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## **Just Like Starting Over**

Senior Paper

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# Just Like Starting Over

A Novel by

Robyn Balay

Just Like Starting Over

The following chapters constitute the beginning of a realistic Southern fiction novel set in the fictional town of Higgins Corner, Georgia. After his marriage goes south, 29 year-old alcoholic and unemployed journalist Tom Frye is living in a motel – until he's forced out by a manager who hates cats. With no other place to go, Tom packs up his cat, leaves Miami, and returns to his childhood hometown, where everywhere he goes is haunted by the incident that drove him to leave ten years prior. Here, Tom has nothing left to lose, so he takes a job writing the gossip column for the town newspaper, becoming major domo of all of the town's dirty laundry. As he falls back into the regular routine of small town life, he starts to realize that he's stuck and that he's been stuck for a long time. Stuck in the act of wallowing about in whiskey and self-pity. Stuck in the same mindset as when he was a teenager. Maybe, after all this time, it's time for Tom to grow up.

For me – bet you thought I was going to get all sentimental, didn't ya?

## Chapter One

I peeled my face off the bathroom floor where I must have fallen asleep and right away wished I hadn't. My head spun and there was a smudge of my blood on the linoleum where my face had been. I reached up and winced, feeling a barely scabbed cut on my temple that began to bleed as soon as I touched it. I placed a shaky hand on the counter and pulled myself up, groaning, to look in the mirror. Not good. A swollen cheek, the trademark black eyes that went along with having your nose broken, fat lip, dried blood crusted along the top of it. My ribs ached, suggesting that some of them had probably been cracked recently.

“What happened?” I muttered. I remembered my brother Will had left early this morning. Or was it yesterday morning? What time was it? I picked crust out of my puffy eyes and squinted at the cracked face of my watch. 7:34 am. Yesterday morning, then. There was a bar. What bar? And a fight. Was I in the fight? I remembered getting punched. And kicked. Repeatedly. Did I say something? I must have said something.

I swayed. Was I hungover? Maybe I was. Holy fuck, I needed a shower. And a drink. I shuffled out of the bathroom and poured one, three fingers, taking it with me into the shower, feeling better already.

Ginny smacked me on the ankle, claws extended, when I emerged, signifying that she would appreciate her breakfast now, not one second later, angry that I'd missed feeding her the night before. "Hellion," I muttered, throwing two scoops into her bowl. She ignored me, snorting as she scarfed her food, and I headed to Waffle House for breakfast.

I barely remembered what had happened, but the details were starting to return to me. I'd been feeling social, which meant I must have been feeling better. Once I was done self-flagellating and spending time alone I usually liked to leave the depths of wherever I happened to be and venture back out into the world, which I had done by venturing down the street to a bar. Not the tiki bar in the motel but an actual bar. The tiki bar was laughable, to say the least. A few weeks ago I'd asked for a vodka tonic, top shelf, and they'd made it with Burnett's. On the bright side, I'd slept very well that night, but I digress.

I drifted into an uneasy sleep when I came back, never quite hitting the sweet spot that makes for a satisfying nap. The only thing that roused me was a rapid-fire banging on the door, sometime around-midday. "What?" I snapped, opening the door, pissed that I'd been awoken from my almost-nap. I was met with the flabby face of the front desk clerk who had checked me in a month or so ago.

"Sir, this credit card's been declined."

I frowned. He didn't seem like the kind of guy to call people sir and I wasn't the kind of guy who wanted people calling me sir. "No, it shouldn't be. I paid my bill." Hadn't I? I swore I

had...until I remembered the responsibility of monthly bills had normally been my wife's responsibility. Fuuuck.

He peered his head around me. "Sir, is that a cat on the bed?"

I turned and looked at where Ginny was dozing on the unmade bed. "No," I said quickly, shaking my head. "That's not a cat. That's, um...a stuffed animal. Taxidermied. Always take her with me when I travel. Makes me feel at home. You know what I'm saying?" She chose that moment to get up, stretch, and hop down from the bed. Shit. I sighed.

"Sir?"

I turned back around. "Yes?" I said.

"Animals are not permitted in this establishment."

I had to think fast. "Service animals are. She's my emotional support cat."

"I don't care if she's Garfield's granddaughter. No animals in the rooms. No dogs, no cats."

He crossed his meaty arms across his barrel-chest. His hula girl-patterned shirt was giving me a headache. "So either she goes or you both go."

"Well, I'm not dumping my cat off somewhere, so I guess I'll be checking out, buddy."

"I want both of you gone by tomorrow morning." He pointed at me, then turned and stalked off.

"Asshole," I muttered under my breath. "I hope you're proud of yourself, cat." I glared at her. "You got us kicked out. Nice going." She stared at me, her yellow-green eyes gleaming, and began washing her paws.

Damn it. What was I supposed to do now? Apparently I was broke. Finding another place willing to take me on short notice wouldn't even matter because I couldn't afford it. I could borrow money from Will, but...no.

So that meant...oh. No.

I was going to *have* to go back home, or at the very least seriously consider it. That, or I could live out of my car. I pictured it: wandering around stale and smelly, taking sink baths in gas station bathrooms, unshaven, my hair grown out past my ears. I'd be the homeless cat man, stumbling up and down Miami Beach, having to choose whether I ate or fed my cat. Wouldn't that be something. I'd sooner do that before moving back in with my parents, but the thought of having to go weeks without showering made my skin itchy just thinking about it. A homeless shelter, maybe – no, they wouldn't take me with a cat either.

I pressed both hands to my temples and exhaled.

“You ready to meet the parents, Gin?”

#

Most would view being permanently banned from your own home a wake-up call, a sign something had to change. Some might even consider that, say, rock bottom. Not me.

If that wasn't it, maybe it was having to live out of a cheap motel room for a month, where the ice machine didn't work and the only amenities it boasted were the pool in the middle with the cracked turquoise tiles around the edge and the tired looking tiki bar in the main building. It was your typical Miami fleapit, the stucco walls painted Don Johnson blazer shades of salmon pink and seafoam green, and skinny palms planted around the pool. The cheapest I could find and the

only one willing to take me without a reservation. But I wouldn't be there forever, it was only temporary, until my wife came to her senses and let me come home. It became blatantly obvious that she wouldn't be changing her mind any time soon when a fake pizza delivery man served me with a meat lover supreme and a summons for divorce. It was the kind of thing that made you go, "Well, shit. I guess she was serious. It wasn't clear enough when she kicked me out of my own house and refused to answer my phone calls, but this must be it. This is really happening." The pizza, at least, was good, and the process server didn't make me pay for it, so there was that. Always look at the bright side.

All the same, I was almost glad to be kicked out and living on my own. I hadn't lived on my own since...well, not even since college. I'd gone from my parents' house to the dorms in Gainesville to an apartment and then a house with my then-girlfriend, soon-to-be-wife. It was freeing to be able to crawl from bar to bar or come in whenever I wanted to. I could eat whatever I wanted, go wherever I wanted, be with whoever I wanted. Walk to the liquor store first thing in the morning if I wanted to. No one expecting me home. No one telling me to sober up. It was the bachelorhood that I'd cut short by falling in love my third year of college. A stupid decision, in retrospect, but I've always been known for making stupid decisions, and I suppose you don't really decide to fall in love, it just happens and unfortunately can't be prevented.

I didn't miss the arguing – I missed her: the familiarity of her, the curve of her smile and the feel of her body next to mine in bed. I missed being able to hold her and feel like all was right in the world, the way a kiss on the cheek could fix even the shittiest day. I still loved her – correct me if I'm wrong but you don't come out of a seven-year relationship with someone without having some inkling of affection left for them – but whether I was still in love with her I didn't know. Things had changed since we first met; we were no longer the same kids we'd been in college.

There were bigger things to contend with now, more important than what kind of takeout we were going to have, or whether I should take up tennis to kiss up to her father.

Hence I didn't bother trying to contest it. Maybe it was all for the best anyhow. Her parents would be thrilled about the whole thing, I'm sure. They'd always hated me for whatever reason, probably because I rode a motorcycle and wasn't a lawyer or a medical professional. If it hadn't been for the fact that I was, quote unquote, "from a good family" (relatively speaking), we would have had to elope. I wished we'd done that from the get-go, but she was a traditional girl and she was going to have her traditional wedding, right down to the old stone chapel and the country club reception and the floating candle centerpieces. And how would it have looked for the Fries' youngest son to elope like a common scoundrel? (My mother's words.) I never would have heard the end of it. Having a big wedding was a small price to pay for peace and quiet, although it seemed that had backfired in a big way, as now there was a divorce to contend with, and eventually everyone would know about it.

When I had been at the motel for a month or so, I woke up to a barrage of texts and several voicemails from my wife (wife? Future ex-wife?) reminding me that I was expected at the courthouse that afternoon and if I flaked on this she was going to send me an invoice for her lawyer's fees, so I better get my drunk ass into the shower and out the door in the next ten minutes or else. Right. How could I have forgotten? I didn't feel like fighting Laura over what she wanted, so I pulled myself together, as much as I could, anyway, had a glass of Wild Turkey to settle my nerves, and set off for the courthouse in Coral Gables.

It was all about as miserable and depressing and straightforward as one might expect. She didn't want anything from me, not even alimony, and I didn't want anything from her either. Equal division of assets; neither of us were leaving with much more than what we brought with us four

years ago. She had more assets than I did, but I didn't want them; I had essentially nothing and she wanted none of it. The little bungalow we'd both fallen in love with would be sold and the proceeds divided between us. The cat would go with me. Ginny was mine, anyway; I'd found her as a kitten behind my favorite bar and brought her home one night. She was mean and she was ornery, almost feral, but, as Laura had said, I was the only one she really liked. I was surprised she'd let her go so easily, because to hear her tell it I could barely take care of myself, let alone another living thing.

Laura had gone off the minute I walked in, complaining about how I happened to be dressed ("Sneakers, Tom? Really?") and couldn't I possibly have shaved for this? (I didn't shave every day; I didn't need to.) Had I even showered today? (I had.) She looked every bit herself in her neat, school-friendly blazer and skirt, her honey-blonde hair smoothed into a low bun and topped with a hairband. I felt like pointing out that it was odd for her to be wearing the necklace I'd gotten her for our first anniversary to her divorce proceedings, but I was still wearing my wedding ring so I wasn't really one to talk.

