

CHANGING PLACES

By

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Under the Supervision of Allyson Loomis, M.F.A.

This project is an examination, recognition, and celebration of the hard work it is to grow up in today's world and become one's own person. This is the first three chapters of a novel consisting of a series of young adult short stories that explores the interconnection of people and place, specifically one very rural valley road in the Driftless region of Wisconsin that is experiencing change. The stories follow a school year with the main character of each story being a high school student and minor characters being their families, other families living on the same road, classmates, teachers, and community members.

The young people in the stories go through many changes in their families, their peer groups, their communities, and society at large. The land changes through the seasons and year to year. These changes are shown by going through the seasons of a single school year with main characters in different grades. Each month of the school year, a story focuses on one main character with other students as supporting characters and their interactions with the land. These stories weave together and by showing a freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior change and develop through the stories of one year, it represents how a person would grow through four years of high school.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

I have been teaching for nearly thirty years and have worked with thousands of students. The more I teach and the more I get to know my students, the more proud I am of the challenges they overcome and the growth they work through. This project is an examination, recognition, and celebration of the hard work it is to grow up in today's world and become one's own person. To do this, I will develop a series of young adult short stories exploring the interconnection of people and place, specifically one very rural valley road in the Driftless region of Wisconsin that is experiencing change. The stories will follow a school year with the main character of each story being a high school student and minor characters being their families, other families living on the same road, classmates, teachers, and community members.

Importance of Place

The first time I became aware of the connection of people and place was when I was five in 1975. My parents divorced and my father moved out of the house. I never recall seeing him in the house after that. Around that same time, my best friend who lived just down the street moved to the other side of town. It may have only been across town, but it might as well have been a different state since I could no longer see and play with him. Although I didn't understand it much at the time, it was his absence that I connected to his empty backyard and the deserted playground at the end of the street where we used to play. In both situations, the connection of people and a place impacted me.

My awareness of place, and nature particularly, continued throughout my grade school years. My mother loved the outdoors, and we would often camp, hike, or cross-country ski on

weekends and school breaks. She was active in the Methodist Church and a single parents group that offered many outdoor activities. In the winter, we cross country skied during the day and slept on the church basement floor at night. In warmer weather, we took canoe, bike, or hike excursions during the day and camped at church campgrounds or state parks at night. When I was eight, my mother bought a cargo van, installed a box we could sit on in the back, and took her three sons under the age of 14 out to the Beartooth Mountains in Montana. What I thought at the time was ordinary, I have grown to see as quite extraordinary since this was the late 1970s without cell phones, GPS, or credit cards.

Because my mother worked, I was a latch key kid throughout all of my primary and secondary school. After school and all day during the summer, I had what could generously be called free range parenting, with much more emphasis on the free range and less on the parenting. My days were filled with playing baseball at the local park on the edge of town, exploring the fields next to the park, and bicycling the surrounding neighborhood which was especially fun during rainstorms with flooded streets. When my mother would come home from work to find my brothers and I had not done our chores, we would tend the garden as a family following the seasons by planting, weeding, and harvesting.

Being outside in so many different places all year long made me appreciate the different environments. And seeing how our preparation, equipment, and clothing changed for the different locations and activities we were doing made me cognizant that places influence how people interact in and with them.

Later, in the late 1980s, this awareness developed more in high school when I read *A Walk Across America* by Peter Jenkins and *The Walk West* by Barbara Jenkins and Peter Jenkins.

Their detailing of the people they met and the places they went inspired me to bike across America, which I did when I was 25. Biking from Washington state to Maine allowed me to see a wide variety of landscapes and the people that inhabited them. I loved it all, especially the rural spaces, and I remember the pull of the mountains reminding me of the Beartooths I had hiked when I was eight.

The first time I recall someone explaining their deep connection to the land was when I taught a travel-study class in the late 1990s with two teacher friends through Colorado, Utah, and the Dakotas. We were watching the purples and pinks of the sunset fade away and the stars start to emerge over an expansive view of the desert, brush, and canyon at Dead Horse State Park in Utah when my friend Brian breathed deeply and said how his soul resonated with the desert. At the time, I thought about the Rockies and my family's trip to the Beartooths and figured the mountains were my place. Later when we took the class to Rocky Mountain National Park, I felt the draw again. So much so that after the class was done, I returned to Colorado for a month of camping and hiking in the mountains.

It was during this trip that I discovered the place that truly resonated with me. While staying at a Boy Scout camp turned youth hostel, I watched a meteor shower with some foreign-born tourists. When they asked where I was from, I tried to explain the beauty of my home region in Iowa County, Wisconsin. I tried to convey how the deepness and variety of greens in the landscape were delicious to the eyes. Robert Johnson captures this sentiment in a collection from The Driftless Writing Center called *Contours* when he says: "I had dropped my art major when I realized none of my palette's greens would ever match the ones alive and well right here." I tried to explain how the rolling hills spoke. How the seasons ebbed and flowed and lived.

They did not understand, and I was not able to explain it to them. That was when I started to understand how the Driftless resonated with me.

In 1999, I was able to move to 12 acres in the country with a house that was built with windows and porches aligned to the sunrise and sunset. After living there for a few years, I realized the land had grown into me and I into it. And as I looked around, I saw that others felt similarly. I learned that this was a special area and had been so for centuries. It is known as the Driftless Region because the glaciers of the last ice age missed this region, and it is now common to see “Driftless” bumper stickers. Native Americans have long inhabited this land and given the large number of effigy mounds still intact, they found this region special and spiritual as well.

In 1999, I also found that my father had lived in Dodgeville and had gone to Dodgeville High School, where I worked, back when his father was the reverend at the Dodgeville United Methodist Church from 1947 to 1949. When I visited the church, I was introduced to my first piece of local literature. I was nearly giddy when I saw my grandfather’s name in “The History of the Dodgeville Methodist Church,” by Mrs. J. Charles Pile. The text was a bit blurry from many generations of copies of the original 14 pages of typewritten text, but there he was with details of his redecorating and building improvements to the church. Today, one can still see the steeple of the church serving as a honeymoon suite at a local hotel.

With this introduction to local writing, I tried to find more. Most of what I found was through the local historical society and was a memoir or a non-fiction history. I then searched for local fiction in the closest bookstores in towns about ten and twenty miles away in opposite direction. They had Madison authors like Jacquelyn Mitchard, but nothing from the Driftless. Even in 2011 when Arcadia Books opened in Spring Green about twenty miles north, their local

section had mostly Madison, Milwaukee, and Eau Claire writers. The one exception was David Rhodes's *Driftless*.

During this time, I started a bicycle tour and bicycle tour services business where I traveled from North Dakota to Texas and from Montana to Michigan. I saw many regions including amazing mesas, vast prairies, Big Sky Country, rivers, wetlands, and Great Lakes. I saw cities, big towns, small towns, and rural areas-all of them someone's home, most of them beautiful, and many of them unique, but none that resonated with me like the Driftless Area.

I have lived in the Driftless longer than I have anywhere, and it is still what I consider home even though I now have a house in Middleton and work in Minnesota. During my time there, I grew to understand how the land influences the people and the people influence the land. I saw and experienced how the push and pull of the changing seasons acted on the land and people and how the land and people reacted to the seasons. It is this interplay between nature and landscape and the humans residing there that I want to explore in this project. As Eudora Welty says in her essay *Place in Fiction*, "place has a good deal to do with making the characters real, that is, themselves." She goes on to say "feelings are bound up in place" and that "place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind."

In this project, I will explore this place and character connection and express the honest feelings of the place as I have grown to know through literature like the prairie town of Bentrock in *Montana 1948* by Larry Watson or the vast desert in *Red* by Terry Tempest Williams or rural wilderness of Kaneq, Alaska in *The Great Alone* by Kristin Hannah.

Since my initial search, there has been tremendous growth in literature about the Driftless. Many are historic nonfiction like *Driftless Stories* by John Motoviloff which has many

essays about hunting and fishing, or *Ridge Stories* by Gary Jones which has stories of the people and animals on a rural farm. The more recent *Crossing the Driftless* by Lynne Diebel recounts a canoe trip on the Driftless waterways. All express a love of the land and an appreciation for the uniqueness of the area. An extensive collection of writing is amassed in *The Driftless Reader*, which has works dating back to 1674 about the geology, ecology, and people of the region with a notable including of selections about pre-European times. Current literature of the region is kept strong in *Contours*, a collection of contemporary writers from the Driftless Writing Center which is also ensuring future writing of the region with a growing offering of classes and projects.

But talking about the uniqueness and literature of the Driftless region would be incomplete without mentioning the Emmy award-winning documentary *Decoding the Driftless* and the books *Driftless* and *Jewelweed* by David Rhodes. *Decoding the Driftless* showed the special, visually stunning features of the Driftless, and with its repeated playing on PBS stations, exposed the region to an audience that may have never heard of it. And David Rhodes exquisitely captures the beauty of the region around the small fictional town of Words, the quirkiness of the people there, and how each influence the other. I recall a scene where he describes a character driving his motorcycle without headlights at night and carving the curves of the road through the rolling hills and feeling that Rhodes had captured the connection of the land and the people.

My project captures the love I have for the Driftless region and shows how the people of the region influence the land and how the land influences the people. This project captures what I was not able to explain to my fellow travelers so many years ago in Colorado: the beauty and uniqueness of the Driftless.

Young Adult Literature

What exactly defines young adult literature is open to debate. Some histories explain that young adult literature has its roots in special sections librarians created for teenagers in the early 1900s (Doherty). Today, some say the teen range is too small and “now includes readers as old as 25” (Cart). Others say the entire young adult literature genre is “marketing-driven” (Brown). Still others bemoan that young adult bookshelves are often filled with preteen series like *Goosebumps*, *Babysitters Club*, and *Sweet Valley Kids* or with adult classics like *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *The Call of the Wild* (Crowe). However it is defined, the growing influence of young adult literature is evident with series like *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *Hunger Games* and authors like Tracy Wolff, Sarah J. Mass, and John Green.

My introduction to young adult literature started in late grade school or junior high when I read *The Outsiders* and *Tex* by S. E. Hinton. I was not aware of it at the time, but I was reading works from the “first golden age” of young adult literature (Cart). In these works, and others I would soon discover, I found windows to new perspectives and worlds of new understanding. In retrospect, I was probably seriously depressed after the end of fifth grade when my best friend moved out of state. This was my third serious loss of a relationship (one father and two best friends) in six years, a lot for anyone, especially a young introvert. In the late seventies and early eighties, mental health care for young people was not what it is today. And with a single mother busy working and trying to raise three boys, it if wasn’t bleeding, it wasn’t a concern. It was through literature that I found understanding.

The mental health treatment I received, or rather didn't, is representative of a larger issue I see with young adults. Throughout my years of teaching, I have seen young people, and their literature, discounted or discredited and I agree with young adult author Leigh Bardugo who said "In culture and media, young adult [literature] is frequently met with a sneer and contempt...There is a desire to wave off the concerns and worries and ambitions of teenagers" (White). It seems some adults are unwilling to acknowledge the full and complex lives young adults have. When I was student teaching in 1993, one student was reprimanded for missing school by the vice-principal. When I talked to her, I found out her mother had lost her job and the student was working full time to feed and house her sister. Whether the vice-principal did not ask why the student was missing school, or was not understanding if he found out, I am not sure, but in any event, the vice-principal was engaging with the student without understanding.

And as I have more experience in more situations with young people, I have found their lives are more and more complex. My work the last several years in alternative education has allowed me to have much closer relationships with my students, partly because the philosophy of alternative education is relationships first and partly because I have had smaller class sizes, something necessary to get to know students better, but all too often rare. During this time, I also learned of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) research of the late 1990s which started being used in education. My understanding of how ACES influence young adults, and how many of my students have ACES and the high number of ACES they do have, has made me appreciate the complexity of their lives even more.

Some of the complex lives of my students have included: A student who walked downstairs to find his father holding a gun after murdering his mother (in effect, he immediately became an orphan because his father went to jail and he was raised by his 18 year old brother); a

student who was thrown out of their home when their parent found they were gay and had to couch surf while trying to find a place to live; students who cared for ailing family members; a student who was involved in a gang shooting and was sent to live with a cousin three states away (he learned to walk again with a cane, but shrapnel worked its way to the skin surface, so he was unable to wear a backpack and was dependent on others); students who were users and wanted to get clean, but did not have resources to get the tools they need and were in the environment that caused them to start using.

This project tells the stories of young people and shows the complexities of their lives. As young adult author E. Lockhart said during a panel discussion on the public radio program 1A, “the readers of YA have actual needs and issues that are important to the writers who create books for them” (White). That is what I am doing in this project, particularly the young people in rural settings. I see examples of urban stories that speak to contemporary young adults in works like *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas or *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. While *All American Boys* gives great details of the city and the neighborhood and how the people are influenced by and interact in that setting, my goal is to connect the rural landscape and the real, complex lives of the young people living in and with it.

