the table, Tico, the family cockatiel, is placed in the center of it all. She is unlike any bird I have ever seen and oddly reminds me of my dog Lucky—round, glassy eyes that seem to know more than they should. Throughout the meal she hops from plate to plate to shoulder, picking out rice grains and noodles as she goes. She is only chastised when she tries to step onto one of the plates, but answers right back with an indignant squawk. She ruffles her white feathers and nips at the accusatory finger before settling on a mound of rice set before her.

They added a chair to their circle of four just for me. To my left sit Juan and his mother. They look so much alike. They both have short thick curls, his black, hers salt and pepper. They have the same light hazelnut complexion, same rounded face angled off at the bottom by a

sharp chin. Their noses are identical as well, perfect right triangles just slightly too small for their faces. Above this feature are their dark, deep set eyes enhanced by dark, thick brows almost always furrowed in concentration, confusion, or anger. But when either face opens up into that rare smile, it is worth it. They have a similar stubborn quality that can cause clashes over minor things, but his will always caves to hers in order to set things right.

On my right are his sister and his father, foreigners at first glance. Though of similar skin tone, Malorie's face is thin and elongated with a nose to match. Small, light eyes are shrouded by shaggy narrow brows just below her narrow, angular forehead. Her small, rounded mouth is always smiling, laughing, poking fun—in good will—at the others. The father, Dave, is tan and has one of those faces that makes you feel like you've seen him before, somewhere. His face is very symmetrical, his gray hair is slicked back, and his bushy eyebrows appear to be the only prominent feature on his face. Much like his looks, he is very quiet, passive, kind of blends into the background unless he has an objection or something important to say.

They are so different from the other two, and from each other, it makes you wonder. I was only slightly surprised when Juan told me that Malorie was his half-sister, they had different fathers. Though it's not something he makes known to everyone—he would always refer to her as “sister” and Dave as “Dad”—it was pretty evident by their extreme differences in appearance and personality. That's when I started my mental comparison of her and Dave.

“So then Dave is her father and your step-father?” I had asked.

This is where the surprise came. He was not the father of either. He married Elizabeth, their mother, after she already had the two of them. I had a whole new respect for Dave, for although their genetic disparity was an indicator, nothing in his attitude towards them would

signal this information. He treated them as his own, loved them as his own, chastised them as his own.

They live in a dynamic I am not used to, one of closeness and comfort. They share every meal as we had this one, something my family had stopped doing when I was in junior high. The only time we could all be found together now (either minus my mom or minus my dad, though) was on holidays or other special occasions. But in this moment they have allowed me to be a part of their complete unit.

This is not to say that they are perfect or that they never have time to themselves. After dinner, they will go off to their own areas within the house. Juan and I have some work to finish on the computer upstairs, his parents will watch TV, his sister will retreat to her room. Yet this comfortableness and openness they have keeps them connected. At any moment you might be subject to an interruption by Malorie jumping into the room in an attempt to scare you, or a powerful shout from Elizabeth calling for assistance in one way or another. This shouting through the house is a common occurrence. I was not used to this and at first it can seem abrasive and aggressive, is even characterized as so in family sitcoms, but it is how they communicate and it works. They are comfortable with it.

You can see their story in their interaction and it makes me think about my own family and why we don't work the way they do. It makes me wonder about what people always say about not being able to choose your family, about how many times I've contemplated the outcome of being able to pick my own. In this case, a choice was made. Dave decided to take Juan and Malorie as his children when he married Elizabeth. Malorie and Juan chose to see him as father minus the "step". They decided to be a family, made a conscious decision to work together and it shows. Is this the difference?

I heard someone say once that love was a choice, a commitment. That the emotional side of it can be fleeting; you won't always like the person, especially when they are doing something particularly upsetting or annoying, but you choose to continue loving them. Many romantic relationships come and go because we choose to let go. It gets too hard and we rethink this commitment because we have an out. We are not physically or genetically bound to this person regardless of promises, or in some cases even vows, that are made. You can divorce a spouse but you can't divorce a family. I saw this as a curse for so long, the fact that no matter what I could not escape the destruction that seemed to surround my dysfunctional family.