"So does that do it, then?" I said, after signing the thousandth and hopefully the last piece of paper that said the same thing as the previous: dissolution of marriage of Robert Thomas Frye Jr. and Laura Michelle Collins-Frye, et cetera, et cetera. "This is taking a big chunk out of my day, you know."

Laura made a face and sighed. "For what, Tom? Are you working again?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's a very important position that I have to get back to right away. Of course not. What do you think?"

"Don't be so hostile."

I shot her a blank stare from across the table and slid the sheaf of papers over to Laura's lawyer. "Am I done here?" I asked as he skimmed through to make sure I'd signed all of them. "Yes? Wonderful. I'll be by for Ginny and to pack the rest of my stuff later."

She shook her head. "No. I'll pack it all up and bring her by this afternoon. I don't want you coming by the house."

"Oh, Jesus Christ. Fine." I got up. "I'm leaving."

"Try not to drink yourself to death," she said.

I sighed but said nothing as I walked away.

#

Laura brought my stuff around later that afternoon, along with the cat, howling inside her carrier. Too quickly. It was as if she'd had it packed for a while now. She only brought Ginny up to my room, then left the rest of my stuff at the front desk for me to come retrieve myself, leaving without saying goodbye. "Just you and me now, cat," I said to Ginny. She hissed in response. After scooping some food into the cat's bowl later in the evening, I went to the Waffle House, came back, fixed myself a drink, and went back down to the pool, as usual.

The pool area was empty, probably because nobody wanted to risk slicing their foot open on one of the broken tiles at the bottom, and especially since the pool water was of questionable cleanliness. It was warm and dusky, an evening I could appreciate even in my situation, and despite the uncushioned and rusty patio chair, I was almost enjoying myself.

"Say, the pool rules say no alcoholic beverages in the pool area, sonny. Can't ya read?" boomed an authoritative-sounding voice from behind me.

I jumped, then said, “I fucking hate you,” once I realized that it was my brother. It took me a second to recognize the central Georgia twang under his affected cop voice. Will grinned and sauntered through the gate into the pool area. My brother was the very picture of dignified Southern lawyer: khaki suit, nice shoes, neat sandy brown haircut, not rumpled and mussed after his travel but lightly tousled. Thankfully he wasn’t the type to wear bowties and suspenders; that was more Senior’s preference than his. He was well-built and trim, taller than me by a few inches, with an athletic frame that suggested he might have played football at some point, which he had, in high school, as a runningback or a snapback, I wasn’t sure which. I hadn’t paid much attention to any of it.

“You know Florida has open container laws, don’tcha?” He pulled one of the rusty patio chairs over and sat down.

“Ah, fuck off. Nice to see you too.” Nothing like legalese instead of an actual greeting, but that was just Will. “What’re you doing here?”

“Not even going to offer me a nice cold beverage after my long drive? Where’s that good ol’ Southern hospitality?” Will reached over and shoved my arm.

I shoved him back. “It’s in my other pants. If you want there’s a vending machine over there.” I nodded toward the Coke machine by the lobby. “Be careful, though; it eats bills. Change only.”

“Eh, forget it,” he said. “I’ve only got bills.”

“What gives, Will? What are you doing here, really? Did Laura call you?”

“She might have,” he said. She had. “I didn’t know you two were getting a divorce.” I sighed. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It all happened pretty quick. Now that I think about it, it was probably a long time coming. She’d been kicking me in and out for the past year or so.”

“Any particular reason?”

“How much time you got?”

“Enough.” Will shrugged.

“I’m immature. I don’t care about anyone but myself. I’m about as emotionally available as a sea slug. I’m bad at communicating. I don’t talk about my feelings enough. I don’t care about her feelings. I’m lazy and unmotivated. Et cetera, et cetera.” I ticked off each on my finger.

He went silent. “So what’s the plan now, Junior?”

“Hell if I know. I only signed the papers this morning.”

“You can’t live out of a hotel room forever.”

“Motel. I’m aware of that. I’m also broke and unemployed. Obviously it’s not particularly feasible in the long run.”

“Any hits on jobs?”

Up until fall of last year I’d been a journalist with a magazine out of Miami known as the *Spectator*, which had focused most of its space on lesser known current events, the kind of stuff that nobody knew was happening because it wasn’t trending on Twitter, among other things. It hadn’t even been of my own doing that I’d lost my job; the magazine had become insolvent and

declared bankruptcy, which meant everyone, and I mean everyone, lost their job. So not only had I been fucked over, everyone had been fucked over, and nobody had known anything about it until they sat us down and told us, the same day the doors closed.

I grimaced. "Times are hard for journalists." I'd sent my resume to several places and interviewed twice at one of them, but there'd been nothing but radio silence after that. I wasn't even worth a formal rejection. How's that for making a guy feel special.

Will sighed. "You could come to Savannah," he said. "I could arrange something for you at the firm. Just until you can find something steady."

I glared at him. "What's there for me to do at a law firm, work in the mailroom? Sling coffee and make copies like an unpaid intern? I'll pass, thanks. I paid my dues. I'm not doing that again."

"You'd get paid but suit yourself." He shrugged.

"Do you know how expensive it is to live in Savannah, Will? The whole city is one big historic district. I don't want to live in Savannah."

"Seeing as how I live there, yes, I do know." He paused. "You could always go home for a bit. Stay with Mama and Pops."

I made a face. "William, that's a terrible idea. You know I can't go back there." Higgins Corner, beautiful and picture-postcard perfect, but nasty and underhanded to the core.

"Oh, come on. It can't be that bad."

"Well, it is, so shut up."

"You shut up."

I pounded the rest of my drink and tossed the cup to the side. “Make me.”

“How about I throw you in the pool?”

“I’d rather you didn’t if it’s all the same to you.” We were about the same size nowadays but I was acutely aware of the fact that he could still deadlift me like he’d done when we were younger.

“Fine, so don’t go home,” said Will. “You know they ask about you every time Erin and I go over there for dinner.”

He and his wife Erin had a standing dinner engagement with my parents, the first Saturday of every month. I wasn’t entirely sure why; I think it became a stipulation once they’d had their first kid. And for another unknown, different reason, Will and my father also had a monthly tee time. Will hated golf but my father didn’t and he didn’t like to piss Senior Frye off the way I did.

“I call them often enough,” I said.

“Every two months is not ‘often,’ Tom.”

“Semantics. If they want to hear from me more than that they can call me themselves on their own nickel. I’m not calling them and I’m not going back.”

“All right but think about it. You don’t exactly have a lot of options right now. It wouldn’t be forever. It would just be —”

“Temporary. Yeah, I know. This was supposed to be temporary,” I motioned around, “as in, ‘a matter of days’ temporary, but, as you can see, it’s clearly not.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? It’s okay if you’re not okay,” he said. “You’re going through some shit. You think you’re the first person to get kicked out by your wife?”

Of course I wasn't. I knew that. "Will. Don't worry about it. I'm fine."

"If you say so." He didn't sound convinced. "You should really think about it, though. Or at least get out of the city. Slow it down. Might do you some good."

I narrowed my eyes and looked at him. "Fine, Will. I will *think* about *considering* it, although I still think it's a terrible idea. But if you mention it again, I'll punch you. Is that clear?"

"I'm not promising anything."

"Just shut up for a minute, all right? It's a nice evening." The night fell silent around us as we sat, the neon from the motel sign humming overhead, a rhythmic buzzing flashing *Vacancy*.

#

## Chapter Two

For the first time in nine years, I was going back to Higgins Corner. I didn't count the one time I'd been back four years ago; the trip had been barely two days. A few months after I'd proposed Laura had insisted on seeing where I grew up before we got married. I'd resisted at first, but I'd relented when I realized how important it was to her. We'd stayed only long enough for me to take her around town to see all of the significant landmarks of my youth: the house I'd grown up, the schools I'd attended, the church where I'd been christened. It wasn't something that mattered to me, but it mattered to her, enough to request that my mother haul out the fat scrapbook my mother had stuck every loose picture that ever existed of me.

I left Miami early the morning after my argument with the front desk clerk, around nine, early by my standards, after cramming the pieces of my former life into the back of my Corolla. I put Ginny and her cat bed in the front seat, not even bothering with the cat carrier. She liked it better that way. I drove in silence for about three hours, the silence only being punctuated by the

sound of Google Maps telling me how many miles until the next turn. Most people probably didn't need a GPS to navigate back to their childhood home, but I did. I should have known how to get there without GPS, but I never went back, if I could avoid it. Any time after the occasion I'd taken Laura I made up excuses as to why she and I couldn't make it for whatever occasion, or they would come to Florida and we would meet up with them there. Never in Miami. My father refused to set foot anywhere near Miami. Even then visits were always on their terms, not mine. They had always liked Laura; I couldn't imagine how they were going to react when I told them it was over between us.

I caught a glimpse of my face in the rearview mirror. Still swollen, still nasty-looking. I felt my sore jaw and winced. I'd gotten into fights regularly when I was younger, the usual disagreements that plague middle schoolers and high school weed dealers. My mother always worried about my nose getting broken in these fights. Not about anything else, just my nose getting broken because if it wasn't reset properly it would absolutely *ruin* my good looks. All this stuff about her side of the family having blessed me with a perfect nose and how I shouldn't squander it by getting in fights or else I'd end up looking like Old Frank, the wino that always hung around the Higgins Corner Courthouse and you don't want to look like Old Frank, do you? Of course, she had told me this while she was very brusquely covering my face with a thick layer of powder and concealer to hide the black eye I'd gotten the day before I was supposed to escort my best friend Becks to our cotillion. Just the usual Southern things, you know.

I reached Higgins Corner shortly before dusk and I was not surprised to find that everything was the same as it was when I left, apart from the gazebo in the town square having a fresh coat of white paint. The Corner was your typical Southern small town, the kind of place travel magazines would tout as a "hidden gem." Magnolia-lined streets, a little downtown bustling with

small local businesses that hadn't changed in sixty years, a riverfront park with a bandstand, the diner that had been there since 1940. The kind of place where you were considered "standoffish" or "aloof" if you didn't greet everyone you saw on the street by name. A "heathen" if you didn't belong to one of the five churches in town. It was, by anyone's definition, a "nice" town. Higgins Corner, a nice place to live, or as I liked to think of it, the furthest you could get from civilization without being in the middle of nowhere.