My students love the pacing of *Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon Draper; *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes, which, unprovoked, a recent student who rarely spoke praised as “a really good book”; and *The Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen, which another student said was “fire” and that his friends “HAD to read it” – emphasis his. Although my chapters may be longer than a few pages, each chapter will be broken into different scenes that will keep the story moving forward similar to a play. While *A Raisin in the Sun* has long acts all set in an apartment, there are many entrances, exits, and shifts in conversation, so the story seems to be made of many smaller

stories. I am incorporating smaller scenes within my chapters to keep reader interest and move the story along.

I also give multiple perspectives to show more of the challenges rural young people face today. To accomplish this, I focus different chapters on different main characters. Like Ernest Gaines does in *A Gathering of Old Men*, I have a different main character in each of the early chapters and then revisit them as main characters in later chapters. Like Gaines, main characters will be included as minor characters in other chapters and their stories will be woven together. My intent is to give a picture of a community that is filled in piece by piece, much like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Change

Most of the time I lived in the Driftless I lived on 12 acres in the country several miles from the closest town. A third of a mile driveway led to a house that had no need for curtains. Truly rural. As a rural resident for twenty years, and as a teacher in the area for longer, I saw many political, social, and environmental changes. On my road, portions of large farms were sold off and homes were built on one-acre parcels. A house with orchard and woodland were purchased from an elderly conservative Christian matriarch of a dairy farm family by a liberal, Jewish Chicago chiropractor as a vacation property that would be used for two weeks out of the year. The matriarch passed away and her home was bulldozed, the one child who remained in the area having long ago built a modern home and given up the dairy business for owning a lumberyard and raising a dozen beef cattle for the tax benefits. An elderly couple moved into town and their old stone farmhouse was lovingly restored by triathlon-loving wives.

People have had an effect on the land since inhabiting it, but the pace of change seems to have increased in the most recent years. All around the area, farmland has been developed for residential and commercial purposes. Towns keep growing house by house, expanding their footprint into what was once farmland. Large farms have been divided into multiple hobby farms or sold off to industry like Vortex Optics which purchased over one hundred acres of fields and built its world headquarters, a \$32 million, 255,000 square foot facility, just 6 miles from my former house (Vortex). A few miles away, an interchange for a growing town was built for the four-lane highway adding miles of new frontage road in what had been prime farmland. In other areas, land has been reclaimed and restored to prairie while conservancy and wildlife areas have expanded.

Not only has the landscape changed, but the people have as well. Although the changes I noticed on my road may be anecdotal, the community has changed and become more diverse as well. From 2012 to 2022, according to the SchoolDigger.com website which takes its data from the governmental National Center for Education Statistics, the population of students of color at the high school increased from 25 to 42 students, an increase of 68 percent. Since the white student population decreased from 394 to 341 students, or 13.5 percent, during the same time, the student of color percentage of the entire student population increased by 83.8 percent over the ten-year period (Dodgeville). During my time at the school, I saw a shift from homosexuality being widely ridiculed and disdained by the students to the first openly gay student being embraced and showcased as the only male dancer in the band color guard.

While there has been a lot of reporting of the divide between progressive, urban America and conservative, rural America, my experience has been more nuanced. Looking at election results by county, it is true that rural counties often lean conservative or Republican and urban

counties lean progressive or Democratic. But looking closer, things are changing. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* notes that “The GOP’s traditional suburban base...in southeastern Wisconsin has become less lopsided in its politics. It is not only less red than it was a decade ago, but it’s growing more slowly than it did in the past” (Gilbert). Rob Mentzer, the Wisconsin Public Radio rural communities reporter responded to the claim by the Washington Post that Wisconsin is actually two states – urban blue and suburban/rural red – with a Twitter thread saying, “this is just completely wrong” (@robertmentzer). He mentions Boulder Junction, a town of less than 1,000 people in Vilas County in Northern Wisconsin, as one example of a town where the majority of the town voted for Biden, but the majority of the county voted for Trump. When the media showed the Wisconsin election map by county, the entirety of Vilas County appeared red.

And rural young people can see and feel the diversity in their changing community that may be missed by most of the media, particularly when they are “questioning the values of their family of origin and the institutions that have shaped them” as young adult author E. Lockhart said (White). Young adult author Leigh Bardugo goes further saying this “speaks to something ...particularly young people are experiencing right now of feeling disenfranchised and unsure of where they fit in the existing power structures.” So high schoolers are in a world that is changing dramatically, while high school has always been a time of great change. I continually see this in my students year after year of how they mature throughout the year and from year to year.

Perhaps this change in students is what has drawn me to teaching high school for so long. I have taught middle school and adults, but seeing the profound changes high school students go through has captivated me my entire career. No longer children, but not quite adults, high school students occupy a space of change. It was not until I took a rhetoric of nature class with Jack

Bushnell that I had a word for this idea: liminal space. A liminal space is “where one thing ends and another is about to begin,” or “the space between.” For people, it is “the place a person is in during a transitional period” (Neumann). During the class, each student picked a spot to study through the spring semester and noted any changes. I picked a spot in a remote county park where land met water, a liminal space where water and land danced through the change of seasons.

In many ways, it seems the land, society, and young adults are all occupying a liminal space. The land is constantly changing seasons, people change the land, and nature reclaims what people have changed. Society is going through changes of race, politics, and societal norms. And high school students are continually testing and transforming into their future adult selves. Changing and growing as a teenager is difficult already. Doing it while the world is changing so dramatically is exceptionally so.

My project explores the many levels of change young people are going through in their families, their peer groups, their communities, and society at large as well as the change the land is experience through the seasons and year to year. I explore this by going through the seasons of a single school year having main characters in different grades and the stories follow their development throughout the year. Each month of the school year, a story focuses on one main character with other students as supporting characters and their interactions with the land. The stories weave together and by seeing how a freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior change and develop through the stories of one year, we can see how a person would grow through four years of high school. I am focusing specifically on one very rural valley road in the Driftless region of Wisconsin to explore the interconnection of the people and the land and how they influence each other.

Project Outline

“August” – Mark is a sophomore on the JV football team who is unexpectedly moved to varsity. His father is sick and is no longer able to work on the farm. His mother works on the farm and in town and Mark needs to take on more responsibility at home. Doing so, he questions some ideas he has been brought up with.

“September” – Autumn is a junior and a new student at school with a family she does not talk about much. She is adjusting to her move from Chicago to rural Wisconsin, but it is not easy. She is put in a situation where she has to make a decision that will have fallout, regardless of her choice.

“October” – Erik is a senior who likes to party. His mom and dad divorced years ago and his mom remarried shortly after, but he and his step-father do not see eye-to-eye. He has two half-sisters. He makes choices that impact his family and friends.

“November” – Kensa is a freshman who takes accelerated math and science classes. She works at her mom’s kennel and can’t wait to go away to college. Somewhere warm. A neighbor does not like the kennel and wants it to close. Kensa has to handle the pressures of classmates and family.

“December” – Mark’s father has passed away and Mark is having a difficult time dealing with the loss. The dairy farm is operating with the help of family, friends, and neighbors. Mark’s relationship with Sage enters a new phase.

“January” – The situation with the kennel is moving forward and Kensa feels more pressure at school. She develops a plan and finds a community.

“February” – Autumn has made friends, but still feels like an outsider. She visits Chicago and has mixed emotions. She moves unexpectedly.

“March” – Erik returns home and has to repair some relationships. His family life has changed. He wants to graduate with his class, but he has a limited amount of time to make up credits before graduation. He takes up a new activity.

“April” – Autumn learns what family is. Mark finds a direction.

“May” – A severe storm causes major damage and impacts everyone.

“June” – Graduation brings an end to the school year, but farming, work, family, and friendship continue.

CHAPTER II: AUGUST

Mark threw his practice gear across the bench seat of the Chevy pickup, slid behind the steering wheel, and moved the seat forward. *Mom must have driven this yesterday.* He looked over his shoulder nervously as he backed out of the pole shed. He'd had his license for only a week, and this was his first time driving into town on his own on the four-lane highway for almost 10 miles before he reached town. Not that he hadn't been driving the tractor in the fields or the pickup on the back roads to the feed mill for years following his dad who drove the good truck and trailer. But that was back when his dad could still drive and before the leukemia had attacked and getting out of bed exhausted him.

He put the truck into drive and stepped on the accelerator kicking up some gravel. He looked up in time to see his mother turn while walking from the barn to the house, put her hands on her hips, and tilt her head. Mark couldn't see clearly through the dust, but he knew the corner of her mouth was twitching in disapproval. *Why does the truck gas pedal react so differently from the tractor?* He drove down the half-mile driveway without incident knowing his mother would be watching the whole time.

His mother could inspire fear in most men and certainly in her son. While Mark, at just under 5' 6", had been bestowed his father's genes for height, he had been gifted his mother's build. Mark's father was wiry and not much taller than Mark, but his mother was what his friends called "big boned." She towered over most men and once knocked a steer out cold with a shovel when it threatened to charge at Mark. During hay baling season, she would pass bales to Mark so fast that he would disconnect the bale elevator pretending it had broken down just to get a break. She would soon get ready for her job as a customer service representative at Merino and Moore, the big catalog and online clothing company in town. He remembered when he was

younger and she had started the job. He loved that she would drive him to school on her way to work. One day he noticed a big crowd at the neighbor's farm near the highway.

"Mom, why are all the people at the Hodgeson's?" Mark asked as she slowed down and pulled to the side of the road.

"They're selling their tractors, combine, and farmland. It's been in their family for generations. It's a shame. They're keeping their house, but they'll look out on someone else's land."

"Can we get a tractor?"

"What? The Oliver not good enough? I thought you loved that thing."

"I do, but it sure would be nice to get one in John Deere greeeen," he sang.

"Honey, not now. Milk prices are too low. It's....It's not a good time."

A gavel pounded. "Sold!" a megaphone voice echoed across the lawn. Mr. Hodgeson turned away from the crowd with a stony face and stared into the distance.

It was a simpler time before Mark understood about families losing their farms, or the work it took to keep a dairy farm running, or the pain of loving a parent.

At the end of the drive, Mark turned east into the growing light. He thought about his city friends who were still asleep and would be pulled out of bed by their parents soon. He did not envy them. He liked this time of day. He had been up since 5:00, had breakfast, and had milked most of the cows before his mother had joined him in the barn. When he did not have practice, he would hunt in the woods past the corn field or fish at the trout stream that led to the old mill two miles down the road.

He drove up from the valley, the Chevy laboring on the steep hill, to the ridge that had once been a road made for the military before Wisconsin became a state. The history of this

region of Wisconsin, missed by the last glaciers, had been drilled into him by both his mother's and father's families since both had lived on this road for generations. They loved to tell how Pikes Peak Road was discovered by the great Zebulon Pike before the peak in Colorado. Mark's Ho-Chunk friend Sage said that people had been discovering and living in this area for thousands of years before old Zebulon "discovered" it, if he had ever been in the valley at all.

At the top of the ridge, Mark saw the first sliver of the sun creeping over the horizon and pulled over to watch Mother Nature's two-minute show. While it was hard living far from his friends and having spotty cell reception, these times made up for it. As the sun broke free from the horizon, Mark looked across the street to the cemetery where the Davis and Harris families had their plots. Both his mom's and dad's families have lived, died, and been buried on this road for generations. At every family function, the Harris family reminds the Davis family that the Harris's have lived here since 1848, two years before the mill was built, and the Davis's are relatively new to the area, only arriving in 1876. The sun glinted off the row of Davis tombstone and Mark shifted uncomfortably, then put the truck in gear.

Ten minutes later, Mark took the exit off of the four-lane highway, his knuckles white. He made it into town, but somehow being alone made the highway seem more dangerous. Since it was still a little early and he didn't want his teammates to see how nervous he was, he decided to go through downtown before doubling back to get to the school. Most of the town was still asleep, so traffic was light, which was good for Mark. As he drove into town, the houses changed from huge, new, vinyl-sided mansions to older, simple, two-bedroom wooden cottages and then to the brick two-story businesses that were the heart of the town.

He slowed and scanned the shops to see what was open. The lights were on, but the pharmacy with the old-style soda fountain was still closed. The door to the diner was wide open

and he could see the three Borne brothers in their usual place at the counter with their coffees. The hardware store and most of the next block had yet to open, but he knew the bakery on the following block would already be open. His stomach rumbled, crying for a chocolate frosted chocolate bismark with white frosting filling, but he resisted the urge knowing it was a bad idea before practice. He rolled through the final block with the barber shop, law firms, and antique stores that were yet to open before doubling back and heading to practice.

Now much calmer, Mark pulled into the high school parking lot. Practice had started two weeks ago, but he could feel the upperclassmen looking at him differently this morning. When he turned the engine off, he could hear the comments.

“Hey Mark, what holds the rust on that thing together?”

“MD, does that have FM, or just AM?”

If that was the best they could do, he would be fine. Besides, he liked the thing. It was a real work truck. Standard cab. No tailgate. The bed dented from loading and hauling hay and wood. The grill cracked from plowing and getting too close to an anxious cow. It was older than he was and had been through a lot.

More of the team arrived and joined the group around the truck, the jokes rolling over a steady background of laughter.

“The junkyard called and said they want it back.” A surge of laughter.

“Did your dad drive that thing to practice when he played? I’m surprised it has any life left in it.” The laughter stopped and the air filled with an uneasy silence.