But this family chooses to be stuck. They chose to love and accept each other for better or for worse a long time ago and have kept the commitment ever since. They cherish the inseparability that I despised for so long. Being allowed to be a witness to this apparent anomaly, being allowed to participate in it...

“Was that your mother, again?”

“Yes.”

“Please don't tell me she called to ask what you ate.”

Juan began to pick at loose threads on his shirt.

“She called this morning to ask what you had for breakfast, she called to see what you had for lunch, she called to invite us to dinner and we said no because we were making hamburgers, and now she has called to ask if you ate what you said you were going to eat when she called two hours ago. You seriously don't see a problem with this?”

He wouldn't look at me. I knew he was thinking something, had something to say. He just never seemed to formulate the words in time to preempt my next outburst and turn my monody into an actual conversation.

"This is why we can't live there. I won't."

"What do you mean," he asked.

I knew that would get him going. "We are not living with your parents, not even for a day. As long as we are there we will never be the adults, we will always be children. I won't be your wife, the woman of the house, she will."

"That's not true. They respect us. They'll leave us alone."

"The way they do now? She doesn't even trust that I'm going to feed you and you think she will leave us be if we live there? She will always be the one to cook, the care-giver, and the decision-maker. You know I like your mom, but she can be so controlling. There is no competing there. I won't even try."

"She's not like that. She's not manipulative. We've just always been close. I've been her son for 28 years. Having someone in my life will take some adjusting."

"You should have been preparing for this. Did you plan to live there all your life? She knew this was going to happen eventually."

"You just don't understand. My whole family is like that. We're close. You might see it as an unnatural attachment, but that's probably because you're not used to that. You've never had that. And we're Puerto Rican. It's different than what you're used to over here."

"So now you're going to use my family's dysfunction against me. Because I've never known what a 'normal' family, a 'real' family is like, I can't ascertain the difference between a regular mother-son relationship and an abnormal attachment."

“I didn’t mean anything bad about your family. I was just making a point of reference. And you have to remember her health. Last time I just pulled away she went to the hospital. I can’t go through that again.”

Neither can I, I thought. I can’t get attached again just to be dropped, to not matter. But I can’t bring him up. Not again.

“You know what I think the problem is? It’s timing. It’s not that I don’t want us to be on our own, I just think a transition period would be nice. Maybe a month of us living there just so we can have time to get used to it.”

“Who’s the we you are referring to? It should be me and you, but it sounds like it’s you and her. You don’t see how that’s just wrong?”

“Try to put yourself in her shoes. See it from her perspective. She’s losing a lot.”

“You see? And you’re always on her side. She is supposed to see it as gaining a daughter. I’m not Elena, you know. I’m not some crazy bitch that’s never going to let you see your family. I just think there needs to be boundaries. And we need to establish those from the beginning. She needs to stop creating this choice between me and her.”

“I like to give people the benefit of the doubt. And I honestly don’t think she’s doing that. She just needs time.”

I don’t think this is going to work, I am ready to say. Not like this.

“This will take some adjusting, but we can make it work. We will figure something out. Even if what you say is true, she knows she can’t push it too far. She knows I’ll pick you.”

CHAPTER XVII

HOW TO CATCH A CHEATING JESSE

A woman's best friend and worst enemy is her intuition. We usually know when something is awry in our orbital universe. Just how long it takes us to figure it out is where the variations come into play, according to circumstances and (in)securities. But we always know. We always find out. We try to give our men the benefit of the doubt, tell ourselves we are too good to sneak around on, but eventually we can't ignore our gut. Some people say ignorance is bliss. Maybe it is. I wouldn't know. The closest I've come to ignorance is the ignore part of it, and I can't do that any longer. Enough is enough.

When you do a search for this online, on how to catch a cheating spouse, the first hits you will get are the ads. Everything from cell phone spies to GPS tracking devices. They are all very tempting. Take the cell phone software, for instance. The promises of access to every call and text, even the ones that are deleted. What they don't tell you, however, is how to get ahold of the phone in the first place in order to install it. Someone who is sneaking around making secret calls and texts does not just leave their phone lying around. So maybe the GPS is worth a try. Though they do not provide the direct information you would want, the names and numbers he is calling, what is being said, it can tell you where he is the nights he never comes home. The nights he says I'll be right there and then turns off his phone. But the ones that have the best reviews, are the most inconspicuous, because you can't for a second take for granted the fact that he's an idiot, cost a pretty penny. And when your husband is in the habit of putting your

accounts in the red every month, even after you've tried everything from cutting cards to using a monthly cash allowance, it is just not an option.