Everybody claimed to know everybody, as all small towns do, but not as well as they liked to think they did. The less you know someone, the easier it is to bring judgment on them. There were good people, of course. I liked to think I'd been one of the good ones. I'd always thought I was different than everyone else. I'd only realized later that I'd been just the same as everyone else – nasty, petty people who'd find fault with anything. My parents were no different – I was truly a product of my upbringing. It was better that I stayed away.

Higgins Street was the one with all the massive historic houses on it, so of course that was where my parents lived, and had lived, for the past 35 years. According to popular survey, it was also the nicest street to live on in Higgins Corner. Not according to me, but nobody asked me. I turned down it and at once knew why downtown had looked so empty. Higgins Street, more specifically the part in front of and on either side of their house, was packed with cars. It was as if the whole town and then some were there. Then I remembered: it was June. About time for the annual garden party. It was always sometime in June, but it had been so long I'd forgotten when exactly. I vaguely remembered a cream-colored envelope, my mother's signature, in the pile of mail that I'd only shuffled through to find my magazines, but I hadn't opened it, and as far as I knew, there it remained.

I liked parties, just not the kind of parties that weren't any fun, and my mother's summer garden parties usually tended more towards the latter, although they did have their moments. I'd always thought they were more fun when I was younger and didn't have to be there. I could run around sneaking desserts; then I got older and had to wear a suit and behave. They were usually semi-formal affairs, meaning summer suits and string quartets, catered food and white linen tablecloths. No dancing, though; dancing was frowned upon, even though 75 percent of the people there had sent one or more of their children to cotillion classes specifically to learn how to dance at social events, myself included. It wasn't the string quartet that bothered me so much as the general atmosphere: boring people in groups having the exact same boring conversation as the group ten feet away from them.

I sat in my car and gathered my thoughts. I took a deep breath. *Temporary*, I reminded myself. *This is temporary. A few weeks. Six months, tops.* I could handle that. I'd made it eighteen years before, hadn't I? And I hadn't murdered any of my family members along the way, either. Maybe home wouldn't be as bad as I remembered it.

My parents had been putting this party on for years, before my brother or I had even been born, and it was their crowning achievement. We hadn't been allowed to attend until we were older, but we'd sneak out of our rooms anyway and swipe petit fours off the dessert table, having to dodge the legs of invited guests to hide under the tables or in the bushes. If you didn't get an invite to that, everybody knew, and the speculation would fly around town about what you possibly could have done to not get an invite. I still got one, ironically, though I never RSVPed and I hadn't appeared at one in over ten years. My father, of course, having been the town judge for a time, had arguably earned the right to judge his neighbors, but there was a difference between being judged for committing a crime and ignoring a social cue or two.

When I made it out to the backyard, I seized a canape from a passing server and headed straight for the open bar. I was surprised the old man had shelled out for a bartender but less surprised when I discovered he wasn't pouring top shelf. Senior could certainly be a cheapskate when he wanted to. I wasn't a snob in most cases, but I had some standards. I looked out over the backyard, strung with paper lanterns. The string quartet played a lively but mellow tune under the oak tree in the far left corner of the yard. And was it just me or did the peony centerpieces seem fluffier than usual? Mother had really outdone herself this year.

I was by the bar minding my own business when a hand smacked down on my shoulder. I whipped around, expecting Senior or Will, but instead found my old friend Mark Whitman from down the street, who had surprised us all by going to law school. He was a lawyer at the firm my father had helped found, Bowman Massey & Frye, up in Savannah, though my father was retired now. As a matter of fact, it had been on my father's recommendation that Mark be hired. Mark and I were still relatively close; he was one of the few people from Higgins Corner that I still talked to. I'd known him since kindergarten; we'd had our first drink at fifteen when he'd swiped two Leinenkugels from his father's beer fridge; he'd been the best man at my wedding. He lived in Savannah while his parents still lived down the street, same as always. "Small Frye. Fancy running into you here. I thought you didn't come to these parties anymore."

"Marky Mark," I said cheerfully. "How's it going?"

"All right, all right." He grabbed me in a hug, smacked my back twice, and released me. "What's new, old man? How's Laura?"

"Uh, yeah, she's good." I didn't have to tell anyone *just* yet that my life had fallen apart.

"What are you doing back here? What's it been, ten years?"

“Nine, actually. Yeah, I suppose I just thought it was time. What about you? What’s happening?”

His face lit up and he went off, telling me all about how his wife Andrea had finally passed her bar exam after being a paralegal for so long and their two year-old twins were ahead of all their classmates at daycare. Work was great; he was being considered for a promotion to junior partner. “Aw, but you don’t care about that. Come on, tell me what you’ve been up to. How’s journalism treating you? Still working at the same place?” Obviously Mark didn’t read *Spectator*, or he would have known it had gone under.

“Well, actually, I got laid off. All of us did,” I said. “I haven’t found anything just yet.”

“Oh, man. That sucks. Hey, I could always set you up with something at the firm. Or you could ask Senior.”

“No, that’s all right,” I said. “Will already offered to find me something at his firm, but I’d rather make it on my own merit than nepotism.”

He punched my shoulder. “Same old Tom. You look great. Nice fat lip you’ve got there. Did you get it done just for the occasion?”

“Yeah, I did, asshole. Thanks for noticing.”

“Listen, I’ve got to dash, but let’s get together and catch up. How long are you here for?”

“I’ll be here for a few weeks, probably.” *Or longer*, I thought.

“Fantastic. I’ll call you, we’ll set something up. It’ll be great.”

“Can’t wait,” I said.

He hugged me again. “It really is good to see you, buddy. It’s been too long.” Mark disappeared back into the crowd and I turned back to the bartender and ordered another whiskey.

I maintained my spot by the bar and surveyed the backyard, noticing that at least half of the people that had been invited to the shindig were people I’d gone to high school with, a thought that didn’t exactly provide me with a lot of comfort. I spotted at least two of my old girlfriends among the partygoers, both of whom had since gotten married. One of them hated me because I’d dumped her right before the Valentine’s Day dance junior year and the other, while one of my longest relationships, varied from one time to the next and I could never tell with her.

“Tom!” Another hand grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into a hug. Oh no. I recognized her perfume as she pecked me on both cheeks, Euro-style. Why did I remember her perfume? I shouldn’t have been able to remember it.

“Valerie,” I said. “Hey. Hi.” Valerie Williams and I had dated off and on for most of my senior year of high school and when we were off, we were never really “off,” if you know what I’m saying. She’d had been the one to sneak into my wedding without an invite, but Will, in true groomsman fashion, had her escorted from the church, quickly and quietly. I didn’t find out until after my honeymoon that she’d even been there. Thankfully Laura had never known anything about it. I’m sure it would have been a bloodbath if she had.

“It is *so* good to see you,” she said, rubbing a well-manicured hand up and down my arm. “You look dashingly rugged as usual.” I’d never been what anyone would call “dashingly rugged,” but all right. I supposed it was her way of saying I looked good, despite still being fucked up from the fight.

“Uh,” I said, eyeing the massive diamond on her left ring finger. She felt uncomfortably close, which, had I been seventeen and horny, I wouldn’t have had a problem with. But I was twenty-nine and recently divorced. “And yourself. You look...” Good. Of course she looked good. Goddammit. I averted my eyes from her cleavage and stared at her forehead. Thankfully I didn’t have to finish my thought.

“Amazing. I know. What brings you to town, Tom?”

“Surprise visit,” I said. “Nothing special.” *None of your business*, I thought.

She tossed her head and laughed, her hand resting squarely on the middle of my chest. “You know, Tom, you’ve always been one of my favorite exes. So if you ever want to pick things up where we left off while you’re in town, you just let me know.”

“Aren’t you married?” I said. I was a lot of things, but I wasn’t a homewrecker.

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” She winked, planted a kiss on my left cheek, and sashayed away in a cloud of satin and perfume, leaving me flustered and self-conscious about the fact that there was now probably a lipstick stain on my face. The bartender smirked. I glared at him while I scrubbed at my face with a cocktail napkin.

I thought I’d be safe by the bar but I was met instead with a stream of people who all wanted to (most seemed joking, although some seemed pretty serious about it) tell me what a bad son I was for never visiting my parents in the ten years since I’d moved away or laugh and joke about the old days when I used to sell people weed in high school. My stint as a dealer had been short but apparently not forgotten. Of course it hadn’t. Nothing I’d done was ever forgotten. Somebody even wanted to reminisce about the water tower incident, which I had tried to push out of my mind and not think about. Needless to say, I didn’t want to relive the water tower incident

with a random acquaintance from high school, so I shut it down quickly, and I'm sure, very rudely. I was starting to get irritated after too long standing around with people coming up and yakking at me about the same thing over and over. I excused myself from the bar with a lame story about having to go find Will and disappeared.

I moved around the edges of the party, watching as it went on from the sidelines. I'd backed myself into a corner, the corner of the yard with the gigantic weeping willow that had been there for years. I must have stepped too far back, because one minute I was standing and the next I was submerged in a sizeable decorative pond that I was certain hadn't been there before.

*Oh, balls,* I thought. *They'll love this.* I flailed about weakly for a few seconds but quickly resigned myself to my fate and let myself float there for several minutes, staring up at the drifting willow fronds above me. I sighed. Someone approached. I peered up.

"Goddammit, Tom." It was Will, rubbing his face and looking particularly disappointed in me. "Really? Is this what you do at every party you gatecrash?"

"Only the ones that have a fun little kiddie pool," I quipped from in the pond.

He sighed and crossed his arms. "You gonna stay in there all night?"

"I wasn't planning on it. How about you give me a hand and help me out of here so I don't have to embarrass myself further?" I moved toward the edge, reaching out my hand.

He reached down, grabbed my hand, and pulled me back onto the grass. "What the fuck are you even doing here?" he asked while I shook water out of my ears. "You said you were fine and you weren't coming back, but you look like shit and now you're here. By the way, why do you look like shit? Other than being soaking wet, of course. Did you get into another fight?"