“I’ll ask him when I get home,” said Mark grabbing his gear.

As Mark walked to the locker room, he could hear the varsity quarterback say, “Shut up, man. Don’t you get anything?”

Mark used the rest of the walk to the locker room to mentally prepare for practice. He had just started to get comfortable on the JV team when the varsity running back had gone down with a knee injury at the scrimmage on Friday. Brady had planted his right foot to make a cut when a defender hit his knee, blowing it out. When Mark visited Brady in the hospital after the game, he could hear the doctor talking in his heavy accent to Brady's parents. "I do not like this American football. Too many injuries. He should play real football." Silent skepticism was their only response.

At the time Brady went down, Mark had been looking for Sage and talking to Justin, his friend and a receiver on the JV squad, when a coach yelled "Get your head in the game," and pulled him by the facemask into the huddle on the sideline. And that was how he got moved up to varsity.

Mark thought about the night. He did well. For the most part. He bobbled the ball three times and forgot where he was supposed to go on two plays, which caused a sack and a quarterback improvisation for no gain, but he ran the ball well. Mostly because the other team could not see him. Mark could hide behind the taller linemen, find a gap in the line, and then power through. And power he had. Mark's thighs were the size of a bull's, and his torso was so large his grandma couldn't get her arms around him. With his work around the farm and in the weightroom, he could bounce off defenders and break tackles. And he was quick, deceptively so. He could hear the players on the other team swear as they grabbed air after he would juke or spin. He certainly was not the fastest in the open field, but he could cut on a dime and reach top speed in an instant.

Coach brought the team together at the start of practice and explained how there would be three more days of two-a-days, Thursday would be a single practice including a walk-through,

and the game against their rivals, Meekers Point, would be Friday. Coach explained how important this game was and how the entire community would be there to see them beat Point. Mark had remembered being in grade school when the Minersville-Meekers Point games would come up and how excited they would get, whether it was football, basketball, or softball. Whatever sport, the one game to win was against Point. His grandfather had told him that years ago school budgets were getting cut and some smaller schools had to combine to make ends meet, but Minersville and Meekers Point hated each other so much they wouldn't unify. Minersville combined with Evanstown, a tiny town nearly twice as far away.

The Minersville-Meekers Point rivalry had been going on for generations, but it wasn't the same for Mark, Justin, and the rest of the people his age. Minersville and Meekers Point now had joint soccer, cross country, and track teams, and most of the people his age had friends in the other town. Social media made it really easy to know people from the other town and many people worked and shopped there too. So it wasn't as big of a game for Mark and his friends as it was for the coach. When the game was over, Mark would still be friends with half of the other team.

“Mark, get over there with varsity.”

“Mark, when I drop my left foot back, motion to the left.”

“Careful not to bobble the handoff, Mark. Once that ball is in your belly, close both arms on it.”

“Make sure there isn't a blitz before going out for a screen. You're our last line of protection for the quarterback.”

“MD, this is a counter play. Fake left and then follow me. I'm your lead block.”

“Good cut MD! Way to see the field!”

Cut left. Fake right. Stay in to block. Go out for a pass. His head was spinning. It was a lot to remember, but the team knew that without Mark they did not have much of a running game. By the end of the afternoon practice, some of the players, especially some of the ones living in the city, were on one knee. Mark was tired, but not exhausted, which was good given that he still had evening milking to help with.

Mark met Justin on the way to the locker room after practice. Justin walked slowly, his shoulders sagging.

“You okay?” Mark asked.

“Yeah. It was just a hard practice. They had us doing suicides to the 50. Aaron puked. How about you?”

“It was okay. The varsity playbook is way bigger than JV. I’m not sure about Friday.”

“I’m sure you’ll do...fine,” Justin said looking past Mark toward the school.

“Gee. Thanks for your confidence. Very heartfelt. What is up with...” Mark followed Justin’s gaze to Sage walking out the gym door with Amber. “Oh, I see. Volleyball practice must be done.”

“Bro, you should go talk to her.”

Mark noticed Sage’s smile, but when their eyes met, he quickly looked away. “Maybe another time.”

“Hey, Sage! Hi, Amber! How was practice?” Justin called, grabbing Mark’s shoulder pad and pulling him over.

“I’m glad it’s done. They had us run the block and our first game is tomorrow. You guys going to come? It’s a home game,” Sage said looking at Mark.

“Well, I can’t because JV has a game, too, but now that Mark is on varsity, maybe he can,” said Justin.

“Oooh. Varsity. When did that happen?” said Sage.

“Today,” said Mark, blushing. “I don’t think I can make it. I’ve got, um, stuff to do at home. Maybe another time.”

“Oh, yeah. Maybe,” said Sage. “Tell them we’re thinking about them, okay?”

“I will. Thanks,” said Mark.

Justin waved and nodded to the girls and walked with Mark back to the locker room in silence.

Although he had showered at Justin’s after the first practice, Mark could smell his sweat again after the second practice and drove with the windows open on the way home. Just before going down the valley on Pikes Peak where he would lose his cell signal, he again noticed the rose granite markers to his right and let out a deep sigh. When he got home, he decided not to shower. The cows wouldn’t care, but he needed to change into his milking clothes. Stepping out of the truck, he paused for a moment and relaxed knowing he was home. Set back from the road with a curving driveway through a patch of woods, the house was not visible from the road. It seemed like the family’s private island. Somehow it made him feel more at ease. He could always hear people coming well before they could see him.

By the time he changed clothes and got out to the barn, his mom had already brought in most of the herd from the far grazing field that had been unused for four days. Mark and his mom had been doing this together without his dad for months now, so he stepped in seamlessly. As she guided the most reluctant cows into the pen, Mark opened the milking barn and started

guiding the cows into their stalls. Maybe it was just Mark, but he felt they seemed happier after spending the day eating fresh grass from a new field. Two of the herd needed a special diet and were getting medication because they were sick, so they needed to go to specific stalls and their milk would need to be kept separate and thrown away. Getting into an assigned stall was no problem for Dolly, who was kind and worked well with Mark and his mom, but the other one was feisty and independent minded. Mark thought how each cow had a unique personality, like people, and decided Sage might be a good name for the feisty one.

They went about their business in a quiet comfort, each knowing the movements of the other, until the last black and white Holstein was fed, cleaned, and milked. Mark led the last cow outside, leaned against the barn, and plucked a long piece of grass from the ground and stuck it in his mouth. Like he had seen his mother and grandfather do countless times, he chewed the end slowly. He tasted the land, his family's land, and let out a long exhale thinking about the day's events, the cool evening air seeping up from the ground. His mother turned off the lights in the milking barn and joined Mark outside, elbowing his ribs and leaning against the barn.

"Thanks, hon." She pulled up another long piece of grass and chewed it slowly. They both let the day settle over them as they watched the shadows of the tree line stretch over the pasture. The easy silence returned and for many minutes the weight of football, chores, and illness left them both.

"How was practice?"

"Got moved up today."

"I thought you might. You ready?"

"I've got a lot to learn. And I almost fumbled the exchange twice."

“Sounds like we have some practice to do tonight.” She gave Mark a tired smile.

“Nervous?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not it. The ball just feels different.”

“Show me what you mean. I’ll be the quarterback. You teach me what to do, and we’ll run through the plays.”

“But…”

“No buts. Get the ball out of the truck. I know you have one in there.”

Mark grabbed the ball from the truck and handed it to his mom and acted out the moves as he said them. “I set a pocket with my arms straight across my body, like usual. One at the belt. One shoulder height. The QB put the ball in and I closed my arms on it. But it just felt different.”

Mark’s mom took her usual position a few steps in front of him, faced away, and crouched. Mark crouched, a smile spread across his face, and he shook his head laughing, knowing what was coming. His mom tapped her left hip signaling the handoff side.

“Orange petunias. Cherry fricassee. Green 19. Omaha. Chattanooga. Poughkeepsie. Oconomowoc. Hut. Hut.” She took the ball and held it to her left and placed it in Mark’s chest as he jogged past, his arms clamping on the ball. “How did that feel?”

“Fine, but we’ve practiced for years. It’s not the same with a new QB.”

“Just how tall is this quarterback?”

“A little shorter than you. Why?”

“And how tall is Aaron, the quarterback you’ve been playing with since grade school?”

“You know that. He’s my height.”

“Maybe he’s giving you the ball at a different height.”

“And when I’m going full speed, I don’t close on it right. That’s it!”

“Want to try a couple going faster?”

“No. I think I know what to do, now. Thanks, mom.” For a minute, they stood next to each other in the driveway, leaning on each other slightly. She put her arm around his shoulder and took a deep breath. Mark leaned into his mom the slightest bit. “Really, mom. Thank you.” He put his arm around her waist and gave a squeeze and they walked to the house together.

In the living room, he greeted his grandma who had moved into the “new” house two months ago. Grandma Bonnie had lived in this house when she and Grandpa Will had farmed this land starting in the 50s, but had moved out when Mark’s mom and dad had taken over the farming in the early 90s. When Mark’s mom and dad moved in, Grandma Bonnie and Grandpa Will moved to the “old” house built in the late 1800s. The newer house was built for Grandpa Will’s parents’ growing family in the 1920s before the depression.

Mark hugged Grandma Bonnie and looked at the floor. Eventually, he built up his courage and looked at his dad. His hair, all gray for the past month, were wisps of clouds. His face was rough from not having a shave and was sunken from the loss of weight. And his hands, once so agile and skilled that they could craft the most detailed wood toy or fix any fine-tuned engine, sat limp on the afgan Grandma Bonnie had made for Mark’s birth. The rented hospital bed took up most of the living room, but it was where his dad wanted to be so he could feel part of the action of the day, part of the comings and goings. His dad had thought that the leukemia had been tiredness from getting older or a cold. By the time Mark’s Uncle Brett, the EMT, had convinced his dad to go to the doctor, all they could do was make him feel more comfortable.

From grade school flag football through Mark’s first tackle games in middle school, Mark’s dad had never missed a game. Even last year, when it winded him to walk to the stands and he still thought it was his blood pressure, his dad made every Thursday night game. He even

went to every Friday night game to see Mark stand on the sidelines knowing it was not likely that the game would be so lopsided that Mark would get to play. But Mark knew his dad would not be able to go this week. He had not been out of bed for weeks.

“How was your day, Dad?”

“Good. I have the best nurse around.”

“Hey Dad, you know how I said I played in the scrimmage? I practiced with varsity today. Coach told me I would start on Friday against Point.”

“That’s great! I wish I could see it.”

“I’ll make sure that I get a copy of the game so you can watch it here.” Mark thought of the old VHS tapes he had seen of his father playing football. While Mark was a powerful runner and could cut quickly, his father was straight out fast. If his dad got free, there was no one who could catch him.

“I’d like that.”

“I have to get some homework done. We can talk more later.”

Over his father’s shoulder, Mark saw the picture of the 1986 state football champion team, his dad in the first row on the right, the gold medal with the purple lanyard hanging over the corner. As a running back, he had two touchdowns that game that clinched the win. Everyone in this part of the state knew about that football game, even if they didn’t know his dad. How the small rural school beat the flashier and top-ranked city school. Mark remembered making the frame with his dad.

“Line up the mark on the wood with the miter saw. Almost. One 32nd more to the left. That’s it!”

“That’s pretty good, but if you sand it with 1000 grit for a couple more minutes, it will be better.”

Mark squeezed his dad’s hand lightly again and got up to change. His dad had already fallen asleep. Mark picked up the photo with the frame he and his father had made, studied his father’s image, and set it down again. He wrapped the purple lanyard around his hand, noting the silky ribbon. He ran his thumb over the cool medal, feeling the golden ridges of the laurel wreath and the word “CHAMPION.” He imagined how his dad felt wearing it after the championship game.

He pocketed the medal.

After school on the day of the game, Mark came home to milk the cows, eat, and shower before leaving for the game. As he was eating, his dad called him into the living room to go over last-minute reminders that they had gone over dozens of times before.

“Before the snap, look to see if the linebacker moves up.”

“I know, and check the defensive line position for where the hole will be.”

“That Straka kid is the middle linebacker, right? He’s a game changer. He’s aggressive, but can overpursue. Take two steps to sell your fake and then cut the other way.”

“I will. Sell the fake with two steps.”

“Be patient with the ball. Wait for your block.”

“Yes, or I’ll run into my own team.”

“I wish I could be there tonight, Mark.”

“I know, Dad. I have to go or I’ll be late.”

The game had been a close one from the start. After both teams scored on their opening drives, it became a defensive battle. Mark had runs for three first downs, but not much else because Straka seemed to line up in the Minersville backfield. Every time they would put a couple positive plays together, Straka would stop them on third down. The Pointers were jumping on everything.

At the start of the fourth quarter, it was still tied at 7. Point was putting together a solid drive when they turned the ball over on the Minerville 15 yard line. The crowd roared and Mark and the offense took the field. The first play, Mark took the ball and followed his line, found a small gap between the left guard and tackle, and gained two yards.