And so I find myself taking the more active route, playing the part of the private investigator I can't afford. There are tips for this too. On how to assess your situation, how and when to collect evidence, how to go about storing and using said evidence in order to reach your ultimate goal. An airtight case against your spouse, although this doesn't really exist. The evidence is not for him, the books say. It is for you. For the person who knows what's going on but refuses to see it. So you can finally come to terms with what is going on and make your decision. To stay or to go.

Determining the Situation

Going through a checklist of changes in his routine, signs, indicators, that there is indeed a betrayal, my checks qualify me as a woman who is in serious trouble. I have already been printing out bank statements at work, highlighting the charges at bars and the abnormally large ATM withdrawals. Sara has been helping me. It is her classroom, the one across the hall from mine, that I run to the second I have a chance to log on to my banking website and see all the new charges from the night before. Her words that help me stay focused for the rest of the day. That lead me on this crazy bar hopping escapade.

"You need to find out exactly what is going on," she told me. "Not all bars are the same. If the bars he goes to are bars with women, then you know what he is going there for. But if they are just regular bars, if it's just the alcohol, then maybe you can help him."

"How am I supposed to find that out," I asked.

"We are going out tonight," she said.

And we did. She would pick me up at seven and we would run down the list of charges on the account. Well only two places really. The other two I had been to. Buffalo Wild Wings and Simon Sez. Though there are bound to be women there when he goes, they are not technically places you go to see women. Not the way we were fearing.

She picked me up at my townhouse and we headed to El Toro Club. The original one by the mall. The one that came out as #1 on the statements. The car was clean, but she apologized for the mess as usual. “The kids were hungry on the way home,” she told me. “The car smells like food.” I hadn’t even noticed.

“I’m going to tell you something, and I’m sorry if it makes you mad, but I need to say it. You know I’m your friend and will support you with whatever you decide, but you need to figure all this out before you have kids. I know you’ve been talking about a baby, and I know you think you’re ready. But just think about what you’re doing right now, and how that will work with a kid.”

I didn’t say anything. But I didn’t stop her either.

“A kid doesn’t fix these problems. I found that out with my ex. There was this one time that he went out when I was six months pregnant with Eddie. And I was driving around at night, after midnight, like you’ve told me you’ve done before with Jesse. I found him at a topless bar. At that place, Stilletto’s. You’ve seen it, right? Off the expressway? Well anyway, I called my brother and told him to help me get my ex. He told me to go home. To deal with it in the morning, but I told him that if he didn’t come get him for me, that I was going in there myself to get him out. Imagine what that’s like. To be six months pregnant and ready to go into a topless bar to find your husband and take him home.”

What do you say to something like that? I didn’t even want to think about it.

“What you do is your decision, but I just want you to think about one thing. All those times you are out driving late at night, looking for him. Who’s looking for you?”

We had arrived at the purple building on S. 23rd. I don’t know why our wardrobe mattered to us then, but we had coordinated, like we did sometimes at work, black tops, dark jeans, black boots. I guess we didn’t want to stick out. I entered the smoke-filled room first. It wasn’t much to look at. Several low-lying tables to my left, surrounding a wood dance platform. There was a stage too, but it was small, so jam packed with instruments I wondered how the musicians were able to fit. No dancers, no poles. The bar to the right was nothing to look at. An older gentleman manned the counter surrounded by bottles and glasses, another gentleman of similar age sat on the stool in front of him. They were both dressed to match the tejano music coming from the speakers.

We were back in the car in about five minutes. There seemed to be no immediate concerns about the place. It was just a bar. A tejano bar, at that. Jesse hated tejano music, even more than I did. I didn’t get it.

The next stop was Skean Dhu, a Scottish pub in Mission that had been around for a while. I remember it because it is in the plaza where my favorite restaurant as a kid used to be. Tom & Jerry’s. My mom and dad used to take me and my sisters there on Fridays. We liked it because you could write on the tables, and because they had great nachos. We listened to the radio most of the way there. Sara’s car was the only place I listened to country. Not my personal favorite, but I never complained.