I steadied my balance now that I was back on solid ground. I could feel the gaze of everyone nearby on me. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t come back, I said I’d think about it. Since when have you ever believed a word I’ve said?”

“Rarely,” he said, releasing his grip on my arm.

“Gee, thanks,” I said under my breath. I raked my soggy hair out of my eyes.

He paused. “Shit.”

“What? Oh, fuck.” I straightened up as my father approached, with an expression that looked like someone told him a joke he hadn’t found particularly amusing, often his default expression when it concerned me.

“Thomas,” he said. “We didn’t know you were here. You didn’t call. Did you forget our number? Or perhaps, how to use a phone?” Genteel, gracious, and backhanded. It was the same way he used to address the accused.

I bit back the urge to make a snide remark. “Hi, Pop. Yeah, sorry about that. Just thought I’d drop in and surprise you all.”

“I see that.” He eyed me, standing there, dripping. “You’ve made quite a splash, haven’t you?”

I wrung out the hem of my shirt, looking pointedly at Senior as I did it. “You know I like to be the center of attention,” I said.

“Jesus Christ,” muttered Will under his breath, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, no doubt about that, is there?” Senior said. I ground my teeth together. “Care to explain how you ended up in the pond?”

"I stepped back too far," I said. "I didn't realize it was there. Is it new? It's nice. I like it. Really pulls the backyard together." I waved my hand around.

"Yes, it's new." He squinted at me. "We just had it put in a few months ago. If you called more than once every two months or came back home occasionally you might have known that."

I didn't quite know what to say to that, so I sighed and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Well, for what it's worth, Pop, I'm sorry." That was what I did. I messed things up. I was good at that.

"I know you are," he said evenly. "Although I'm not the one you should be apologizing to."

"Mother," I said. "Yeah."

"She put a lot of work into this party," he said. "Anyhow, you'd better go on and get yourself cleaned up," he continued. "If you'd like, feel free to rejoin us when you're ready."

"Sure, Pop," I said, and slogged off towards the back veranda, waving at the people still staring at me, who gradually went back to their drinks and chatter. The string quartet started up again and the evening continued. When I got to the back door, my mother was waiting with a stack of towels. "Hello, Mother. You look nice." She looked at me disappointedly and shoved the towels into my hands. I took off my soggy shoes and went inside.

#

"I'm very disappointed in you, Thomas." Mother stood in front of me later that evening, after the party was over and she was finished supervising the cleanup. She was every bit as dignified as she always was, quietly simmering with irritation and annoyance just under the surface.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I told Pop; I didn't know the pond was there."

"This isn't just about the pond, although I don't know how you could have missed it."

I sighed. "It was dark, Mother. Anyone could have missed it."

She ignored my comment. "At the very least you could have called beforehand if you weren't going to RSVP to the party."

"An honest mistake," I said. "I didn't even think about it."

"What did you expect coming in the middle of a party?"

What had I expected, really? I should have just stayed out of it. "I don't know," I said. "Not to fall into a pond, I tell you that much. But I said I was sorry and I'm not going to keep apologizing for no reason."

"Everyone saw. I've never been so embarrassed." I would have believed her if that wasn't something she said every other time I'd done something to "shame the family." "Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

"The canapes were good," I said.

"I know they were good, Thomas. I planned the menu myself. Please don't change the subject."

I shrugged. "Well, I've already said all that I'm going to say for myself, so no. I don't have anything else to say. The entire town saw me fall into a pond. It's not that big of a deal. People will be talking about it until next year's garden party. Nosy Eula will write it up in the gossip column. The publicity will be off the charts. You'll be thrilled." Eula Lawless had written the gossip column, aptly titled, "A Little Bird Told Me," in the *Higgins Herald* for the past six-million

years, conservatively. She was a meddlesome old lady who would air whatever dirty laundry I happened to have in her weekly column when I still lived in town, although usually grossly exaggerated for effect, I presume. I got yelled at for it (the scandal!), but I'd kept the clippings in a shoebox under my bed for laughs.

"It's not about the pond. You are so stubborn. You're exactly like your father." She crossed her arms and shook her head, refusing to meet my gaze.

*And how would you know?* I thought. *How would you know a single thing about what I'm like? You never paid the slightest bit of attention to me unless I did something to "shame the family."* I ground my teeth together to keep from saying something nasty. "What exactly do you want from me, Mother?"

"An inkling of remorse would be appreciated," she said. "Perhaps some regard for the feelings of others. Why don't you start there?" She turned on her heel and left.

Will wandered in shortly thereafter. I exhaled through gritted teeth, shaking my head as he came in. "She's impossible," I said.

He shrugged and sat down on the window seat. The room was pristine, blue and white, nearly untouched. Not much remained from my teen years, although there'd never been much to indicate a teen ever living here in the first place. Most nights I'd stumble in plastered at three in the morning and instantly fall asleep face-down in the fluffy duvet that was supposedly for display only. It was a nice room, with an en suite, but it had always felt more like a guest room. The furniture was a matching set, the drapes (drapes!) were color-coordinated with the duvet, there were *throw pillows*. Throw pillows! On the bed! Mounds of them! Who puts mounds of pillows in a teenage boy's bedroom? It looked like a shot out of *Southern Living*. Even Laura had never

liked that many throw pillows on our bed and she was a devoted reader of *Southern Living*. “What about the divorce? Gonna tell ‘em?”

“Eventually, I suppose. Not yet,” I said. Mother and Senior were proud and prominent members of the small faction of Catholics in the Corner. We’d gone through the whole shebang: communion, confession, confirmation, the whole altar boy shtick. Will had stuck it out the whole way, but I’d been “relieved of my duties,” or in a word, “fired,” after about a year for sneaking too much of the sacramental wine, among other things. Much to our parents’ chagrin, none of it had stuck for either of us. Will defected to be a Presbyterian when he got married and I didn’t care one way or the other. But, as a long-lapsed Catholic, there were some things I’d come to figure out they frowned upon, divorce being one of the big ones. That, and falling asleep during the homily at Sunday Mass because I was hungover from the night before. My parents had barely gotten over me refusing the full Catholic wedding mass; what were they going to do when I told them it was over? “Not while Mother is still upset with me. I’ll wait.”

“You’re gonna have to tell them sometime. They’re going to wonder why you’re here and why your car is full of boxes. Speaking of which, what did you do with that cat? She’s not still in your car, is she?”

“Bathroom.” I shrugged towards the closed door of the en suite. “I’m surprised she’s not yowling at this point. Probably busy shredding a roll of toilet paper or something.”

“Pop doesn’t like cats, Tom. What are you going to do about her?”

“What the fuck do you mean, what am I going to do about her? I’m not doing shit about her. I didn’t take anything from my wife except the cat and I’m keeping the goddamn cat. She’ll stay in my room or something.”

Mother stomped back in, threw a frozen bag of peas and a first aid kit at me, then disappeared again. I laid back on the mound of pillows and positioned the bag over my face.

“In any case, you’ve been gone too long,” said Will. “Nosy Eula died last year, so no more gossip column. Bit of a sore spot with Ma. She likes being up on town gossip sans the act of actually gossiping, although I’m fairly sure that’s all they do at Garden Club every week. Nobody reads the *Herald* anymore, anyway. It’s been on a downward slope for a while now.”

“More typos?” I said from under the bag of peas. The *Herald* had barely been readable in years past; I couldn’t imagine it getting any worse. It was never proofread and most of the articles were written by the same person: the editor of the whole shebang, J.C. Clarke, who was older than dirt and hated just about everyone, man, woman, child, and dog.

“It’s mostly the typos, yeah. J.C.’s losing his vision but the man refuses to quit. And they stopped putting the crossword in.”

“Not the *crossword*.” I pretended to be aghast. “Now there’s *really* nothing to do in this town.”

He picked up one of the pillows next to him and hurled it at me like a football. “Would you shut up and stop wisecracking for ten seconds? You always have something to say, don’t you?”

“All right! Sorry. God.” I flung the pillow back at him.

“Listen, things are rough. I get it. But—”

“No, you don’t,” I snapped. “You don’t get it. You’re happily married, you live in a nice house, you’re gainfully employed in a job you’re passionate about. You’ve never lost anything. You’re in control of everything in your life. You don’t know what it’s like to feel as though

everything is slipping through your fingers and there's nothing you can do about it. Like you can't control anything that happens to you. Like you're just a background character in your own life. You don't get it, Will. At all."

Will was quiet. "I was going to say, 'but I've got your back.' We're not all out to get you, you know."

I didn't respond. My eyelids suddenly felt heavily weighted, and it wasn't just the bag of peas laying over them.

#

### Chapter Three

I awoke the next morning, forgetting for a moment I was no longer at the Palms before I picked up on the scents of breakfast wafting up the stairs and under the door. I was burrowed deeply underneath the duvet, which I remembered falling asleep on top of, and the throw pillows tossed to the floor in a neat pile. I hadn't slept so well in I don't know how long. I sat up and rubbed the grit out of my eyes, before rolling out of bed and into the bathroom where I'd forgotten Ginny still was, who shot out of the bathroom as soon as I'd opened the door.

I dressed quickly for breakfast to save myself a lecture about house rules and went downstairs where everyone was already seated in the breakfast nook off the kitchen. I sat down at my old spot and poured a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, son," said Senior. "It's about time you came downstairs."

I ignored the last part. "Morning," I said, dumping sugar into my coffee and wishing I had something stronger than creamer to put in it.

Senior lowered his newspaper and peered over his reading glasses at me. "Tom, could I interest you in some coffee with your sugar?" he asked.

I sighed noisily and set the sugar bowl down with a thump. "No, that's all right, Pop. I like it sludgy." Will kicked me under the table and shot me a *watch it* look. I kicked him back, hard.

"Suit yourself, then." He shrugged and went back to his paper. The *Savannah Morning News*. Of course. Senior had always preferred the *Morning News* over the *Herald*. Mother preferred the *Herald* because she didn't particularly care about what went on outside of the Corner.

"So, how long will you be staying with us, Tom?" asked Mother. "Don't be mistaken, we're happy you're here, but I do wonder what your designs are while you're in town."