He pulled himself up and returned to the huddle. A receiver brought in a new play: a run-pass option to the wide side of the field on the right. Mark lined up to the left behind the quarterback and looked downfield. Where was Straka? On the left. Where was the corner on the right? He was already dropping his inside foot. Although the game had started with the sun out, it was fully dark now, so it was hard to see beyond the lights on the field, but past the cornerback on the right, it looked like an ambulance was pulling down toward the far end zone. *Focus on the game. Look at the cornerback.* The corner took a full step back. At the quarterback's signal, Mark shifted to the right of the quarterback.

At the snap of the ball, Mark released to the right, looking for someone to block, but there was no one there. He cut right and then downfield and looked back at the quarterback to see a ball spiralling toward him. Mark reached forward and the ball landed perfectly. Before the cornerback could recover and the safety made the tackle, it was a 15 yard gain.

The crowd roared and started chanting "MD. MD. MD"

Mark was lifted up by his right tackle and knocked on the side of the helmet so hard, it knocked him sideways. *I wish Dad could see this. At least we can watch it together later.* As the next play was being run in from the sideline, he could hear the crowd chat changing, but he couldn't understand to what or why.

The play was a delayed handoff to the left. Mark lined up behind and to the left of the quarterback. The center snapped the ball, the receiver on the right sprinted straight down the field drawing the corner and safety downfield and out of the play, the receiver on the left slashed across the field to the right and then downfield with Straka tightly on him, the offensive line dropped back two steps and formed a gap on the left, the quarterback motioned to throw the ball down the field to the right. The entire defense bit on the fake and then the quarterback handed Mark the ball. Mark broke through the gap shaking off one tackle and saw the entire left side of the field open wide. He angled left and sprinted down the sideline. To the side, he could see Straka with a good angle coming at him. One step before impact, Mark planted hard with his left foot, juked right and pushed Straka past him and out of bounds. As he sprinted into the endzone, the pent up pain and frustration of the last year burst and he fell to one knee sobbing in release.

Collecting himself, he stood, expecting his teammates to swarm him. When it didn't happen, he looked back up the field to see all of the players on both teams at the five yard line looking over his shoulder. Mark turned. On the other side of the endzone was his dad, Kevin Davis, or KD as the crowd had been chanting, in a wheelchair with his mother behind him. Mark walked across the end zone and took off his helmet. He reached under his pads and pulled out his dad's gold medal. He thumbed the laurel wreath and placed the medal in his dad's trembling hand.

CHAPTER III: SEPTEMBER

Autumn walked out of the darkness of the coach bus into the early morning sun, the change in light blinding her. She squinted and shielded her eyes as she took in the scene before her. What was described on the internet as “the Minerville bus terminal” was actually the parking lot of a rundown Citgo gas station. She slung her overstuffed backpack on and clutched a bulging, plastic shopping bag while looking for the gray Pontiac Sunbird she was told would be there. No such luck. Her forehead tightened and her shoulders rose. The bus door closed behind her and pulled away leaving Autumn very much alone.

She paused, collected herself, and started making a plan. *Find a safe place.* Shielding her eyes with one hand and holding the bag tightly to her chest with the other, she scanned the parking lot quickly and spied a bench seat along the front wall of the laundromat attached to the gas station. *I won't have to watch my back there.* Walking to the bench, she sized up the people she could see. One sleepy man in dusty construction clothes and boots walked back to his car with a cup of coffee and a young lady wearing a faded flannel shirt and worn New Balance shoes filled her car at the gas pumps. *What kind of people are these? They would be eaten alive in Chicago.* Autumn looked at her own creaseless, black Timberland boots.

Sitting down, she could survey the scene more carefully. The gas station looked like it was a few years past being nice. The laundromat was dark and had no machines in it. A ladder with layers of dust sat in the middle of the room still waiting for a long-forgotten renovation. Inside the gas station stood a young man, leaning over, his elbows on the counter and his chin in his hands. The entire back of the store was filled with refrigerators displaying Milwaukee's Best and Pabst Blue Ribbon in any size someone could want. From the wallpaper and color scheme, the far side of the store once held a sandwich chain, but now stood lifeless. Compared to the

large, new-looking mega-station on the edge of town, this place looked like a neglected stepchild.

Directly across the road, a row of mobile homes stretched into the distance. Next to the mobile home park, a combination paint store and gun shop sat next to a garage that looked like it hadn't seen a car since cassettes were popular. A few cars drove by every few minutes, but it was nothing like the traffic and pace Autumn was used to. *Chicago had run down places, but nothing this hick, and nothing this dead. Maybe it is too early to be busy.* Certain she was safe as she could be, she pulled out her phone and saw that Jake messaged her that he would be there in a couple minutes. She exhaled deeply, releasing some of her anxiety. *What have I gotten myself into?* She thought of what her art teacher in grade school taught her whenever Autumn said "I can't do it," and took several more deep breaths, repeating to herself, *I am strong*, with each breath.

By the time the gray Sunbird arrived, Autumn's forehead had relaxed a bit. She stood, projecting a purpose that exceeded her five-foot three frame as the dented passenger door opened. Autumn measured Jake and his mom as they got out of the car. They had talked on the phone and exchanged pictures, but she had never met them, and now she was going to live with them, hopefully until she finished high school. Jake, tall and thin and wearing a Rage Against the Machine t-shirt, covered the ground between them quickly, while his mother, average shorter and fuller, followed slowly behind, giving Autumn space. Jake moved to give Autumn a hug, but she stiffened, and he stopped and stepped back.

"Jake, Ms. McGraw, thank you so much for letting me stay with you. You don't know what this means to me," Autumn said shifting her attention from Jake to Ms. McGraw.

“It’s Sue. Just call me Sue. You must be tired. It must have been quite a trip for you. All the way from Chicago. Such a long trip by bus. You just can’t get here from there. Where’s your luggage?”

“I packed light.”

A moment of recognition crossed Sue’s face before she could replace it with a practiced smile. “Well, here, let me take your bags.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ve got it. But you’re right. I am tired. And hungry,” Autumn said walking to the car.

“Well, let’s get you home and get you some food.”

Home. The word echoed in Autumn’s head. She thought of her mother and Chicago, but no specific location came to mind. Hunger gnawed her back to the present. The truth was, Autumn had not eaten for two days. She had run out of money because she had to quit her job before the move. Even before that, most of her paycheck went to pay for her phone and groceries for her and her mom. What little money she had left, she had spent on the bus fare. *I’ll have to get a job and get new clothes. But first, see where I am living and go to school on the first day.* She put her backpack and bag in the middle of the back seat and sat by the window, resting one arm on her life’s belongings. She felt the paint from the red Rage Against the Machine fist she had painted on the front of the backpack. That was how she met the Jake, in the RATM chat room when she was a freshman. What had started as a discussion of the lyrics of deep cuts had turned into her best friendship, even if it was online at a distance. So when she decided she had to leave, the first person she told was Jake. A minute later, Jake messaged that he had told his mom that Autumn needed a place to live and that his mom, always one to help, suggested Autumn live with them. That minute changed her life. And two days later, there she was in a car

she had never seen before, with a family she had never met, pulling out of a gas station in a town and state she had never been to.

As they drove, Jake pointed out landmarks to Autumn and talked about people she did not know. It was too much for her to take in. As they drove out of town, she looked back and saw the population sign: Minersville – 4978. *This certainly isn't Chicago.* Passing the Wal-Mart and the tractor dealer, the town gave way to countryside. She had to admit, it looked amazing. So much space and so many trees. A field of knee-high leafy green led to rows of rich green bushes which led to row after row of corn rolling into the distance. Houses, barns, and silos dotted the view.

About 10 minutes later, they came to what looked like an even smaller town. Among the speed limit, church service, and welcome signs, she saw the faded population sign: Evanstown – 646. *Almost 650? I've lived in buildings with more people than that!* she thought and then shuddered with the memory. From what she could see, Evanstown had bars, churches, two gas pumps, and not much else. Jake continued pointing and talking, but most of it did not register with Autumn. *What have I gotten myself into?* she thought as they exited Evanstown and went further into the country.

After another few minutes, they turned onto a winding road, went up a hill past a cemetery, and down into a valley where the road curved and turned. The car slowed by a clearing at a bend in the road. A small house sat at the back of the clearing with a tree-covered hill behind it. Autumn tensed as she took in the house, noting any exit, door or window, and the immediate surroundings from the road to the path up the hill.

“It’s small, but it’s home,” Sue said as they got out of the car. “Why don’t we give you a tour and then let you get settled in while we make something to eat?”

“Thanks. That would be nice,” she said as she took a deep breath and walked through the door. The house was so small that the tour took less than a minute. The door opened into a small family room with a small wood stove. Across the room sat a small, worn table with two matching chairs and a folding chair. Beyond the table, three doors opened into a cramped bathroom and a bedroom on each side. An opening to the left of the table led to the kitchen. Three doors in the kitchen led to a pantry, stairs to the basement, and what looked like a large entryway with a cot in it.

They led Autumn to the room with the cot. “This is your room. We’ll get a real bed, nightstand, and dresser as soon as we can manage. It’s the best we could do on such short notice,” Sue said.

“We were using this for storage. When you said you needed help, we moved everything downstairs but the shelf and file cabinet, and we found the cot and nightstand at the thrift store,” said Jake.

“It’s great. Thank you.” Autumn looked around and set her backpack and plastic bag on the cot. She looked at them, at everything she owned in the world. “Um, where’s the thrift store?”

“We’ll go tomorrow,” Sue said. “Autumn, it hasn’t been easy for Jake and me since the divorce. I know this isn’t much, but it’s your home now. You get unpacked and I’ll work on the food.”

Home. That word again. Autumn looked around the room. Two days. They had cleaned out the room and made her a space in two days. It had been a long time since someone had shown her that consideration. And for the first time in weeks, Autumn’s shoulders and chest fully relaxed. “Guys, can I help in the kitchen?”

Three days later, Autumn was on the school bus with Jake. Autumn swore the driver searched out the curviest roads she could find with the fewest people to pick up. After almost an hour, it was only a quarter full when they got to school, and that was after transferring to another fuller bus in Evanstown. Autumn shook her head with disbelief. The buses in Chicago were always crammed with morning commuters.

When they got off the bus, she couldn't believe how small the school was. Still, she didn't know who she needed to talk to about registering, so she was grateful Jake was there to take her to the office and pick up registration forms.

"Hi Jake, who's this?" the secretary asked.

"This is Autumn. She just moved."

"Hi, Autumn. I'm Michelle. Here are the registration forms. Make sure your parents fill them out and sign them."

"Ah, okay."

"Since you don't have a schedule, why don't you follow Jake's. Let's see, the counselor can meet you at the start of fifth hour to go over a schedule."

"Okay, fifth hour," said Autumn writing herself a note.

"If she gets a minute, she'll start working on it before then. Is there a job you are interested in after high..."

"Nursing!" Autumn responded so quickly that Michelle flinched. "Ah, I want to be a nurse," she said in as calm a voice as she could.

“I’ll let her know. And you might want to talk about the Certified Nursing Assistant program we have when you meet her. You can get credit for getting your CNA certificate. You know, I’m also the school nurse, not that I really know that much, but if you need a band aid, come to me,” said Michelle.

They left the office and Autumn couldn’t believe she would be attending classes in a few minutes. She would not have been able to get in the building in Chicago without an ID, a background check, and walk through the metal detector.

Jake introduced her as his “friend from Chicago,” who was living with him and his mom. “Sure,” she heard one person mutter, and she could see some of the others smirk. It was during this exchange that she started noticing other students looking in her direction. She looked behind her. Nothing special there. They were definitely looking at her. She closed her eyes for a second. *I am strong*. She looked at her clothes, the one nice outfit she was able to bring with her. Not exactly the style here, but not much different than other people wearing their new outfits on the first day of school.

She cupped her hand by Jake’s ear, “Jake, why are people staring at me?”

“Who? Oh, them. You’re new, and we don’t get that many new people. And your family hasn’t been here forever, like theirs. The city says it has a big heart, but really some of the people are real assholes to new people. Especially people who they think don’t fit.” Jake scanned the room. “Remember when I told you about how quiet the crowd got at prom when the first mixed race couple walked in the grand march. My mom and her friends waited in the parking lot to make sure they got back to their car safely.”

“I forgot about that. When was that? Like twenty years ago? Was your mom a student here then?”

“No, it was only like two years ago. Some of her friends had kids that were in the march. Besides, it’s a small town, so everybody goes. They will say there is nothing else going on, but I think everyone wants to see how they compare to each other.”

“I know that feeling.” Autumn looked around at the cafeteria with most of the tables empty and thought how packed it would be in Chicago with all kinds of people. “Jake, where is everyone? Is *everybody* here white?”

“Most, but not everyone. And some people might be in their first hour.” A tone beeped over the PA system. “That’s the warning bell. We should get to class.”

In the hall, Autumn felt like she was on display. Other students stared or talked to each other glancing at her, Autumn the obvious topic of conversation. She also couldn’t get over how empty the halls were and how small the school was. In three minutes, they had walked from one end of the building to the other. It only had one hallway and it was all on one level, not the three-story building with six wings she was used to.

“Jake, how many people go here?”

“About four hundred, I guess. Why? How many went to your old school?”

“Around four thousand.”

“Welcome to a different world.”