I don’t know why I was so nervous at this place. I didn’t want to open the door. But with Sara right behind me, egging me on, I pulled it open and stuck my head inside. I guess I was expecting it to be dark, like El Toro Club, but it wasn’t. All the lights were on, and the three

men at the bar in the back, the only men in the place, turned and looked at me. They were big white men, reminded me of the kind of men they get to play Santa on TV. Only they were dirty, and sweaty, even though they were only wearing the white sleeveless undershirts I used to steal from my dad's drawer to sleep in. I pulled my head back out.

"We don't have to go in there," I told Sara. "It's just a bunch of old men. And they were staring at me."

She started laughing. "Probably because of your red hair and freckles," she said.

"Gross," I said, already on my way back to the car. "Let's get out of here."

"Come back here little red head," she said, running after me. "We've never seen anyone like you in here."

I was laughing too now. This whole thing was ridiculous. Sara and I getting dressed up only to have creepy men checking us out. We wouldn't forget about this for a while. Things got a little more serious on the way home, though. I guess she wanted to recap.

"I guess we can pretty safely say it's just the alcohol. At least for now. The part that I don't get is how much he spends. That's what made me think there might be someone else with him. How do you spend \$400 in one night?"

But she didn't know him. Had never tried to prove to him that she could be fun, a drinking buddy. She didn't know how it felt to try to keep up. Shot after shot. Drink after drink. Until you couldn't even remember what number you were on. Going to the restroom, promising you just had to pee, only to empty your stomach into the porcelain bowl all in one go. To come back to another drink waiting in his hands.

I had to say, that for a rookie, for a chick, as he would say, I did alright. I never passed out, never tripped, never slurred. But I did get sleepy. And at the end of the night when we had

drunk what I thought was more than enough, for us, he took me home. Tucked me under the thick blanket on the mattress. Turned out all the lights. Walked out the back door.

“Where are you going?” I would sometimes manage to ask. I wouldn’t get an answer til the next morning. Online.

Evaluate Your Mate’s History

There are all sorts of ways to tackle this one. Many suggestions on interviewing past girlfriends. I didn’t know any. Not personally. Others to talk to family. I had tried that before. Even though I had asked his mom to keep our conversation between us, she didn’t. And I heard it later. The only other angle involved his friends. I really only knew one. His best friend from high school. Steve.

“I’m sorry to bother you again. Especially so late. But do you know where Jesse is? He said he was going to be with you.”

“Look, Mel,” he said. “I’m not going to lie to you. You’re a nice girl. He asked me to tell you he was here if you asked, but he’s not. He hasn’t been here all night. I honestly haven’t seen him in a while. He started hanging out with some new people. From work I guess. I’ve never met them but I don’t think they’re any good. I think he’s heading down the wrong road again.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m gonna tell you some stuff. Because I think you deserve to know what you are getting into. But you can’t tell him I told you. I mean it, Mel. I’m gonna deny it.”

“Okay. I won’t say anything.”

“Alright,” Steve said. “I’m trusting you. When we were in high school, we got into some stupid shit. Yeah, we would drink, everyone would drink, but we had this friend. He had

access to some crazy shit. We did pot every once in a while, but usually it was something else. Something stronger. We were kids. Didn't know better I guess. But we would go out into the fields behind my house and just get fucked up and mess around. But it changed us. It changed him. He started acting all messed up all the time. Started doing it more often, without me. And he would lie about it too. Get all defensive and angry, start throwing my shit in my face. Telling me I couldn't judge him. We eventually stopped. That friend ended up getting so coked up he killed himself. And then I got married, and had my kid. Yeah, I still drink. But not like we used to. Nothing like we used to."

"So you're saying you think Jesse's on drugs? What the hell am I supposed to do about that? I don't know anything about that. I don't think I can deal with this."

"I don't know, Mel. But the way he was acting then, he's acting like that now. I've asked him why he's doing what he's doing to you. And he just brings up all our old shit, asking who I am to question what he does. What you need to do is talk to his family. Have you ever seen that show *Intervention*? I watch it a lot. You should check it out. It'll show you what to do. Maybe his parents can help you."