"Indefinitely," I said, setting down my coffee. "I'm not sure how long."

"Well, what about Laura?" said Mother. "What's going on with you two? It's not another miscarriage, is it?"

My eyes strayed downward, wishing she hadn't brought it up. I'd been hesitant to tell anyone about them when they'd happened, all three of them, each one more painful than the last. "No. She's fine. She just...can't make it this time."

Will shot me a dubious glance but didn't say anything.

"She isn't coming at all?" said Mother. "Why not?"

"Um – " I said.

“Are you having money trouble?” said Pop. “Is it because you lost your job?”

Another thing I almost regretted mentioning in my last phone call. “It’s not that – ”

“Then what is it, Tom?”

“Divorce.” I tossed my hands up and let them slap down. “We’re getting a divorce. Happy?”

Senior inhaled and exhaled loudly. “William, did you know about this?”

Will bit into his toast. “Not until after he’d already signed the papers.”

My parents exchanged scandalized glances. “And how do you think this is going to reflect on us?” said Senior. “Do you know how this is going to look to our parish? You getting a divorce? What are they going to say? Did you ever think of that?”

“Of course I didn’t.” I slumped back in my chair, raking a hand through my hair. “I wasn’t particularly concerned with how this was going to affect you. I was a little more concerned with how it was going to affect me. I feel awful, by the way.”

No one said anything, just sat there in stunned silence. I wished to sneak back upstairs, to float to the bottom of a glass of Wild Turkey, to get trapped under the ice cubes at the surface. To fall asleep and wake up when things weren’t such a mess.

Mother broke the silence. “People are going to *talk*, Tom.”

“And what, was I just supposed to force myself on someone who didn’t want me around? Make both of us miserable? Add having a restraining order taken out against me to my life’s accomplishments?” I sighed. “Things just...fell apart, all right? The miscarriages, they added up.

It got messy.” I stared at the table and chewed the inside of my lip. Nobody spoke. I stood up. “I’m going for a walk.”

“But you haven’t eaten breakfast yet,” said Mother.

“I’ll eat later.” I found my shoes and left, out the front door. The morning was cool and misty, the sun already beginning to rise over the magnolia trees. The street was quiet, as usual. I broke the silence by slamming the front gate after me. As soon as I was on the sidewalk I was walking, my mind somewhere other than what direction I was headed. I thought about what Mother had said. *Another miscarriage?* I thought about Laura, the first one, then the second, and the third. We thought we had it the third time. The first and second ones happened early, in the first trimester, but the third one – six months in, right at the end of the second trimester. Only weeks before we’d begun to talk about names; tentatively, so we wouldn’t jinx anything. Then the cramps started, then the bleeding, and it was over, almost as soon as it had begun.

She wanted to keep trying, but the third one did it for me. That was it. I was done trying. I couldn’t keep watching her go through the pain, every time. I couldn’t put myself through the pain of seeing her in pain again. Most of all, I had no power over any of it. I went to the liquor store for the first time in five years, the first time since the motorcycle accident that led me to quit the first time, and bought a fifth of whiskey. I drank it, bought another one. I finished that one, bought a half gallon. Kept a flask tucked in my glove compartment. Hid it from Laura like I was having an affair. But, like an affair, she figured it out eventually. It wasn’t hard, not when I drank like I did. It was the one thing I could control.

Even if I didn’t know where I was going, my feet seemed to, and by the time I bothered to look up I found myself at Riverfront Park. Looking back, it wasn’t surprising that Riverfront was

where I ended up. I recalled the other times I'd stormed out of the house, going where my feet took me, and ending up there. There was a spot, secluded, deep in the depths of the park where nobody ever seemed to go, and that was where I went. It seemed like it was the only place where the gossip column never found me. A hidden gem. A little creek gurgled through a glade of sorts, a quiet reprieve from small town life. I didn't remember what had first brought me to it, and I'm sure I wasn't the only person who knew about it, but I kept it to myself nonetheless.

The park was heavily shaded with massive trees, but with a grove in the center where the bandstand and park facilities were. The Corner River wound through the entirety, hence its name, alongside a gravel walking-slash-jogging path. "On your left!" someone shouted, jogging past me.

Startled, I lost my footing on the gravel and tripped forward, landing with an "oof!" as the wind went out of my chest.

"You okay there?" She'd jogged back over and was now squatting down in front of me.

I looked up. It was a woman about my age, someone I didn't quite recognize. Her expression was a mixture of concern and amusement. Her auburn hair was woven into a French braid, tucked into a wide hairband. She was wearing jogging clothes: black leggings and a gray zip-up hoodie. Wait a minute. I recognized that voice. And that tone.

*You okay over there?* I heard it in my head, softer, more concerned. I had been drunk, she was driving me home. I saw it as if it were happening right now in this moment. Her at the wheel, my head leaned against the cool window, half out of it. She always answered when I called. She was my designated driver. I'd call her over anyone else, especially my father.

"Becks?" I said from the ground, pushing myself up on my hands. "Is that you?"

“Yeah?” She squinted down at me. “Junior?”

“In the flesh.” I got to my feet, groaning and wheezing, picking bits of gravel out of my hands. I brushed myself off and looked her in the eye.

Becks looked like she either wanted to slap me or hug me, but she did neither. “Tom Frye,” she said. “It’s been a long time.”

“It has, hasn’t it?”

“What are you doing back here?”

“Um,” I said. “No reason. Thought I’d come and visit the parents.”

She crossed her arms. “You always said you’d never come back.”

I had. “Changed my mind,” I said.

Becks shook her head. “Tom Frye, I’ve known you since we were five, and I think we both know you’re not the kind of guy who just decides to come back after ten years on a whim. So, you’ve either changed or you’re a liar.”

“People can change, Rebecca Piper,” I said. “You’d be surprised.”

She half-smiled.

#

I chatted with Becks for about ten minutes before the conversation wound down and she went off to go finish her run. I wandered off, too, without even making it to my old spot in the depths of the park. I thought back and tried to recall the last time I’d seen her. It was a graduation party, probably the last week before everyone packed up and left for wherever they happened to

be going. At that point I hadn't really talked to her in almost a year; why, I couldn't say. Back then I was usually fucked up in one way or another, be it weed or alcohol, so my memory was spotty when it came to high school. I remembered an argument, but not what it was about. Before that we'd been friends, I thought. Good ones. Other than Mark, she'd been my best friend. I told her things, things I didn't tell Mark or Will or even Laura, later on. Things like how I was convinced that my parents secretly hated me. Or that I'd always wanted to be a writer and publish books. That, at least, I remembered. It helped, of course, that our mothers were both involved in every women's club-slash-society in town, the Garden Club and the Junior League being the big ones, so we had each other to commiserate with over being dragged to every function known to man.

But she'd been at my wedding too, or I remembered inviting her, at least. No, she'd been there. I remembered her coming through the receiving line. She'd been there by herself, as far as I could tell, though she'd been one of the guests to get a plus one. I wondered if she'd ever found anyone or if she was dating anyone. She'd dated a lot in high school. People liked her, guys especially. It was out of the ordinary for her to not have a date on Saturdays. I wondered what directions her life had gone in since I'd last seen her. I wished we could have caught up more, but she didn't seem willing to talk for too long.

"We should catch up," I'd said.

She'd said, "Maybe," before giving me a hug and bidding me farewell.

I absently let myself in through the front gate, my mind still preoccupied. I dropped my shoes upstairs, per house rules, and wandered into the kitchen where my parents were, planning to make myself a sandwich, only to find that Mother had already made me one without even having to ask what kind. Afterwards I disappeared upstairs, wanting to avoid any potential conversations

with either of my parents. Nine times out of ten talking with my father tended to devolve into argument and I wasn't in the mood to argue. I brought the boxes in from my car and busied myself putting things away. I wouldn't have otherwise, but I didn't see any reason to be driving around with my car packed to the rafters with boxes, and it gave me the perfect excuse not to talk to anyone.

I was lucky it hadn't been me that had packed the boxes, or else it would have been a disaster: unlabeled, jumbled together, disorganized. Since Laura had packed them they were all labeled and packed neatly. Of course. I'd come to expect nothing less from her. I went about stacking books on the built-in shelves, original to the house, or so I'd been told, while Gin slept on the window seat in a patch of sunlight. I flattened the boxes and shoved them under the bed when I was done, for easy retrieval when I inevitably had to pack up and leave again.

I found my old shoebox filled with mementos at the bottom of the last cardboard box, which I set aside to dig through later. I thought the last box was empty, but something rolled about loosely in the bottom when I picked it up. I turned the contents onto the bed and a little box, black velvet, tumbled out. I picked it up slowly, flicking it open, hoping it would be empty.

It wasn't.

Inside was Laura's engagement-wedding ring set. I'd proposed with a placeholder, a cheap ring from Target, promising to take her to pick out a real one, a nice one, from a jeweler. I didn't know the first thing about picking out jewelry, so we'd picked this one out together. I'd wanted her to have exactly what she wanted. It was two pieces of white gold, welded together after the wedding, a princess-cut diamond setting with sapphires on either side. *To match your eyes*, I'd said.

*It's too much, Tom,* she'd said, her face shaded in concern.

It had set me back quite a bit but I didn't care then. Now, all of my breath seemed to catch in the back of my throat. My hands shook. I sat down hard on the bed, staring at the ring nestled in velvet. Why had she given it back to me, hidden at the bottom of a box of junk? It was hers, made especially for her, so she might as well have kept it. I didn't care what she did with it. I hadn't noticed that she wasn't wearing it at the lawyer's office. Why did she give it back to me? Why? I didn't want it, but I didn't want to sell it. What was I going to do with it?

There was a light tap on the door. "Tom?" Will poked his head in.

"What?" I snapped, sniffing loudly, shoving the little box into the bedside table drawer next to me.

He came all the way into the room. "Am I interrupting something?"

I cleared my throat. "Nope. Just, you know, unpacking. What are you up to?"

"Came to say goodbye," he said. "I can't stay for dinner. I told Erin I'd be back this afternoon."

"Oh," I said. "You're abandoning me, then?"

"I mean, I guess I *could* hang around a little longer."