The next four hours were like the cafeteria and hallway with whispered conversations and texts followed by glances in Autumn’s direction. When lunch finally came, she thought she could get a break by sitting outside for a little while like she did in Chicago. Unfortunately, it

was a closed campus, so everyone funneled into the cafeteria. She could feel her neck and shoulders tighten as she walked in.

Jake introduced Autumn to more of his friends and then the conversation quickly shifted to what classes each person had. Since Autumn did not have a schedule yet, she lost interest and scanned the room. It was her first day in the school, but she could easily see different groups around the room. There were several loud groups, like the group with cowboy boots and Future Farmers of America shirts. Or a few groups of people wearing team t-shirts like cross country, football, and volleyball. And then there were the quieter groups like the artistic kids with edgy haircuts and mismatched clothes or the brainy kids with thick textbooks and reusable lunch bags. What stuck out to Autumn was that even though she had seen people from different tables talking to each other in class, there was little moving or talking between tables. And almost everyone in these groups was white. At two other tables, the ones furthest from the windows, sat most of the students of color. She was used to cliques at her old school, but this level of separation was on another level.

Autumn noticed more students looking in her direction and talking. And then she noticed one girl moving from the athletes tables to the two tables furthest from the windows doing what Autumn was doing – looking at other people looking at Autumn. Autumn was struck by the girl's long, black hair; sharp, powerful features; and rich bronze skin. The girl caught Autumn's eyes, swept her hand from one side of the room to the other as if to say "all of these people," and mouthed "Fuck them." The girl smiled slyly. Autumn had never been happier to see a smile.

The bell rang and the girl walked over to Autumn. Autumn nodded to Jake that it was okay.

"You're new right?" the girl said.

“Yeah.”

“I’m Sage.”

“Autumn.”

“What year are you?”

“Junior. You?”

“Sophomore.”

The PA crackled to life, “Autumn Johnson to the office, please.”

“Slut,” came from behind Autumn in a girl’s voice.

Sage stared at the girl she thought had said it, a tall girl with coal-black hair. “Like I said, Fuck them,” Sage said loudly to the girl then turned to Autumn. “I got you, nunu.”

“New new?”

“It means big sister in my native language. Now, come on. I’ll go to the office with you.”

“Will you wait for me?” Autumn asked.

“I was going to wait before you asked,” Sage said smiling.

In the office, the counselor met with Autumn and went over her schedule and the CNA program she could start next semester. As she was leaving, the counselor called out, “Remember to get the registration forms signed by your parents.”

“Will do,” Autumn called back, hiding a smile.

Sage was still in the office. “Let me see your schedule,” she said. “Hey, we have seventh hour together. I’ll show you where your fifth and sixth are and then I’ll save you a seat in seventh, okay?”

“Sure, but why are you doing this? Most people here have been...not nice.”

“Well, I’m not most people, and my culture teaches me to respect my elders.”

“I’m an elder?”

“It’s a joke. You are a year older, so technically you’re my elder.”

“That’s funny.”

And it wasn’t that long ago that I was new here. Now, I’ll show you where your fifth hour is.”

Autumn woke slowly opening one eye part way and then the other. It had already been a week, but she was still adjusting to her new surroundings. She closed her eyes and scenes from the past three months flashed in her brain. The nights her mom did not come home. The empty refrigerator. The needles. The trips to the emergency room. The doctor handing her a vial and syringes. She felt for her backpack on the floor by the nightstand. *Still there*, she thought. Then more images. The unopened mail. The unpaid bills. The eviction notices. *I am strong*. Others she tried to push out of her mind.

Autumn curled up and laid on the cot for another half hour, trying to summon the energy to get up. She reached for her phone. It was almost noon. She opened the door and stepped into the kitchen. The house seemed empty. On the table she found a note explaining food was in the fridge and they were outside mowing the yard and gardening. After eating, Autumn went outside where she found Jake and Sue in the garden.

“She lives!” said Jake.

“Hello, Autumn. Did you sleep well?” Sue said shooting Jake a look. “Don’t mind him. He wasn’t up at the crack of dawn, either.”

“Sorry I slept so late. I should have been out here.”

“It’s really okay. I was just kidding,” said Jake.

“You probably needed the sleep. It’s important to listen to what your body is telling you,” said Sue.

“Well, what can I do to help?”

“Would you help me pick these tomatoes? I’m going to can them tomorrow,” Sue said. Autumn didn’t move, looked at the tomatoes, and blinked several times. “Are you okay, Autumn? Is something wrong?”

“You’re going to put them in cans?”

“No, in jars. Oh, you’ve never canned tomatoes. Have you ever gardened?” Autumn shook her head. “I’ll show you what to do.” Sue studied Autumn, lingering on her feet.

Autumn looked at her Timberland’s, then at the dirt in the garden, then her boots, and finally Sue and her bare feet. Autumn removed her boots and socks and stepped into the garden, feeling the moisture from the dirt. She sank into the earth and could have sworn she felt an energy from the ground rooting into her feet.

Autumn spent the afternoon learning how to tell if a tomato was ripe and how to pick it, how to pick peas without pulling out the entire plant, and how to pick beans with a quick snap. Jake also showed Autumn how to open a pea pod and empty all of the peas into her mouth using one thumb. Autumn was surprised how good the peas tasted fresh from the shell. He also showed Autumn how to weed. And there was plenty of it to do. Once he knew Autumn was comfortable, Jake started mowing the lawn. When the mower sputtered to life, Autumn realized Jake had waited to start mowing until she had woken up.

It was well into the afternoon when Autumn brought in her fourth huge metal bowl filled with tomatoes. Sue brought out three tall glasses of lemonade and set them on a stack of large,

limestone rocks that served as a table. Sue took the bowl and nodded to the metal chairs surrounding the rocks. Autumn sat and surveyed the surroundings. The lawn and garden looked nice. There were woods on three sides of the large clearing with the road on the fourth and a small shed sat to the left of the house. Across the street, a small field sat in front of another tree-filled hill. There were no other houses within eyesight. In fact, she hadn't even seen a car pass by while she was gardening. Jake put the mower into the shed and she noticed the silence for the first time. She could hear the wind blowing through the trees, some birds chattering in the woods, and a dog or two barking in the distance, but no sirens, or cars, or people. The quiet was foreign to Autumn and she moved to the chair that gave her the best view of the road, the house, and the other two chairs.

Jake sat down and Sue came out and joined them.

"This is nice," said Autumn.

"It's what we could manage after the divorce," said Sue. "He had a good lawyer, and I...didn't. Friends own the property, but they rent the house to us."

"They have hundreds of acres that way full of trails," said Jake gesturing past the house. "They used the house for a cabin on weekends and during hunting season, but now they have an RV. They don't bother us, really, and we can use the trails if they aren't hunting."

"Anyway, Jake and I have a bit more work to do. A neighbor of ours is really sick with leukemia and we set up a calendar where people can help the family. We're going to go there soon. You can stay here. After that, we'll have supper."

"I'll go, too," said Autumn.

"It's helping on a farm. Milking and stuff. Are you sure?" said Jake.

“Yeah. I’ll do it. It helps your neighbor, right?” Autumn thought about the closed in feeling she had in the city. “Can we walk there?”

“It’s over a mile. Do you want to walk that far?” Jake asked. Autumn nodded confidently.

“Well, I’m making their supper, and if we’re all going, maybe we should eat there. I’ll call Joan and see if it’s okay. But I’m driving. I’m not carrying the food that far. Now, let’s get you some work boots and clothes,” said Sue looking at Autumn’s feet.

On the way to the neighbor’s, Jake served as a tour guide again. “This silvery shrub is autumn olive and it’s taking over open spaces. Rumor is the Department of Transportation planted it along the highways and now it’s out of control. Maybe it was the Department of Natural Resources. Anyway, it’s everywhere now.”

“That tree? It’s almost ten feet tall.”

“It’s a shrub. A tree usually has one trunk and a shrub usually has many.”

“If it spreads so much, how do they know it was the Department of Whatever? Couldn’t it have spread naturally?”

“Well...That’s not what I heard.” As they walked, a bend in the road straightened and a fading, yellow house appeared. Autumn didn’t realize it, but they had been walking for several minutes. She looked back and their driveway was out of sight.

“This is your closest neighbor?”

“Yeah, you get a lot of space out here to just be yourself. This house is owned by Tim Butteris who is a couple miles up the road and he rents it to some friends. He comes down here in a four-wheeler all the time drinking Coors Light and throwing the cans in the ditch along the

way. They shoot guns all the time. They call it target practice, but they're really just pissing off the neighbor across the street who owns the dog kennel. Really riles the dogs up. He hates the kennel and wants to run it out of business."

"What kennel?"

"We're coming up to it now. You can't see it from the road. Just that tiny sign and the driveway."

"Why doesn't he like the kennel?"

"It's a long story, but if he doesn't like something, he lets everyone know."

"Tim doesn't sound like the nicest guy."

"He has his moments. Now, the next driveway over there goes up the hill to a huge house owned by a professor at the university. Once we get past the orchard, we'll be at the Davis farm."

Around another curve and up a sharp rise, the road straightened and leveled. Autumn tapped Jake's shoulder and stopped. "I just love how the trees from both sides have grown together. It's a tree tunnel. And look at those streams of sunlight."

"Yeah, I guess I see it every day, so it seems like it's not such a big deal." They walked the rest of the way to the Davis farm in silent unison, appreciating the moment, Jake matching Autumn's much smaller stride.

When they got to the Davis farm, Autumn and Jake could hear Mark and his mom in the milking barn. Autumn followed Jake taking in the scene. The smell of manure, faint on the walk

up the driveway, intensified the closer they got to the barn and made Autumn recoil and cover her nose.

“Hi, Mark. Mrs. Davis,” said Jake.

“Hi, Jake. I’ve told you before, call me Joan. Thank you so much for helping.” She walked over to Jake and spotted Autumn, still outside. “And who is this?”

“This is my friend, Autumn. She’s staying with us and she came to help, too.”

Joan studied Autumn, then Jake, and then Autumn. Joan’s features softened and she called Mark over and turned to Jake. “How about you two bail the hay that has been cut and dried? Autumn and I can do the milking.”

Autumn recognized Mark as the boy Sage talked to during lunch.

Jake turned and asked Autumn, “Are you up to milking?”

Autumn nodded. Over Jake’s shoulder, Autumn saw Joan and Mark exchange a knowing look.

“Good,” said Joan as she put her arm around Autumn’s shoulder and held her firmly. “Us girls will take care of the girls in the barn.” Autumn’s upper body relaxed. She hadn’t realized she had been clenching her jaw.

Sue drove up and greeted Joan with a long, lingering hug. After a short exchange, Sue went to the house loaded with grocery bags and Joan returned to the barn.

Joan gave Autumn a crash course in feed, cows, barns, and milking, and within half an hour, Autumn had become Joan’s assistant and was anticipating Joan’s next move, making sure the iodine was at hand for cleaning the udder and the milking machine was at shoulder height and easy to grab. Autumn asked question after question about the farm, the cows, and milking. Joan answered all of the questions with kindness and assurance, never making Autumn feel

stupid. When they were done in the barn, the boys had not yet returned. Joan suggested they walk out to the field after checking in the house. She put her arm around Autumn's shoulder again and squeezed. "You did good," Joan said, then walked to the house.

Autumn went to the house and was about to knock when she looked inside and saw a bed in the living room. She saw Joan bent over a very thin man, holding his hand with one hand and wiping a tear away with the other and Sue standing next to Joan, rubbing Joan's back. Autumn studied the man with his delicate hand dwarfed in Joan's and his fine gray hair framing his thin face. Her heart ached for the man she didn't know, his wife she had just met, and their friend she now lived with. She turned away and sat with her back against the house, the ache filling her chest. Autumn knew the helpless feeling of loving someone, of losing them little by little, and not being able to do anything about it.

She thought about the comfortable feeling in the barn, and of Joan's mix of caring and resolve. She looked at the beauty of the rolling fields. Even the smell of manure, once overpowering, seemed to have diminished. Then she thought of Chicago, of keeping her eyes closed when she turned on the lights so she wouldn't see the cockroaches scatter. Of the water getting turned off and having to pack and move on a day's notice. Of her mother, not breathing.

After several minutes, she heard an engine getting nearer. She collected herself, stood, and walked back to the barn to wait for Jake and Mark to appear.

The next two weeks developed into a bit of a routine for Autumn. Every morning, Jake and Autumn would take the bus to school together and she would make note of how the temperatures and morning light had changed. The sun rose later and some leaves had already

started changing from green to shades of yellow and orange. After school most nights, Jake would go to work at Wal-Mart and Sue would pick him up when she was done working at the emission systems manufacturer. That left Autumn alone in the afternoons and early evenings.

With her options limited, Autumn slipped on some beat up shoes and started walking just to relax. At first, she would walk to the Davis farm and turn around. But one day, Joan drove up as Autumn was about to turn around at the Davis driveway.

“Autumn, how are you? I was thinking about you.”

“You were?”

“Yes,” Joan said with a laugh. “I was wondering how you were doing.”

“I’m okay. I was just a little bored, so I went for a walk.”