"I don't think they will. Jesse hates it when I try to talk to his family. I mean, he goes crazy. And either way, after all these years, you don't think they know who he is, what he does? He lived in their house. I've seen him walk in at one in the morning, too drunk to stand up straight, crashing into doors and walls. You think they didn't hear that? I don't think they'll do a thing. I don't think I can do anything either."

"I guess that's up to you. But I don't know about you giving up on him. You used to make him better, once. I don't think anyone else will be able to reach him. I sure can't. If you really love him, help him. At least try."

Don't Divulge Information to Your Mate

One key thing I see repeated everywhere is not to show your hand. Don't reveal your cards till the time is right. As you gather evidence you are supposed to keep copies of important documents hidden and never write anything down. Everything should be stored in a mental filing cabinet, waiting for the final confrontation. But I've never been a master of the mental checklist, and I don't like to wait.

My whole body begins to quiver as I open up the envelope. I know I will hear it when he gets home but I have to check, have to know. I look over the detailed billing and see what I suspected all along. A strange number fills every page. Calls and texts at all hours of the day and night, sporadically peppered with those from me and others I know.

My shaky fingers find my phone and begin to dial. The phone rings and rings, and then voicemail picks up.

“This is Marissa, sorry I missed your call...”

Marissa, I remembered her from church. She was his most serious girlfriend before me. He used to take her with him when I was still too young to join the youth group. But I remember seeing her in her midriff tops, her acid washed jeans, her combat boots. It was her picture I had found in an old pair of his jeans hanging in the back of his closet. During a routine pocket check I had done last month. He hadn't been able to fit into those jeans since before we started dating. I don't know why he still had them. He used this in his defense, said the picture was from back then as well. I believed him then, just made him throw it away. But not after this.

I logged onto his AT&T account. I wanted to see just how long this had been going on. Months and months and months it seems. I can't text while I'm at work, he would tell me. But he could sure text her.

I decided to call him and tell him I was leaving. I told him about all his calls. All his calls to her.

“What do you talk about?” I asked him. “What can you possibly have to talk about with her?”

He said it had all been an innocent mistake. That he had seen her name in the database at work of people with outstanding warrants. He had only called her to warn her to get that taken care of. And then they had just started catching up. Just like old friends.

“Does she know about me?” I asked. “Does she know you’re married?”

“Of course,” he said. “How could she not?”

But I didn’t believe him. Not this time. “I’m leaving,” I told him. “And there’s nothing you can do.”

He asked me to wait. To wait till his shift was over so we could talk. He would explain everything. But I didn’t want to hear it. I wanted out. So he got angry. I’ll burn the house down, he told me. And don’t think I won’t get to you, too, he said. Then he threatened Lucky, my pit bull, a gift from him. He was supposed to be our baby until the real one came. But Lucky was a mama’s boy and that made Jesse mad. And whenever there were fights he forgot what he was supposed to represent, to me, to us. I’ll kill him, he told me. I’ll slit his throat.

I called Kiki and asked her if I could stay with her for a while, that I didn’t want to call Dad unless I was sure I was never going back. “Is it okay if I bring Lucky? I don’t think he’s safe.”

But he got home before I left. “Here, boy,” he said as he walked through the door.

“Stop it,” I told him. “Leave him alone.” But he just smiled.

“So you think you’re leaving,” he said. “You don’t want to do that.”

“What else can I do, Jesse? I’m not gonna just sit here while you’re out fucking around.”

“I’m not,” he said. “It’s not what you think.”

“How do I know?” I asked. “How do I know anything you say is true? You lied about the picture, you hid this from me. I can’t trust you.”

“I’ll call her,” he said. “I’ll tell her she can’t talk to me anymore, okay?”

“Okay. You’ll call her. But in front of me. And then you’ll change your number.”

“Why? That’s not necessary. I’ve had this number for years. And this is the number all my work contacts have. “

“Anybody who really needs your number, you can give it to. The rest of the stupid people that you are not supposed to be talking to won’t have it. It’s only fair.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll change it tomorrow.”

“Now the call,” I said.

He tried to walk into the other room but I didn’t let him. “I have to see the number,” I said. “And I have to hear what you say.”

And so he showed me the screen as he dialed. I heard when she picked up.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Okay.”