"No, don't worry about it. I'll be fine here by myself," I said. "Go home to your wife. Tell her I said hey, yeah?"

"Yeah, of course." He twirled his keys around his index finger. "We'll be back for dinner next week, you know. If you don't burn the house down by then." His eyes twinkled with good humor.

I rolled my eyes. “Drive safe, Will.”

“See ya, buddy.” He chuckled me lightly on the shoulder, letting his hand rest for a second longer, then left, leaving me fully alone.

I stared at my own ring, twisting it around. For all the times she’d kicked me out I’d never even considered taking it off. She’d take me back. I knew it. Four years I’d worn it and it was as much a part of my hand as my fingers. This was it, though. The papers were signed. This was nothing like the other times. There’d be no going back after this. No sense in leaving it on. I pulled it off, shutting it in the same drawer as Laura’s. If the pizza man serving me with papers hadn’t been real enough, my ex-wife sending back her wedding ring certainly was.

#

I was on my second drink when Pop rapped on the door and told me to get dressed for dinner. “Put a clean shirt on,” he said. “And comb your hair. You look mussed.”

I reached up and flattened my hair with my hand. “I’ll get on it right away,” I said. “What’s for dinner?”

“Brisket,” he said, and left.

I felt a small surge of anticipation. Brisket happened to be one of my favorite dishes, and one that I hadn’t had in a long time. A good one, anyway, and Karen Frye’s was a good one, I’d give her that much. I dug a clean, albeit wrinkled, button-down from my suitcase and went downstairs.

"Oh, good, there you are," said Mother when I came into the kitchen. She was taking what looked to be a peach cobbler out of the oven, bubbling and steaming. "Go ahead into the dining room. Everything's just about set."

I went in and met with a massive spread of food that covered most of the dining room table, even with the extra leaf. Heaping bowls of sides – macaroni and cheese, coleslaw, mashed potatoes, baked apples, things I hadn't had in ages – surrounded an open space, which I assumed was for the centerpiece of the meal. I sat down. Pop sat at his usual spot at the head of the table, looking as though he'd had his arm twisted recently, a sort of resigned expression. Mother bustled in after me, humming tunelessly under her breath and carrying a platter laden with brisket. She seemed oddly cheerful, which was strange. I didn't imagine her to be over the morning's news so quickly.

"Good grief, Mother. Who else is coming? The Pope and all of the saints?"

"Tom!" She feigned indignance, though she looked secretly pleased. "Well, enough of that." She waved her hand. "Let's eat before it gets cold. Will you say grace?" Mother was still looking directly at me.

"Um," I said, looking around. "Yeah, er – sure." They bowed their heads while I dug furiously through my memory banks for the Catholic mealtime blessing that I'd repeated daily for almost fifteen years. I thought about making one up on the fly, but they always did the Catholic one, regardless of occasion. Anything else would have been no good. I struggled through, "Bless us, oh Lord, and, um... these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ our Lord. Amen," mangling the sign of the cross afterward.

“Amen,” rumbled Pop. He took Mother’s plate, loaded it up, and passed it back, though I knew she wouldn’t touch it until everyone at the table had a full plate.

The brisket was amazing, practically melting in my mouth. All the fixings, too – I didn’t realize how long it had been since I’d had Mother’s cooking. Her macaroni was just as good as I remembered, thick and creamy and oozing with cheese.

“Tom, how is it?” Mother asked, looking in my direction with a solicitous expression. “Is it good? I haven’t made it in a while; I might be a little out of practice.”

“Yeah, it’s good,” I said. “Delicious.”

Mother beamed, almost looking more pleased than before when I’d made my comment about the Pope and looked pointedly at Pop.

He dabbed at his mouth with a napkin and cleared his throat. “So you need a job,” he said.

I paused, a loaded fork hovering between the plate and my mouth.

“I’ve called Sharon in human resources up at the firm,” he continued. “She said they could certainly find a place for you there.”

I let my fork drop to my plate and sighed. “Not this again. I don’t want a job at the firm. I’ve told you before I’m not interested.” This wasn’t the first time he’d tried to get me to work at his firm. The summer before my senior year of high school he’d gotten me an internship I didn’t want since it consisted mostly of doing the work of a paralegal, sans getting paid for it. I knew why he’d done it. Back then he was still holding out hope that I’d follow him and my brother to law school, and I was already in trouble for everything that had followed the water tower incident, though they didn’t know I’d been involved. After that he felt he needed to keep an eye on me all

the time. Now, even though I was an adult and he was retired, I still got the feeling that he'd have eyes and ears all over the place. "Thanks, anyway, Pop. I've already got something in the works." I didn't, not really, but I couldn't let him know that.

"And what's that?"

"I heard the *Herald* was floundering," I said, thinking fast. "I'll go for that."

"That old rag?" he complained. "It's hemorrhaging money. It'll be defunct in a year. Why would you want to put yourself through that again?"

"Because I'd rather do that than have anything to do with the legal profession. I'm a journalist, not a lawyer, or a paralegal, or anything else," I said. "Listen, if you're right, and the paper flops, and I still happen to be here, then sure, by all means, find me a job at the firm. But until then that won't be necessary."

Pop muttered something under his breath and took a long drag from his Arnold Palmer.

"There's actually something else we'd like to talk to you about," said Mother.

"And what might that be?" I said.

"Tom, you're an adult, and we'll respect that, but we'd like you to come to Mass tomorrow," said Mother. "And every week that you're here after that."

"Mass?" I said. "Are you kidding? I'm not going to go to Mass."

"You'll do as your mother says or I'll put you on the street," said Pop through a mouthful of food.

"Fine," I said, rubbing my temples. I would have protested more, but more than one argument in a day seemed excessive. "Guess I'll go to Mass."

"And confession," said Mother. "Once a week.

I shook my head. "Oh, no. Absolutely not. I am not going to confession, Mother. I'll tolerate Mass but I draw the line at confession."

"Just *once*, Thomas. You'll feel better about yourself."

"I doubt that," I said, "but fine. If me going to confession will make you happy, I will go. Once. But only once."

She looked awfully pleased with herself.

#

Mass was just as boring as I remembered, and it didn't help that it was too early in the morning for anyone to be able to focus on anything other than staying awake. I found myself nodding several times, but I was kept awake throughout the service by her repeatedly elbowing me in my still aching ribs, which she seemed irritated about having to do. When I wasn't trying to keep myself awake, my mind kept drifting to the last time I'd stepped foot in a church. There'd been once, before my wedding. A funeral, twelve years ago. It hadn't been Catholic; it had been Methodist, I remembered. Low-key. Much different from the full Catholic funeral Masses I was used to from dead family members.

Mother flicked me in the ear when I drank too long from the communion chalice, which I was none too pleased about. Because of that, among other things, I was not in a particularly good mood when the service finally ended. "I think that went well," she said as we came out of the

building afterwards. "Oh! Carolyn!" She went off, waving at one of her many fellow club members.

Pop sighed. "I'd better go head her off. We'll be here all day if I don't catch her now." He followed her over to where she was now chatting, head bobbing and hands gesticulating, with Carolyn from the Friends of the Library.

I shrugged and tucked my hands in my pockets, watching the rest of the congregation file out of the big double doors, all faces I remembered but couldn't place names to. The one time I'd brought Laura back she'd suggested getting married here, in town, but I'd had to put my foot down on that. I wasn't staying here any longer than I had to, and I especially didn't want the memories of my wedding day to be associated with a town I hated. "Anywhere but here," I remembered telling her. "I'll pay for a destination wedding myself before I get married here." She knew why then. I'd hit step five of AA and decided to come clean about what had happened. I knew certain people resented me for getting married out-of-state, but that was their problem, not mine, and at that point having it in Georgia would have been out-of-state for me.

"Thomas?" I froze. Father Michael, my least favorite priest, was coming in my direction. I turned tail and power-walked away.

When I started walking, I ended up somewhere I hadn't been in years: the water tower. I found the ladder, in the same place it had been all those years ago, and scaled it all the way to the top, wishing I was wearing different shoes. Even after almost slipping several times, I made it to the top, breathless. The water tower had been one of my places, way back in the day. I'd been coming up here long before the incident. It was a good thinking spot.

I sat down, my feet dangling off the edge of the platform, and took the flask out of my jacket pocket. Being up here was bringing it all back, every memory that I had of this place was in my head now, the incident, of course, at the forefront.

It was dumb, I thought. None of us should have been up there, not at that time of night. The water tower wasn't well lit, except for a few lights on the very top of the tower, which did little to illuminate the area. But teens by their nature are dumb, and in a small town like ours we did whatever we could to amuse ourselves on a Friday night, even if it meant climbing to the top of a water tower on to paint something stupid on it. I couldn't even remember what it was we'd planned to paint, only that it was a dumb teenage prank gone awry. We'd never even ended up painting anything, just goofed around smoking weed and shotgunning the last of the beers we had tucked in our jackets. We were seventeen, all of us, including the guy that went over the rail. His name was Derek. Derek Fleming. I didn't know him all that well, just that he'd been in the same classes as all of us since kindergarten. He was one of those background social fixtures who just happened to be there with us that night, drinking and laughing and smoking like the rest of us, until someone, probably Mark, came up with the bright idea to scale the water tower. If we'd been sober it might have ended differently but we were all stoned as well as drunk. That was just asking for something to go wrong.

And it did. I didn't even notice when Derek went over the rail. I only noticed when I realized he wasn't on the platform of the tower with the rest of us. When we came down, we found a flashlight and discovered him there on the ground, mangled as one might have expected after a fall from five stories above, blood pooling beneath his head. I stood in stunned horror holding the flashlight, unable to tear my eyes away from the carnage. I remember it even now: his eyes wide, brown, blank and staring, his left leg bent at an unnatural angle beneath him, the white bone and

yellow cartilage visible through the ragged hole in his jeans. Several feet away Mark was throwing up in the bushes after seeing the body, and the other guy, Jeremy Rafferty, took off, heading back towards town, not even waiting for the rest of us to follow. I remembered reaching down and gently shutting Derek's eyes, some myth about the dead and their open eyes at the back of my mind. I would never forget. I couldn't forget.