“Well, I’ve got something you could do,” Joan said, and Autumn was soon in the barn helping Joan. From then on, she worked there most days. Joan told Autumn she would get paid, but Autumn was surprised when, after a week, Joan handed her an envelope with cash in it. Autumn grew to like the warmth of the barn and what was becoming a cooler and darker walk home. On the Saturdays, Jake, Sue, and Autumn all helped.

At school, Autumn had forged her mother’s signature on the registration forms, so she was an official student at Minersville High. Once at school, she would find Sage, usually with Mark, in the cafeteria. Since Sage talked to almost everyone, and Autumn got along with Sage, most people stopped harassing Autumn. People did not go out of their way to be nice, but they were not openly hostile towards her.

Except for Brittany, the tall, black haired girl, and her friends. They would get in Autumn’s way or run into her in the hall. They started rumor after rumor about Autumn from being a prostitute to being pregnant to being a drug dealer. And they sent horrible messages to

Autumn, who immediately blocked them. The last straw happened before gym class when Autumn was changing. Brittany took one of Autumn's gym shoes and ran. Autumn quickly locked her backpack in her gym locker and chased after Brittany. Brittany threw the shoe outside and when Autumn went to get it, Brittany and her friends closed the doors and wouldn't let Autumn back in. Eventually, the gym teacher walked toward the doors and the girls scattered. When the gym teacher asked why she was outside, Autumn was so upset she couldn't talk.

Autumn decided to talk to the principal after class. In the locker room, she changed and put her backpack on when someone tried pulling it from her back. She swirled around and saw Brittany with two friends. They blocked her exit. *I am strong*, she told herself. They lunged for the backpack, but Autumn backed up, pressing the backpack into the corner and protecting it with her body. *Damn it! Why did I let my guard down? I got too comfortable.*

They took a step toward her. Her instincts returned and she lashed out at them, kicking and punching. Brittany tried grabbing for the backpack, but missed and lost her balance. Brittany teetered forward and came within reach. Autumn had her hair in an instant and slammed her head against a locker. The noise alerted others and Autumn could hear people approaching. She let go of the Brittany who backed away, rubbing her head.

A crowd gathered, but they had missed the show. All they saw was a steely eyed Autumn looking at Brittany rubbing her head and her two very shocked friends with their mouth open. The gym teacher finally arrived.

“What’s going on?” The teacher took in the scene. “Has someone been hurt? Have there been a fight?”

“No, there was no fight. Brittany just tripped and banged her head.”

Brittany looked at Autumn, her face registering that if the truth came out, everyone would know Autumn had beaten her. “I tripped,” she said, still rubbing her head. Autumn studied Brittany noting she had lost a lot of weight in the past two weeks.

“I’m not so sure, but without cameras in the locker room, I’ll have to find out from you four. Brittany, come to my office. I’ll talk to the rest of you later today,” the teacher said.

Brittany looked at her two friends and then at Autumn and gave a nod. Autumn knew they wouldn’t say anything.

Through the next week, Brittany and her friends ignored Autumn, to the point of it being ridiculous. If Autumn was walking down the hall and one of them was walking towards her, they would turn around and walk away, duck into any open classroom, or turn and stare at the wall until she had passed. It was enough to make Autumn laugh, but she didn’t afraid she would upset the unspoken treaty.

That Friday, Autumn rode the bus with Jake and met Sage in the cafeteria like usual. In first hour during work time, her thoughts wandered. Autumn thought about how different her life was now. For the first time in a long time, she knew what to expect each day and night. She knew she would have food and a place to sleep. She even had a real bed now. She didn’t really know many people yet, but she had a friend in Sage, and Sue and Joan were more of a mother than she’d had in a long time.

She thought about her mom, how she tried to get clean again and again. She thought about how they had been evicted when she was in middle school and they had lived in a car. And how, as a freshman, they were evicted again and since there was no car, they lived in the shelter.

She thought about the counselor who had tried to help and the teachers who could not understand why she did not have the homework done. She didn't think she could tell them it was hard to do homework when there was no home. And she thought of the discussion, no, the talk she gave to her mom at the end of summer after Autumn opened another eviction notice. Of how she told her mom she would be leaving, that she could not be homeless again.

The next classes blended together with notes, labs, and homework. At lunch, Autumn found Sage quiet and sitting alone, which was unusual. Autumn scanned the cafeteria. She saw Michelle, the secretary/nurse on lunch duty, like usual. She looked at the places they usually sat. Everything seemed normal, except the table where Mark usually was. She scanned the table but couldn't find Mark. At the next table, Autumn saw Brittney sitting down unsteadily. *Uh oh*, Autumn thought, before focusing on Sage again.

“Sage. What's up? Where's Mark?”

“He didn't come to school today. They don't think his dad will make it through the weekend.”

“Oh, Sage. I'm so sorry. We should go there.”

“Really? Do you think he would want us there?”

“I know he would want you there.”

“What?”

“The way he looks at you? You're telling me you don't know?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Anyway, yes, he would want you to be there. Come on. Let's find a ride...”

As Autumn pulled Sage to her feet, a girl screamed and Autumn turned to see Brittany flop to the floor. A crowd gathered standing around Brittany, and the room went eerily silent.

The secretary rushed to her, but when Brittany didn't respond, didn't seem to know what to do. The secretary fumbled with her radio and called to the main office, "Code Blue, Cafeteria. Code Blue, Cafeteria."

Autumn pushed through the crowd followed by Sage and took in a scene she had seen too many times. It didn't look like Brittney was breathing. Autumn grabbed Brittney's arm and saw the tiny red spot. The loss of balance. The weight loss. The clammy skin. The purple fingernails and lips. "I am strong," she said under her breath.

"Call 911. Now" she said to the secretary.

"Brittany, can you hear me?" Autumn yelled.

There was no response. She double checked that there was no breathing and ground her fist into Brittney's chest. No response. She could hear the shocked expressions of her classmates. She quickly and smoothly pulled off her backpack, opened the front pocket, and pulled out a small vial, a syringe wrapped in plastic, and a CPR mask.

"What the hell!" she heard one person say.

She took out the syringe, measured the naloxone, and rechecked the needle. She grabbed Brittney's arm and smoothly inserted the needle to just below the skin surface and pressed the plunger.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she heard another person say.

She placed the CPR mask over Brittney's face and turned to Sage. "Start timing now. If she doesn't revive in three minutes, we need to do it again."

Sage pulled out her phone. "Go," she said starting her timer.

The total time from the Code Blue call to starting rescue breathing was less than a minute. The crowd stood, stunned. Autumn heard more people running into the cafeteria.

One of the math teachers knelt and said, “I’m an EMT. What happened?”

Autumn continued the rescue breathing as Sage explained what she had seen. The man looked at the vial and checked for Brittney’s pulse. Autumn could see him evaluating her. She heard other people clearing the cafeteria.

“Good work. How long ago was the shot given?” Sage held up her phone. “Continue with the breathing for another ninety seconds and then we will do another shot if the ambulance is not here. We can switch rescue breathers then.”

Autumn continued breathing until she felt a suction on the mask. She removed the mask and Brittany took a small breath in, then out. Autumn backed up and pushed Sage back. She knew what could happen next. Brittany slowly regained consciousness and looked around her, looking baffled about why she was on the floor in a near-empty cafeteria, and then vomited.

Autumn had never been in a principal’s office before, and certainly not with a police officer. At least Sage was with her. The police officer asked her what had happened. Autumn reported what she saw and did and why she had the naloxone. The principal told Autumn he would talk to the counselor and she would be meeting with Autumn next week. She didn’t exactly tell the truth when they asked where her mom was now, but she didn’t lie either. She said her mom was at home and when they asked if her address was on Pikes Peak Road, she said yes. They never did specify who the “her” was. And besides, Sue and Joan were her adopted moms and they lived on Pikes Peak.

“You know, you probably saved that girl’s life,” the police officer said.

”We’re very lucky you’re here,” said the principal. “How do you feel?”

Autumn looked at Sage. “It’s a lot to take in.” She turned to the principal. “I think we should take the rest of the day to calm down. Can we get a ride to Mark Davis’s house? We should probably be there.” The principal nodded. She turned to the police officer. “And can you use your siren?”

Autumn smiled as they raced down the highway with the lights flashing and the siren blaring.

“Was that good?” the police officer asked.

“It was great,” Autumn said, still looking out the window.

Sage grabbed Autumn’s hand. “I’m so sorry about your mom. I would like to listen if you ever want to talk. Or just be there if you don’t want to talk. What you did was incredible. Even if it was for Brittany.”

Autumn thought of her mom and her disease. She wanted to hate her, but she couldn’t. “I’m not going to lie. It’s hard to forgive, but she probably didn’t know why she was doing what she was. We all deserve another chance,” she said and squeezed Sage’s hand. She looked out the window and the green, rolling hills, at her new home. *I AM strong.*

CHAPTER IV: OCTOBER

I've had worse hangovers. At least that is what he tried to convince himself. With the sun radiating through the bottles in the wall, he knew it was mid morning. Fuzzy snippets pulsed in his head. Parking in the field of cut hay. The bonfire in the woods. The October night chill. Brady sitting on the log with his crutches. Couples in the shadows. Mark smiling for the first time in months. Sage intent on Mark's eyes. Tony with two turntables in the bed of a pickup. The throbbing music. The humming generator. The pulsing core of the crowd, rings of observers surrounding them. Climbing the tree stand, Justin and Corey urging him on. Jumping into the tangle of people. The cans of Bud. The weed. The pills.

Seeing the bathroom door closed, Erik looked out the living room window toward the yellow and brown valley of tall prairie grasses. Most of the land was their neighbor Tim Butteris's, and he wouldn't let them forget it. Erik noticed a doe and fawn by the tree line on the other side of the valley, a backdrop of orange for the foraging family. He breathed deep and his jaw relaxed. He was studying the deer when he heard the bathroom door open and his mom enter the living room.

"Hey, Mom."

She stood next to him, shoulder to shoulder, and they looked out the window together. "Look who's finally awake. You're late for breakfast, but there's leftover fried venison sausage and eggs I gathered this morning." She looked at him sideways and jostled his shoulder. "You look a little green. You better eat something after last night." She gave him a hug and went to the kitchen, leaving him with an open mouth.

Damn. How does she find out? But he knew. His mother was no saint. For that matter, his grandmother was no saint. Walking down the hall to the bathroom, he saw the pictures of his grandmother sitting in the side door of a VW van, bell bottoms with flowers embroidered in the flair, his mom squealing with delight in a tie-dyed sling. Next to that, pictures of his dad and mom at the Grateful Dead and Pink Floyd concerts when they still lived in the Twin Cities, both looking like hippies born twenties years too late. Then pictures of Erik with his mom and dad in the garden of the rental house on Dugway Road, Erik giggling with dirt caked from his feet to his hair. Next was one of just Erik and his mom, singing in front of the huge oak tree in the same yard. And finally Erik, straight faced, pushing his half sisters Natallia and Layla who screamed with delight on the tire swing while Erik looked over his shoulder at Sonja and James cuddling.

In the bathroom, Erik remembered asking his mom what had happened between her and his dad and why she had gotten together with James. She had said that after Erik was born, Dan had changed. He had lost interest in her and he wanted to live off the grid. She didn't want to be married to someone more roommate than lover, and she couldn't imagine cleaning diapers by pedaling a bike while breastfeeding an infant, so she ended the marriage. Not long after that, she met James. Dan hadn't gone far. He found an old farmhouse 10 miles away and was still pumping water by hand, using an outhouse, and burning kerosene lamps. Erik was sure his dad was the only male teacher in Minersville who had a ponytail although he did tuck it into the back of his shirt to hide that it was waist length.

Rounding the corner to the kitchen, Erik saw James and Sonja holding hands and doing a crossword at the table. Every Friday, his mom would go to the Minersville library after work and grab the old editions of the *New York Times* before they were thrown out. James held the paper

in place with his left hand while Sonja did the writing. When Erik sat at the table, James grimaced and went outside.

“What do you guys have planned today,” said Erik.

“We’re putting the garden to bed for the year and hauling wood from the drying racks to the boiler. It’s going to need to be split.”

“Would you make a couple eggs for me?”

“You know my rule.”

I know your rule, but it was worth a shot. He’d heard her say it dozens of times: You are responsible for your own actions. And the consequences for those actions. That meant that he needed to wake up, get himself fed and to work on time. He could hear her other favorite saying: It’s how you treat people that matters, so be kind. *I wonder what Justin’s and Corey’s parents are saying to them?*

He went to the stove and saw the cast iron skillet still had the venison sausage in it. He grabbed three eggs and started scrambling them. “Where are Natallia and Layla?”

His mom put down the crossword and got up from the table. “They’re spending the weekend at Jorja’s.”

“Oooh. In that McMansion? What do you think that family does with six bathrooms for four people?” he said pouring the eggs into a pan.

“If I was an attorney and James was an executive at Merino and Moore, we’d have more than one bathroom.”

“James? A suit? How many carpenter jobs has he had in the past two years? Four? Five?”

“Hey, he built this place,” she said, her hands on her hips.