“I’m not gonna be calling you anymore and I don’t want you calling me.”

“Tell her why,” I said. “Or else it doesn’t count.”

“I’m married,” he said. “And we can’t talk anymore.”

“Wow,” was all I heard her say and then he hung up.

Know When to Quit

I was sitting in the Starbucks inside Barnes and Noble with my dad. It was Christmas break and he had met me here after the meeting for the club I supervised at work. I was sponsor of the school newspaper and cosponsor to the robotics club. We had a competition coming up and we had to be ready. No matter what.

“When you first came to me,” he said. “You said you wanted to leave.”

“I know,” I said, after sipping my white chocolate mocha cappuccino.

“But now that you have the information you were looking for, you hesitate. You said you wanted to check the most recent bank statements and Sara took you to do that. What did you find?”

“He’s spending money at bars, again.”

“Okay, and then you told me you wanted to find out where he went Christmas Eve. He left his parents’ house early because he told you he was called in to work, but you didn’t believe him. Especially since he didn’t answer you all morning and was late getting to grandma’s house Christmas Day. I went to the police station. I talked to the chief. He didn’t work the jail that night.”

“Right,” I said. “That’s what you just told me.”

“So what I don’t understand is what else you are looking for. If you are waiting to catch him in the act, red-handed, you’ll probably be waiting forever. He obviously had been doing this for a very long time. So you need to decide. Do you want to talk to him again, maybe get him to counseling, although I don’t see that he would go, and try to make it work? Or are you ready to move on? It’s hard to leave, mamita. I know. I avoided it with your mother for a very long

time. But some people don't change. They will just keep hurting you and using you as long as you let them."

"I know," I said.

"So what are we going to do?"

I decided to leave. We planned the move that night. I was to wait with my dad, in the meantime. He didn't want me alone. It was Sara's daughter's birthday and they were going to the movies. I went with them. It wasn't until I was in the dark theatre that I started to cry.

My dad asked Stephie and her boyfriend to help. She had a truck. We waited in the H-E-B parking lot while my dad went to tell Jesse he needed to disappear for a couple of hours so I could get my things.

"What's this about?" my dad said he asked.

"You know exactly what this is about," my dad had told him. And he left.

Stephie helped me stuff all my clothes and books into the Tupperware containers we had bought at Wal-Mart.

"Just get the essentials," my dad said. "We'll come for the rest later."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

Juan and I are in the bathroom connected to my room. My new room in my dad's new house that he bought three months after I moved back in. He just got remarried. Two months before Kiki. She wasn't too happy about that. But I don't really mind. It's Sara he's married.

My room is upstairs, along with Stephanie's and the kids'. She has three. My brothers and sister, now. We have just brought two of my dumbbells upstairs, the 25 pounders, to test my scale. I am convinced it is weighing me wrong and it is pissing me off. Juan doesn't think it matters but I do. I'm not working this hard for nothing.

"It doesn't matter if it's a little off," he is saying. "If the numbers are consistently dropping, then you are still losing weight."

But his mathematical logic doesn't matter. Not now. I had paid \$50 for this "most accurate" digital scale and need to know if it's doing its job.

"Just test it," I say and he drops the weights on the scale. It read 50.4 lbs.

"You see," I said. "It's off. Try it again."

He is laughing now. "That's not very much of a discrepancy," he says. "Especially since these are rubber head dumbbells. It might be them that are off."

"Fine," I say, pushing the weights to the floor. "I'm still subtracting .4 pounds when I weigh myself from now on."

There was a knock at the door. "What's going on in here?" my dad asks.

“We’re in the bathroom, Dad,” I say.

Juan stands up to shake my dad’s hand, but when I see that curling lip I stay seated right where I am. “What was all that noise?”

“We were just testing out my scale,” I say. “I thought it was weighing me wrong so we brought up the weights to check.”

“It’s late,” he says. “And Stephe is asleep. You know how she gets when you wake her.”

“It’s only 9:45,” I say. “So just because she’s asleep everyone has to go to bed? No one can make a sound? There have been plenty of times when I’ve been in bed and she’s had the TV on or people over.”

He pauses for a moment, staring down at me, like we’re having a contest. I don’t think he knows how to register this situation. “Just keep it down, please,” he says and then walks out.