The decision was made, at some point after Mark was done puking, that we'd go home and neither of us would say anything about it. Let them think that Derek had been alone, that it was a suicide, whatever reasoning they could come up with to explain why a seventeen year-old had been found battered and bruised at the bottom of the town water tower. I knew what my parents would have said; I couldn't tell them. I wanted to tell Becks, Will, anyone who would have seen my side of the story and understood, but I couldn't. On Saturday we woke to a buzzing town and what seemed like the entire sheriff's department crawling all over the water tower. Mother dragged me over to see what all the furor was, just in time for me to see Derek loaded into the back of the coroner's van. Sunday morning, we woke to the headline, in big black letters:

Local Teen Dead After Apparent Suicide from Water Tower

I walked around on edge for weeks after that, expecting someone to come busting through the doors to arrest me at any moment. My conscience wouldn't keep quiet. I felt awful about the entire thing, though it hadn't even been my idea to go up on the tower that night. I should have done something. I should have noticed he was gone sooner. Maybe I could have done something. Kept him from falling, maybe, grabbed his hand as he fell. Never mind the fact that my senses were just as impaired as his were at the time he fell, and likely couldn't have done any good. Never mind the fact that I'd played it over and over again in my mind and come up blank for any way to have helped. I still couldn't shake the feeling that Derek was dead because of me. I'd been drinking

for long enough already, but that was the first time I fully disappeared inside the bottle. If I was drunk, I could be happy. I didn't have to think about it. I didn't have to feel guilty. I put my conscience on mute. Mark seemed bothered by the whole affair, though whatever feelings he might have had faded after a month or two, and nothing ever came of it. Jeremy Rafferty ignored the pair of us for the rest of high school, which didn't bother me as I'd never particularly liked him in the first place. But I was pissed. Pissed that I felt like I was the only one who harbored any remorse for what had happened. Pissed that I couldn't get over it as easily as the others had. Why me? It hadn't even been my idea to go up there, so why did *I* feel so responsible for Derek's death? Why, even now, did it trouble me so?

I went to his funeral with my parents and I felt so uncomfortable that I almost left, but I made myself stay, although I felt on the verge of a panic attack throughout most of the service. This was my penance. I had to stay and watch Mr. and Mrs. Fleming cry over Derek's flower-covered casket and talk about the horrors of suicide and how they couldn't believe Derek would do such a thing, how happy and social and well-adjusted he'd been. I wanted to stand up and shout that it wasn't a suicide, it was an accident, it was all my fault, but I stayed quiet, resisting the urge to sprint down the street and fling myself from the water tower as well. I had to stand there in the hallway of the Flemings' house while my mother dropped off a casserole, surrounded by happy family pictures of the five of them, staring at my feet and riddled with a deep, radiating shame.

They left town about a year later, around the time I graduated high school, and moved to Columbus. Around the time Derek would have graduated high school. Their departure left a hole, to say the least. No one left the Corner. Its denizens were integral, woven into its fabric like squares in a quilt. Most families there had been there since the Confederacy, some even earlier, and the Flemings were among them. Mrs. Fleming was involved with many of the same clubs and societies

as my mother, Derek's brother Beau had played football with Will, and Will had dated their sister Jenny as well. Their absence was felt all around, once they were gone.

As the town tried to move past the incident, yet another scandal was brewing. A series of burglaries, small-time, petty. Someone had broken a window at St. Anthony's, the Catholic church, and stolen the donation box in the foyer. It happened again, at all four of the other churches, later in the month. The first instinct of the sheriff had been to go for me, as they already knew me pretty well down at the station. Since the incident I'd been brought in several times on charges of drunk and disorderly and before that on some small instances of vandalism. Nothing had really come of that. I'd get a mugshot, spend the night in prison, and in the morning I'd be sentenced to time served, let off with a slap on the wrist each time. I never even bothered using my one phone call. But, being the black sheep son of one of the town's most respected couples, people were bound to talk.

And they did. It was surprising when there wasn't something printed about me in the gossip column, or otherwise in the newspaper. At home I was being treated to daily lectures about how I was a disappointment and a shame and an embarrassment to the family name, and with Will gone at college I had no one to back me up. The people in town saw me as nothing other than a delinquent and a troublemaker, capable of nothing but making mischief and committing crimes. I hadn't done it, of course. They eventually figured out that it was Jeremy Rafferty's little brother when they caught him in the act and packed him off to the state school for juvenile delinquents. But the damage was done. I resented everyone who'd ever thought I had anything to do with it. If anyone had given any thought to how I felt about it, maybe offered some form of apology for suspecting me in the first place, I might have felt differently. But nothing more was said. I'd been used as a scapegoat and no one said a single thing, just acted like nothing had happened. Business

as usual. It was to be expected. I was the town's token black sheep screw-up. No one trusted me. That was when I decided: that was it. I was done with the Corner. I was done with this place and all of its backwoods small town justice. Once I was gone, I'd never return. I'd prove that I was worth more than what they thought of me.

And I hadn't, amid the crocodile tears of my mother and the guilt-tripping of my father. I'd stood in front of them, the day I graduated from college, and told them, no, I was never coming back, and I didn't care if they didn't like it. Of course they wouldn't understand why. This was a town where very few people ever left, and to have me, the native son of a native son, refuse to return? My absence was noted.

Eleven years ago, I'd made a promise to myself to never set foot in Higgins Corner again. Yet here I was, where much of it had begun, having broken the one promise I thought I'd be able to keep. Now, I realized, I truly had nothing left to lose. I took a long pull on my flask and looked out over the trees and rooftops. The realization was almost...freeing. It all stretched out so endlessly in front of me. The question now was: what was I going to do? What did I want, really? I'd be thirty in November, and here I was, unemployed, divorced, living with my parents – a failure in anyone's book.

The answer seemed beyond my reach at this point. I sat atop the tower, watching life go on below me, until I drained my flask. If it weren't for that I think I would have stayed up there forever. But I climbed down and headed toward home.

#

Later I was alone and the house was empty. Mother and Pop had gone to someone else's house for dinner and had left me a note informing me of the available leftovers in the refrigerator.

All of which I was fine with. But instead of eating I skulked around the house, drink in hand, finding everything just as it had been, right down to the pictures on the wall. Now there were pictures from my wedding next to the pictures from Will's and my parents' weddings. I felt like taking them off the wall and putting them in the garbage can outside, but I left them where they were.

I followed the wall of pictures down to the end, landing finally on the picture they'd taken of Becks and I at our cotillion, the very same one they had printed in the paper in a feature article about the dance. I remembered teasing her about having to wear a dress, which she never did unless she had to, being a bit of a tomboy. Then she'd teased me about having to wear makeup to cover up the bruises from the fight I'd been in the day before. I peered at myself through the glass of the picture frame: dumb suit, stupid grin plastered across a babyface just beginning to show the signs of puberty. Green eyes that didn't look bloodshot and depressed, dark hair in a neat haircut of Mother's choosing. I hadn't had my hair cut by a professional in months; I'd been cutting it myself, so of course it looked like shit now. I glared at my non-alcoholic face, then wondered if I had any other pictures of the pair of us.

I went back upstairs, fixed myself another drink, and retrieved my shoebox of mementos from the shelf. It was a big shoebox, from an ugly pair of dress shoes I hadn't worn but once or twice before outgrowing them. Inside I stashed the kinds of things nobody would have expected me to save, the usual fare that ends up in memento boxes. Ticket stubs from the movie theater in town that only showed second-run movies. The gaudy class ring I didn't want but had been forced into getting for tradition's sake in high school. A waste of money, I thought. I'd never worn it, since it looked massive and out of place on my skinny fingers. There was one of my high school graduation announcements in a pile of cards and letters, though I couldn't imagine why I'd kept

it. I had a program somewhere, probably tucked into a yearbook. A jumble of photographs held together with a rubber band. Jackpot.

Before I could do anything with the pictures, I noticed the bundle of clippings I'd saved from the *Herald* years ago, in a loose stack. I flipped through them, skimming the headlines of the local news items.

Local Teen Dead After Apparent Suicide from Water Tower

Community Mourns Local Teen's Death in Candlelight Vigil

Eagle Scout Commemorates Teen with Memorial Garden

Youth Claims Responsibility for Accidental Fire at Annual Cotillion

I hadn't saved many news items, so I moved on to the clippings from the gossip column.

*A little bird told me they spotted Tom Frye and Rebecca Piper canoodling over shakes at the Main Street Diner.*

*A little bird told me they spotted fifteen year-old Tom Frye reading Nazi propaganda at the town library! Should we be worried? Is this the beginnings of Neo-Nazis in Higgins Corner? What is the truth?*

*A little bird told me they spotted Tom Frye sneaking shirtless from the Williams backyard! What were you doing in there, Tom?*

I hadn't really thought about it before, but how weird was it that the town gossip column wrote about a teenage boy sneaking out of his girlfriend's backyard? What else could I have possibly been doing that would have required me to be sneaking out of my girlfriend's backyard with no shirt on? The best part of the gossip column was that no one ever fact checked any of it,

so there was no telling what was true and what wasn't. It was all hearsay. That was what made it so laughable to be written up, especially if it was something I hadn't actually done. Wild speculation and stories heavily exaggerated for effect made for some very satisfying and humorous reads. And that wasn't even the weirdest thing I'd been written up for in the column. It went from the mundanity of being spotted drinking a milkshake by myself at the Main Street Diner to conspiracy-level speculation that I was a neo-Nazi at fifteen. All because someone saw me reading *Mein Kampf* at the library, when the simplest explanation was that I happened to be doing a paper on the Holocaust. I had no idea where Eula came up with half the things she wrote about me, but they were certainly entertaining. If she could do it, I certainly could.

I found the article the picture downstairs had appeared in, crinkled and dog-eared, and read the caption:

*Pictured: Rebecca Piper, 14, and her escort Robert Frye Jr, 14.*

The article was fairly run of the mill, and boring, honestly, until it got to the more interesting part where it mentioned the tablecloth fire. I smirked as I remembered it and tucked the article away. For once something hadn't been my fault; I had been covering for Becks knocking over a candlestick. Ginny at some point wandered up and plopped down, as cats do, on the rug next to me.