Erik looked up from the pan. “*We*, built this place. You. Me. My dad. Our friends. *We* built this place,” he said gesturing in a large circle with the spatula. “And you had to convince *him* to do the bottles. I was only eight, but I remember. And I remember being ten feet up on the top step of a shifting ladder packing mortar around the cordwood. Definitely not OSHA approved.”

“Okay, we built it. But you know how much he did,” she said gesturing to the woodwork in the house. Erik scanned the room and saw the doors, bookshelves, cabinets, and kitchen table James had made. “You two need to find a way to get along,” she said heading outside with her garden gloves. Erik could see James already picking squash. She rubbed James’s arm and caressed his hand. He kissed the top of her head.

Erik studied the table. It was made with wood from the trees they had cleared to build the house. Each leg was solid oak with a carving representing each season: a doe and fawn for spring, a deer jumping into a field for summer, a buck rubbing his antlers for fall, and deer tracks in a field of snow for winter. The top was a single 42-inch-wide slab of oak. Erik had counted 114 growth lines from the center of the table to each edge. Inlays of cherry, walnut, and aspen formed a miniature of their cordwood house and valley. But the most amazing detail of the table was the birds. A bald eagle, the master nest builder, soared over the house and a wood thrush, the enchanting singer, chirped on the porch.

Erik looked at the designs made in the real cordwood walls. A flower and petals. A sunburst. A column of colored bottles that filled the room with a rainbow as the sun rose. They

bought 12 acres from Old Lady Butteris after her husband had died and she needed money. He remembered each month he and his mom placed a scale model of their future house around their new property. His mom wanted to make sure the rising sun would shine in the living room windows and the setting sun in the kitchen ones. How it would fit in with the hillside and ridge. What view of the valley the front window and porches would provide. He remembered how excited he was when his mom and James told him and his half-sisters they would move out of the rental.

Erik checked his phone on the way to the bathroom to shower. Nothing from Justin or Corey. Just two messages from a number he didn't know that he didn't bother reading. Getting ready for work, Erik noticed his favorite design in the house, a cordwood sock monkey his mom put by the bathtub. *No place was like this.*

He heard James and his mom come in from the garden when he was putting on his Badger Mart polo. He called from his room, "Mom, can I take the car today?"

"Why don't you ride your bike?" James said.

Erik closed his eyes and took a deep breath before walking into the living room. "It's going to be dark when I get done with work, James. And I'm not riding on the highway shoulder in the dark."

"Take the bike path."

Erik's temple pulsed. "That adds 5 miles. And the back roads add more." He didn't say that with all of the ghost stories, the idea of being on the bike path at night freaked him out.

“I don’t know why you work there. There are better jobs and there’s plenty to do here. You didn’t do anything yesterday or this morning. Again.”

“Natallia and Layla haven’t done anything either. Why not ask them once in a while. And I get paid for working there.”

“They’re younger than you,” James said, a fire in his eyes.

His mom walked between them. “Mom? The car?”

Handing Erik the key, “Come straight home. I need it tomorrow for an 8 a.m. shift.”

“Thanks.” Over her shoulder, James frowned and rolled his eyes.

Erik decided to take the backroad to work to check out where his family used to rent a farmhouse before they built their own place. The fall colors were intense this year and the oak would be putting on a good show. Opposite the Davis place he was a little surprised to see that the Butterises had not harvested their corn yet. Tim kept a few head of beef cattle so he could get a tax write off and grew corn, soybeans, and alfalfa on some of his land not in conservation. But usually, he was early to harvest, and Erik had seen others harvesting already.

After the bend in the road, Erik could see the Butteris house and barn. Outside the barn, Tim was climbing into his tractor, a grain trailer attached. *He must be getting ready to harvest tomorrow. No rain forecast for a couple days.* Erik remembered getting a ride to school one day with the Davises. Tim had an energetic wave and a large smile for Mark. *Maybe today will be different.* Erik nodded and waved at Tim in the tractor, a cold glare the only response, the same he had been getting for ten years. Years ago, Erik had asked his mom why Tim never waved

hello to them. His mom had asked if he remembered their fall dance parties. It was a highlight of his childhood. They would groove and dance on the porch at dawn and dusk, the only time they ever put the speakers outside. It wasn't until his mom reminded him of what time of year they did it that Erik understood that it was deer hunting season and it wasn't just a good time, but also a way to save the deer which prevented Tim from getting his trophy buck.

Shortly after taking the right on Dugway, Erik saw the huge oak tree alone in the yard, a blaze of red and burgundy against the green of the lawn. He remembered pushing Natallia and Layla in the swing, jumping with them into the pile of leaves from the massive oak, and riding their bikes up and down the drive. His cell phone chimed. Another text from the unfamiliar number. He read the three messages, an ache forming at his temples. He checked his pocket, but he had left his two remaining pills at home.

Badger Mart was the only store in Evanstown, so everyone went there for a gallon of gas, a loaf of bread, or any of the other essentials of life. Unless a drink was considered an essential of life, because there was no shortage of bars. In a town of under 650 people, there were five bars in the three blocks of downtown. When Erik started at the grade school, he remembered going with his new friends to pick up their parents at the bars when school was done. He remembered Uncle Al from Minneapolis joking, "How do you know you are in a city in Wisconsin? They have a bar next to a church, so you can sin and repent." If that was the case, with only two churches, Evanstown had a lot more sinning than repenting.

Badger Mart was also where everyone went for the latest gossip. Not that most people didn't already know everything with their emergency services scanners and the Evanstown

Confidential Facebook page. Erik liked seeing all different kinds of people from the Catholic priest who would stop by after Saturday evening mass to John Deere Dave. Dave had so many DUIs that he drove a riding lawn mower around town and to the bars. It wasn't a real John Deere, just a knockoff, but they still called him John Deere Dave. Why he decorated it with stuffed animals on the hood, no one seemed to know, but most people liked the red nose he added last year around Christmas.

Erik needed to stock the shelves and clean the bathroom and floors and then he would sit behind the register for the rest of the shift. The store only had two rows of shelves with aisles so narrow customers had to sidestep. The beer cooler was a walk-in. The stocking didn't take long and Erik completed the cleaning in 15 minutes. The floors were so highly trafficked and the bathrooms so old, cleaning didn't change the appearance of either. A constant trickle of customers kept Erik busy until the start of the Badger game. It would be dead until halftime when he would get a few customers stocking up on Miller High Life to finish the game. At least he could watch the game on the TV in the back corner of the store.

Midway into the second quarter, the bell above the door rang.

“Yo, bro! How you doing?”

Erik turned to see Corey and Justin bounding into the store. “A little rough, but making it. How about you guys?” He reached across the counter bumping their fists, Justin's hand wrapped around a brown paper bag.

“I bet you're rough. It was a killer party. I was surprised so many people from Valley and Point were there,” said Corey.

“Jumping off the deer stand was wild. But trying to get Straka to fight you was not smart,” said Justin.

“Will Straka was there?” Erik looked from Justin to Corey, trying to see if they were bullshitting him.

Justin smiled. “You don’t remember that? Corey had to pull you into the hay field. And I had to convince Will kicking your ass was a waste of his talents.”

“I don’t remember much of anything after the deer stand. My mom found out about the party before I woke up, but I don’t think she knows how big it was. How about you guys? Your parents find out?”

“My dad gave me the ‘We’re so disappointed in you,’ speech. Nothing new,” said Justin.

“No car for a month, so unless you are giving me a ride, I’m stuck in Evans for a while,” said Corey walking over to the beer cooler.

Erik’s gaze followed Corey. “No car for a month. That’s rough. What are you up to today? And get away from the beer. You know I can’t get you any. They inventory it every day.”

“We’re returning this to you,” said Justin holding up the brown lunch bag.

“Returning? What is it?” Erik said, his temples throbbing.

“You remember talking to Peyton from Mount H last night? He was the dude with the Air Jordan Retros and the Rolex. Corey introduced you. No recollection?” Justin shook his head.

“You really must have blacked out.”

“Well, you asked to be part of the action, and he delivered.” Corey grabbed the bag from Justin and threw it across the counter. “Usually, you have to pay him first and then sell it, but you didn’t have enough on you, so he said he would give you two days to get him the \$400.”

“Sell it?” Erik looked in the bag, then crumpled it and shoved it back at Justin. “No way. You guys are full of bullshit. I didn’t ask for a cut of this.”

Justin threw the bag in Erik’s chest. “Don’t give it back to me. You did. Said you wanted in. That with your connections, you could have it sold in no time. I don’t know what the fuck you meant by your connections,” Justin air quoted. “You’re always hanging out with us and we get the stuff for you.”

Corey motioned to Erik’s phone by the register. “Hasn’t he texted you? He said he would ‘make arrangements’ with you today.” Erik looked at his phone and his eyes grew dim. “See, you bought it. And you’ve got two days or it won’t be pretty.”

The bell rang. Alone, Erik looked in the bag. *How many oxy pills were there? And how can I sell them in two days?* Erik stuffed the bag in his jacket and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

Think Erik, think. How can you sell this stuff? And if you can’t sell it, where can you get \$400 fast? He pulled onto Pikes Peak and gunned it lost in thought. A flash of brown out of the edge of the headlights broke his spell. *Be alert. Think. Sell it. \$400. Two days.*

He pulled up the drive, parked, and knocked his head on the steering wheel between his hands. *Think.* His heart quickened and his hands trembled. *Just one pill to settle down.* Erik

looked up in time to see James look out the window of the garage. Erik wasn't sure why they called it the garage since James had taken over the space as his woodshop even before it was finished. As far as Erik knew, it had never had a car in it. Erik thought back to when he would spend hours studying James cutting, nailing, and sanding, the smell seeping into Erik's hair, and the sawdust settling on his shoulders. Whether it was a picture frame for a neighbor or a full wall entertainment center with carvings and inlays, James was precise. He would fit pieces together then rework them to make the joint tighter and he would sand until the wood was as smooth as glass. After years of watching and asking, when Erik was eight, James allowed him to help make a box for Sonja. Guided by James, Erik cut the thin sides using a hand saw. James made the joints and clamped the pieces for Erik to nail together. Erik tapped the first nail, but it didn't budge. Two more taps and no movement.

"You're going to have to give it a bit more muscle than that," said James. Erik, both hands on the hammer, drew back and swung missing the nail entirely and caving in the side of the box. James grabbed the hammer from Erik. "What did you do that for?" his voice rising.

"You told me to give it some muscle," tears building.

"I didn't say ruin it. Here give me that." James snatched the hammer from Erik. "I don't want you -" but Erik raced out the door before he could hear any more.

Walking to the house, he stopped, looked up and took in the vastness of the sky. It really was a spectacular without streetlights spoiling the view. Stars from horizon to horizon, the creamy river of the Milky Way just above the trees. He exhaled slowly and continued to the house, lights from the bottles in the wall guiding him. *How do I get out of this?* Erik could hear his mom from outside singing Songbird along with the CD. He had heard this song hundreds of

times. He grabbed the knob, then listened closer. “To you I would give the world” his mom sang. *Maybe I should.* He sat on the porch listening to his mom sing along for the rest of the CD and studied the sky. He was summoning the courage to talk to her when his mom belted out “you can only be you and I can only be me,” and he thought of her rule: you are responsible for your own actions. Erik sighed, heavy with worry and went inside head bent.

His mom knocked on his door and opened it a crack. “Erik, wake up. Extra pancakes are on the table for you. I’m heading to work. James is at Acorn making the bookshelves for the new job. I need you to mow the drain field and chop the stack of wood by the boiler.”

“He’s working on a Sunday? Hey, I need to run some errands. I was hoping to use the car today. Can I drive you to work and pick you up?” He sat up and put on his shirt.

“Not today. You know Ernesto? The mechanic at the Minersville Auto? He’s doing a side job for me and replacing the brakes. Going to save a bunch of money. And yes, a Sunday. Acorn wants the bookshelves installed by Tuesday.”

“There’s no way I can use the car?” panic crept into his voice, his eyes squinted.

“Sorry Erik. If I’d known, I would have tried something else, but this is the only time he has available for a month. And we need to get ready for winter. I really need your help.” She kissed Erik on the head and started walking out his door.

Erik called after her, “I can drive you and then wait for him to fix the brakes. Then I’ll pick you up.”

“Erik, what is going on? You usually love being here alone. Is everything okay?” She took a step toward him.

He suppressed his urge to tell her. “Everything’s fine,” he said, shocking himself with his volume. “Everything’s fine,” he said at his normal volume. “I just have a lot of errands I need to get done.”

“Okay.” She walked to the door hesitantly. Turning to face him in the doorway, “Maybe you can do the errands tomorrow after school when you get the groceries. And remember, the drain field and the wood by the boiler.” She lifted her shirt an inch and pointed to a scar on her stomach.

“No no. I got it.” He held up his hand and looked away, laughing at her guilt routine. “I know. ‘You bled for me. This is the least I can do for you. Horrible doctors. Worse labor. Huge scar. Pelvis to rib cage.’ I got it.”

“Great! Thanks, sweetie” she said lowering her shirt.

“Okay. Careful driving. The deer were out last night.”

Thwack! Thunk thunk. Thwack! Thunk thunk.