I hug my knees to my chest and lower my head to meet them. I sit like this for a while.

“I guess I should go,” Juan tells me.

“Why,” I ask. “Because of my Dad?”

“Yes,” he says. “I guess it is kind of late.”

“No it’s not,” I tell him. “This is what I’ve been telling you about. I can’t stand it here anymore. I’m 24 years old. And I’m not here by choice. I have a house. I can’t help it that I can’t stand to be there. That it doesn’t look like it’s gonna sell anytime soon. I should just move back over there.”

“You can’t,” he says. “It’s not safe.”

“What am I supposed to do then? I can’t stand it here. It’s just like it was before, before I left the first time. Switching houses didn’t change a thing. Everything is about her. I can’t

turn a light on in the house if she's not up yet. Can't watch TV if she's already asleep. It's crazy how this entire house is run by her. And I'm not moving over there with you. So what else can I do?"

"We'll figure something out," he tells me, pulling me to my feet.

I'm lying on Juan's bed, reading. He is working on the table cards for Kiki's wedding. It's tomorrow. He's been at it for hours, ensuring the ink is the exactly right shade of purple, that the font has the right amount of curl and sophistication, is big enough to be read from a distance, but not big enough to be tacky. He's a perfectionist.

"They wouldn't have asked us to do this if you hadn't offered," I remind him. "If we hadn't done such a great job with the slideshow."

"I know," he says. "I'm almost done."

We have decided that I am going to stay here tonight. Like last night. His family is out of town. And mine is busy preparing for a wedding. And it's late. As I lie here, almost finished with my book, a free romance novel that came with the Nook he bought me for my birthday, I start to think about our latest plans. We've been talking about getting married. He suggested moving in together, maybe renting a place, but I just can't bring myself to do that. I still want my dad, my family, to approve.

But we want to be together. We don't like all the back and forth and the "I have to go, it's late." I'm not used to that anymore. I know what everyone will say. It's too soon. But then again, how can you ever know for sure?

We've been honest with each other from the very beginning. About everything. It was a preventive measure, on my part. I wanted him to know what he was getting into. But he never

even flinched. Not at the divorce, though its finalization was a small road block at the beginning, not at my family, not at N. And he had told me about Elena. His only real relationship, though it hadn't even been real at all. She had been married, had used him, would still be if he hadn't finally walked away. I think when he met me.

I think about how he will always carry a part of her inside of him, like the Jesse in me. The Jesse in me that makes me want to walk away every time we fight. The part of him in me that makes me lash out when he jokes about things like women and housework. The part that has me scared out of my mind. Afraid I'm the reason it all went wrong.

I know the love they show on TV, in movies, in books doesn't exist. The kind of love some people wait their whole lives for. I learned that love wasn't real a long time ago. Convinced myself to hold on to what I had because I was lucky. Lucky to have even that. I felt I had been chosen to love him, to love Jesse. That it was my lot in life to try to fix a man I felt I had ruined.

But that's not love. Love is not at first sight, not head over heels, not to die for. Not all the time. It can be, at first. But the rest of the time it is what you make it. It is what you choose. Just the way you choose who you love. Maybe at first it is those sparks, those butterflies, that draw you to them. But it is your choice to stay. Long after the sparks are gone. After you happen to see a spark with someone else. Love is choosing to stay. Because you said you would.

The upcoming move will be the third one since I left Jesse. And it will probably be back to that house like a cage, the house that means waiting. But I don't want to wait anymore.

Juan tells me he won't leave me and I think I believe him. He says that he has always been loyal. That he doesn't leave unless he has to, is forced to. He says the day he invited me

into his house to help his family decorate the tree he had already decided—he already knew. He is choosing, he says. Choosing me.

Juan joins me on the bed; he has finished. He slides under the blanket next to me and I know I want to choose him too. But if I choose him now I have to choose him every day. Again and again. I don't know if I'm ready for that. I'm afraid there might come a day when I won't want to choose him, even though I said I would. What happens then?

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Melissa King was born in McAllen, Texas, was raised in Mission, Texas and is a product of Hidalgo High School. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English, with a minor in Biology, from The University of Texas-Pan American in 2006. In December 2010, she received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing – Nonfiction.

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