It was dumb, probably, to be sitting here wallowing in the detritus of my teen years, but there I was anyway. I was surprised that I'd had the foresight or the sentimentality back then to save as much as I had in this box, but I was glad that somewhere in my marijuana and alcohol addled teen years I'd had the capacity for it. That being said, I did have to wonder why I had kept

any of it. Maybe it was time to clear out. Maybe it was time to just weed out what mattered and get rid of the rest.

I looked down and noticed my glass was empty. With Ginny curled into a ball next to me, I poured another drink and carried on.

#

## Chapter Four

The *Herald* was a small operation, staffed only by J.C. and several other ancients I couldn't place the names of, housed on the top floor of a Main Street storefront. When I came in I didn't even recognize that the tiny, hunched-over receptionist was Mrs. Jensen, who had been the seventh grade Algebra teacher at the junior high for years. So this was what she'd decided to do with her retirement. This town was so boring that even the retired couldn't stay retired.

J.C. came out of his office, took one look at me, and grunted, as if in disgust, but he was like that with everyone that he disliked; that is, everyone in town. "Boy, what the hell do you want?" he snapped.

"A job, for starters," I said.

"We ain't hiring, Small Frye."

“You need a gossip columnist.”

He laughed, the sound thick with phlegm and nicotine. “Ya wanna do the gossip column? That’s a woman’s job, boy.” J.C. called over to the rest of the newsroom, which consisted only of two other decrepits. “Hey, fellas, Small Frye over here wants ta’ sit around gossipin’. Whatchall think ‘a that?” As if on cue, the decrepits cackled uproariously. J.C. turned back to me.

“I can do it,” I said. I felt my face flushing with irritation. “I have experience with that column and I think you know why.”

“Better’n anyone else,” he said. “And Miz Lawless, rest ‘er soul.” J.C. crossed his arms and shifted the pipe in his mouth. “Whatchu doing here anyways, boy? Thought you moved further down south.”

“I did,” I said, shrugging. “Moved back up.”

“What the hell for? You stupid or somethin’?”

I glared at him.

He shook his head. “Bet it’s woman troubles. S’always woman troubles. Awright, fine. Ya wanna gossip, then gossip. The hell do I care. But I ain’t gonna pay ya very much, now. Ain’t no benefits, neither. Say, ya know how ta write a crossword?”

And that was it. It wasn’t what I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing, but it was enough to keep me busy and out of the house for the time being, and it was better than being a legal assistant or whatever menial job Pop would have dug up for me at the firm. Besides, even if it was writing up gossip items for a small-time rag, I’d missed writing. I missed my job at the magazine. People said they loved their job all the time and didn’t really mean it, but I did. There

was just something about seeing my name in a print magazine that did it for me. And to know that I was shedding light on things that weren't talked about...well. It was a good feeling. One that I hadn't felt since the *Spectator* had gone under.

It was different than the *Spectator*, of course. What I did at the *Herald* was more akin to what I'd done as a newsroom assistant before I'd gotten the magazine job. The working environment, anyhow. Both were relatively boring. It wasn't like I was writing groundbreaking stories about mosques being bombed or anything like that, it was crosswords and Mrs. Jenny Philbin was talking to herself at the Piggly Wiggly. Under a pseudonym, at J.C.'s behest, something about not being able to sell a man writing a gossip column. So I'd assumed the moniker Edith Mayfield, the name of a long-dead teacher I'd hated in elementary school. The crossword, on the other hand, I was allowed to publish under my own name.

Then, before I could do anything about it, I'd fallen into a routine. Mass on Sundays, work from nine to five Monday through Thursday, half days on Fridays, walks in the morning, and dinner with my parents every night. Record-breaking. It was more times than I'd eaten with them in a week since junior high, almost enough to make up for the ten years I'd spent away from home. Ginny had settled in as well, having claimed the window seat in my room as her own, and could most often be found there, asleep in a patch of sunlight or staring pensively out the window. All was fine and good, remarkably so, but I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was something else I was supposed to be doing.

I came outside after work one day and nearly ran into Becks again, dressed this time in shorts and a tank top. "Jesus, Junior," she said, a twinkle in her eye. "That's the second time you've almost run me down. Do I need to make a citizen's arrest?"

“You’ll never take me alive.”

“You’re a menace.”

“Hah. What else is new?”

“That was a joke, Tom,” she said. “Which means you’re supposed to laugh. You used to laugh at my jokes. I guess you’ve gotten too serious in your old age.”

“Well, your jokes used to be funnier,” I said, smiling. “And I already told you that I’m never getting old, so. Joke’s on you.”

“Oh, shut up, you.” A flash of some expression crossed her face, and her smile dimmed a notch. “Anyway. Good to see you.” Becks turned to leave.

“Wait, don’t go running off on me again,” I said, following after her. “I haven’t seen you in years. Come on, let’s get a drink. Chat. I want to know what you’ve been up to.”

She looked at me sideways. “Won’t your mother be expecting you for dinner?”

“She’s a grown woman. She’ll get over it. Besides, her cooking’s making me fat. I’ve gained at least two pounds since I came back. One night off won’t hurt.” I stopped and looked her in the eye. “Please, Becks. I know I sound desperate, but in the two weeks I’ve been here I’ve done nothing but make conversation with old people and I’m bored, not to mention lonely as fuck. I don’t exactly have a lot of friends here, you know. Let’s take a walk. For old times’ sake?”

She relented. “All right.”

We continued up Main Street in the direction of the park. “You gave in awful easy. Couldn’t resist my charms, could you?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Tom Frye. You have no charms whatsoever.”

“Ouch.”

“Well, it’s true,” she said. “You were a lot of things but you were never very charming. You were always too busy getting into fights to defend your own honor than being charming.”

“That’s horseshit and you know it.”

“Aw, poor Tom. I’ve wounded your honor, haven’t I?”

“Let’s change the subject. Why’ve you been avoiding me?”

Her smile dropped. “Tom, I haven’t been avoiding you.”

“Kinda feels like it,” I said.

Becks sighed. “All right. Maybe I have. But we’re not really friends anymore, are we? It’s been ten years. And things weren’t exactly so good between us before that anyway, if I’m remembering correctly.”

I tried thinking back to high school but the edges of each memory blurred together into the next one. I shook my head. “I don’t remember that. All I remember is that one day we were talking and then one day we weren’t.”

“Of course you don’t remember,” she scoffed. “You were never not drinking. You wouldn’t remember calling me drunk at two in the morning to come pick you up all those times or being so plastered that you fell into the cake at your own girlfriend’s birthday party.”

“No, I remember that,” I said, fixing my eyes on the ground in front of me. Both Eula and my mother had a field day with that one. “It was a good cake. Bit of a waste, though.”

Becks shot me a sideways glance. "Still. You know what I mean." She sighed. "You changed and it wasn't in a good way. That guy jumped off the water tower and suddenly all you were interested in was yourself and how much trouble you could get into instead of anything having to do with me."

I didn't say anything for a while after that. "It wasn't like that," I said finally.

"Then what was it like, Tom? Enlighten me."

"I want to," I said. "I do. I just...can't."

"You really haven't changed at all," she said, refusing to meet my eyes.

"Listen," I said. I touched her shoulder and she turned to look at me. "I'm sorry about that. I am. You have to know that. But you came to my wedding, though, didn't you? You can't have been that mad at me."

"Tom, I was never really *mad* at you." Becks crossed her arms as we walked. "Well, okay, maybe I was. For a while. I know I was." She shook her head as she looked down. "But more than being mad at you I missed you. Even when you lived two streets over and I knew I was going to see you the next day. I missed how you used to be. I missed how *we* used to be." She dragged a hand under her glistening eyes. I felt a tight, guilty feeling in my chest. What was I supposed to say to that? I could barely remember how I used to be before everything changed. She sniffed. "Anyway. Enough of that sad shit. What are you doing here? You never answered me. You're working at the paper now? I saw the crossword was back and your name was next to it."

"Yeah," I said, relieved to not be discussing the distant past anymore.

"Does that mean you're back for good, then?"

“God, I hope not.”

“Oh,” she said. “So what about your, you know, wife?”

I exhaled. “Well, um, she’s not exactly in the picture anymore.”

“What happened?” she said. “Is she okay?”

“Oh, she’s fine. She just didn’t want to be married to me anymore.”

“How about that,” she said. “I’m sorry. That’s rough.”

“Yeah, well,” I said. “Happens to the best of us.”

“How’d your parents take it?”

“I haven’t been to Mass in ten years. Guess what I’m doing now?”

“So not well, then.”

“Better than I expected, worse than I was hoping. But you know what they say. Hope in one hand, spit in the other and all that.” I heaved a sigh. “What about you? Any relationship horror stories? Disastrous breakups? Don’t tell me you’ve gone a whole ten years without leaving any horrible exes in your wake.”

She laughed. “Uneventful. Boring, even. A few long-term things, a couple of flings, but nothing too disastrous. I promise you don’t want to hear about it.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t settled down yet,” I said. “You always wanted the whole white picket fence, nuclear family kind of thing.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted too?” she said. “You did get married, after all.”

“Hey, just because I got married doesn’t mean I was leaning into the whole American Dream thing. I set out to be a serial monogamist and look how that turned out.”

Becks shot me one of her patented *be serious* looks. “My point is, you settled down.”

I thought of Laura, all that we had and all we hadn’t been able to. The white picket fence and the two cars in the driveway – but no two and a half kids. “Okay. In all seriousness, yes. I did kind of want that. Later, anyway. It would have been nice. Maybe. Probably for the best it didn’t happen that way. I wouldn’t have made a very good father.”

“You don’t really think that’s true, do you?”

My eyebrows furrowed and I passed her a wry smile. “Rebecca, I’m an emotionally repressed and barely functioning alcoholic, most of the time. My life story is essentially a cautionary tale for what happens when little boys don’t get enough hugs. Imagine someone like that being your father and tell me you wouldn’t resent the hell out of him.”

We walked along in silence.

“For what it’s worth, I am glad you’re back,” said Becks, breaking the silence. “I know it’s not under the best circumstances – but it’s nice to see you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “As much as I don’t want to be here – at least there’s you, right?”

She smiled. “Yes. At least there’s me.”