Erik picked up one of the newly chopped red oak pieces and inhaled deeply. Layla said red oak smelled funky, but Erik smelled the sweetness of 60 years of life. Short compared to some of their trees. *What is 60 years? Why does time seem so different depending on what you’re doing? School takes forever, but I could do this all day. Maybe that’s why I smoke so much. At least being high makes things bearable.*

Thwack! Erik remembered the anxiety, starting in kindergarten. Before kindergarten his mom was always outside with him in all weather. Playing, building forts in the woods, but most of all singing. Her favorite song, and therefore his favorite song for her to sing, was Autumn Leaves. He could hear her voice now. “The falling leaves drift by my window...” It wasn’t until he was in middle school that he heard Eva Cassidy’s version. His mom’s was better.

The first day of school when his mom had left him at the Evanstown school was the first time they had been separated that he could remember. He remembered singing along with the ABC song, doing the hand gestures proudly that his mom had taught him, no one else joining him. And when everyone else sang “Now I know my ABCs, next time won’t you sing with me,” Erik full-voiced and with his arms wide sang “Now I know my ABCs, kiss me, kiss me, won’t you please.” He remembered the laughs. And the stares. And the comments.

Thwack! He rested for a minute and took in the ridge in front of him, impressionist blotches of gold and brown from the aspens and oaks. Behind him the brown of the dried prairie in front of the red and orange of the red and silver maples. His breathing slowed. It looked better now than it had when it was cornfield. Most of the valley was their neighbor Tim’s, but today, the view was Erik’s alone. About five years ago Tim had the land surveyed and he marked the corners of his property with six-foot metal rods. Just so there was no ambiguity of who’s land it was, he mowed a ten-foot path along the border of his property. Then he put the land into the Conservation Reserve Program where he got paid by the DNR not to till the land, creating a nature conservancy in his front yard for 15 years. Most of what Erik could see was Tim’s. He owned over 400 acres – his mom had looked it up when he did the survey – and Erik’s family’s acreage jutted out into Tim’s on one side of the valley.

Erik remembered the sense of intrusion when Tim had mowed the path, particularly outside the kitchen windows. They had been eating breakfast at the ornate table on a sunny Saturday in May when Tim bounced by leaving a wake of destruction, the property line less than 50 feet away. With so much other land available, it seemed invasive to Erik for Tim to be so close to their house, even if it was legally his property. It probably felt even more invasive since there were no curtains or blinds in Erik's house, so there was no way to shut Tim out or keep him from peering into their lives.

Erik remembered the tension even before Tim had mowed the path. The day before had been Minersville Middle School's biggest event of the year, the end of year open house where student work was put on display for all to see. While most kids in his class had made a cutting board, Erik had built a bluebird house. Curly cherry joined with maple for the front. Joints tight and square. Even a ladder cut into the inside of the box and a perch on the outside under the opening so the birds could get in and out easily. Sanded and finished so smooth Erik could see his reflection in the wood. It was the best work in the class. He tried not to show it, but he was excited for everyone to see it, even James. And he was especially excited to give it to his mom.

He had stayed at school all afternoon and he was the only kid there without their family. His mom had said they would be there by 6:00, an hour before the open house ended. At 6:00, he checked the doors. And then the parking lot. At 6:30, he used the phone in the office, but there was no answer. As it got later, Erik grew quieter. At 7:00, the crowd had thinned, and they still had not shown. And then Erik realized that they were his ride home, and without a ride, he would need to walk 10 miles on the highway to get home. At 7:15, when the PA crackled a thank you for attending, Erik stuffed the birdhouse in his backpack and sat on the bench on a small island of grass outside the front doors. He endured the judgement of the last of the open house visitors.

And then each teacher. Some asked if he needed a ride, but Erik mumbled an excuse, averting their eyes. At 7:45, James's van finally turned into the parking lot.

"Where were you guys?" Erik's voice wavered when he opened the door.

"We...we lost track of time," his mom said.

"I've been waiting for hours," Erik's voice caught in his throat.

"We finished the timber frame house we've been working on and the construction company had a celebration. We didn't realize how late it was," said James.

Erik stood outside the van unwilling to leave the grass island, blinking, letting the situation wash over him.

"Erik, get in. Let's go home," said his mom.

"But this was the open house. Everybody was here. You've known about it for months. And we talked about it this morning," he said.

"I know sweetie. We didn't realize the time. Get in," Sonja said.

Erik lifted his foot, put it down, and waited. A silence settled over the parking lot. He grunted, set his jaw, and slouched in, throwing his backpack to the floor, the sound of splintering wood filling the van.

The thought of the sound brought him back to the present. Thwack!

It hadn't gotten better after seventh grade. Eventually, the only people who would hang out with Erik were Corey and Justin, and they mostly partied together. Even their time together

was limited. He remembered the first time they drove out to Erik's house their sophomore year. His mom had heard the car coming up the drive. Erik was in the driveway telling them to come inside when he saw his mom's head pop out the upstairs window.

"Erik, who's that?" she yelled across the front yard.

"It's Justin and Corey," he shouted back.

"Ooh, ick! Tell them to go away." And with that, Justin and Corey were uninvited from his house.

Even his dad made Erik feel like he didn't fit. People liked his dad, but they also looked at him like he was hermit - harmless, but weird. The long hair was only one thing. They knew he lived in a house with no electricity or running water. That he grew his own weed. The first time Erik smoked, it was with his dad. Dan even gave Erik seeds to grow his own and told him where to plant it so it would grow and not be seen by the cops, the DNR, or James.

Fucking hypocrite. As if James didn't do it. As if he hadn't always done it. I might have been young, but even at eight I knew that skunky smell. That's how he paid his friends for their work on the house. And he did a shitty job of hiding it. Like the smoke wouldn't travel. Idiot. And it didn't stop there. On the deck. In the garage. In the woodshop. And then he has the balls to preach to me about partying. The stack of cut wood grew, Erik unleashing his aggression chop by chop. Why was I stupid enough to get into the other stuff? Xanax was just the start. And where am I going to get \$400 by tomorrow?

Erik went inside and found the box of checks in his mom's sock drawer, where they always were. He made sure it was a perfect tear when he removed the last check and carbon from

the last book. He hid the check in his room and went outside to the wood boiler with the carbon and a lighter. He lit the carbon and tossed it into the boiler, locking the door quickly.

Monday was like most every other Monday. Almost. Erik dropped his mom off at work where James would pick her up later. He dropped Layla and Natallia at the middle school and then he went to the high school across the street. People were talking about the weekend and the party. Half the people fell asleep in math. A normal Monday.

But his English teacher had to ask him four times why he was pacing in the back of the room. And his history teacher suggested Erik see a doctor if he really needed to go to the bathroom three times during one class. And nobody was buying anything. Maybe Friday they said, but that wouldn't help Erik today. During his third trip to the bathroom, he ran into Justin by the water fountain.

“Any luck?” Justin asked.

“Absolutely nothing!”

“We told you it wouldn't be so easy to get rid of it,” Justin said as he checked the hallway for a teacher. “When are you meeting Peyton?”

“We're meeting today at his place in Mount Hale. I'm in deep shit. If you have an idea, let me know. I have the car today, but I don't have a lot of time, so it needs to be close. And I've got a fucking migraine,” Erik said as he scanned the hallway. He pulled a ten pill Excedrin bottle out of his pocket, slid a pill into his mouth, and chased it down with four gulps of water.

“Dude! What the fuck? You’re supposed to sell it, not use it! You *are* in deep shit. How much have you had?”

“Just a few.”

“You better watch it. If you’re doing that many pills, brown isn’t far behind. They call it Mount H for a reason.”

“I don’t need it. I can stop anytime I want,” but he couldn’t look Justin in the eye as he said it.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

After school he went to the bank, like usual, to cash his mom’s check for grocery money. Mrs. Edwards took the checks and counted out the money slowly. He thanked her and waved stiffly as he left. She waved back as she answered the telephone. Erik exhaled deeply and texted Peyton to set the time to drop off the money.

He got the groceries and drove to Mount Hale. The extra 15 miles one way meant he would be a little over half an hour late getting home. If anyone asked, he could say he met a friend at the store. It took a bit, but he found the address.

“I almost thought you forgot. Glad you didn’t”

“Here it is. It’s all there.”

“Just wait a second while I count. You can never be too sure.”

Erik took in the room. No lights. Curtains closed. Stains in the ceiling and walls seeped into each other with the TV screen glinting off Peyton's watch. Trash piling up on the sticky carpet.

"It's all here. It's been a pleasure. I can help you out next time."

"There won't be a next time," Erik's jaw locked.

"Don't be so sure," Peyton grinned.

By the time Erik got home, the sun dipped below the trees throwing long shadows over the house. James's van was already in the driveway. *Who's going to pick up Layla from volleyball practice and Natallia from musical rehearsal?* Walking to the house with the first load of groceries, Erik saw the wood boiler door open. *Shit! Shit shit shit shit!* Inside, he slowly walked down the hallway, the pictures of his family judging him. It was much too quiet in the house. He rounded the corner and saw James standing in the kitchen. Erik's eyes darted from the burnt half of a check carbon on the counter, to his mom crying at the table, to James standing in front of the counter his arms across his chest.

"I think you have some explaining to do," James broke the silence, his voice smoldering.

Erik set the groceries on the counter, eyeing the burnt check. With pleading eyes, he looked at James, and then his mom, unable to speak.

"What the hell were you thinking, Erik? Or were you thinking at all?" James punctuated each word with his right hand as if it were a saw, red rising up his neck. "I found this when I prepped the boiler for winter today."

This was the remains of the carbon for the \$400 check he had forged from his mom's checkbook. *Damn it! The electric wasn't on yet, so the damper was closed. No oxygen, no fire. That's why it didn't burn.* The check, light and delicate as a dried leaf, fluttered at the edges with the air disturbed by James gestures. Erik looked at the floor, then his mom. "I didn't kn--"

The redness rose from James's neck, up his cheeks, to his eyes. "I called the bank, but they said you had just left. How could you do this to us? To your mom? Sonja's working two jobs and this is how you thank her?" James picked up the charred copy and threw it at Erik.

Don't give him the satisfaction. Erik swallowed hard. "I needed--"

"*You* needed. I tell you what you need." His right arm sawing at Erik.

From the table, "James."

"You need to pay it back. All of it. Now." The final word reinforced with a sharp sawing motion into Erik's arm.

Erik pushed the hand away and squared himself to James. "I know I'm not perfect, but at least I'm not a hypocrite like you. You lecture me about not helping out and going to parties, but you can't keep a job and you're getting high all the time, so lay off." Erik stuck his hands out with his last word, making space for himself. His temples throbbed, his hands shook, and his stomach tightened.

James pounded Erik's arms out of the way and shouted "Mind your own fucking business," poking at Erik like a jackhammer.

Erik shoved James's finger away, knocking him off balance. James recovered and pushed Erik across the kitchen, stunning Erik, the pills spilling from his coat pocket. James and Sonja's eyes bulged. "Wh, What is that?" James said.

"I was going to tell you, Mom. I tried to the other night, but ... I couldn't," said Erik.

"Oh, Erik! What's happened?" said Sonja.

"I'll pay you back. I just need more time," said Erik.

James picked up the pills. "What the hell is this?"

"It's Oxy, but it's not what you think," Erik said looking at Sonja.

"Oxycodone! How the hell did you get it? And what do you mean you just need more- Oh, no! I didn't think even you would stoop to dealing." James threw the pills at Erik and stepped toward him.

"James!" Sonja jumped from the table. Erik's hand clenched into a fist and opened, clenched then opened. He thought of the blame, of the abandonment, of the constant reminders of not being enough. Before his mom could get between them, Erik clenched his fist once more raising it to his shoulder. And then a calm settled over Erik. Sonja pushed James and Erik apart. Erik smiled, gave James a single nod, and left the room, his mother weeping.

Erik only had to wait until the weekend to be alone at home. A strained silence filled the house for the week, Erik and James working their way around each other, one leaving the room when the other entered. At breakfast on Saturday, Erik saw his mom's fingernails were chewed

to nubs and a darkness sagged under her eyes. Once everyone else had left, Erik went to the woodpile and split a cord of wood. The repeated thwack and the sweet smell calmed him. The autumn chill spotted his nose and cheeks, but he had worked up a sweat from his work. He looked over the valley, a red-tailed hawk soaring above searching the field for prey. Thirsty, Erik went inside with the axe and poured a glass of water. *Well water tastes so much better than the chemicals they call water in the city.*

Erik studied the table, the elaborate artwork of the tabletop mirroring the view outside. Erik was thankful for the 10-foot ceilings now. He studied the precise details of the bald eagle. The piercing eye as if it could see Erik now. Each feather of the tips of the wings spread separately as if it could take flight at any moment. That was where he started. He lifted the axe high and like a compressed spring being released, he drove the axe deep into the eagle, clipping its wing, sending chips flying. He drove the axe into the other wing, then through the eye, then his pent-up fury released and he struck with abandon, hacking apart the valley, the miniature house, and the carved legs. It took him almost an hour to turn the table into a pile of shards. Exhausted, he sat on the floor against the wall, sobbing. The only distinguishable remaining piece, the singing wood thrush, he held to his heaving chest.

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