

MAPLE, BAILEY MARIE, M.F.A. *Country Roads*. (2018)
Directed by Holly Goddard Jones. 86 pp.

The following is an excerpt for the novel I wrote during my time in the MFA program. It follows Kat McClellan, a young woman forced to move back home and raise her siblings after her father dies in a mining accident. While Kat readjusts to life in West Virginia, her mother, who abandoned them six years ago, returns and fights Kat for custody of the children. This novel examines the themes of family, particularly the relationships between mothers, daughters, and sisters.

COUNTRY ROADS

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2018

Approved by

Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

Last night had been a mistake. Kat winced as her alarm went off again, shrill and unsympathetic to the pounding in her head.

“Turn it off!” Emily groaned from the far side of the room. Kat sat up and everything spun. This was not how this morning was supposed to go. She hadn’t planned on going out with everyone after Jenna’s birthday dinner. She had wanted to get a good night’s sleep before her meeting with Professor Bartlett. But Jonas had convinced her to come with them to Callie’s apartment. One drink, he’d said, for good luck. One drink had turned into two, then three, and she’d crawled into her bed somewhere around two in the morning, not even bothering to undress.

Kat turned off the alarm and stumbled into the bathroom, sighing at her bird’s nest hair and mascara-smearing eyes. Somehow, she got herself showered and dressed, with enough time left to make her meeting if she hustled. She downed some pills for the headache and set a glass of water on the desk beside Emily’s bed.

“You’re the best,” she mumbled. “Good luck.”

“Try not to throw up in your bed this time,” Kat said, moving the trashcan beside Emily before leaving.

It had been an unusually cold December for New York City, and January was shaping up to be the same. A couple inches of fresh snow crunched under her feet. Kat

pulled her scarf up over her mouth and nose and quickened her pace, one hand checking that her purse was still tucked under her coat. Her head pounded in time with her steps.

She wished she could take the subway, but it was too short of a walk to justify it, despite the cold. When she first arrived, she'd expected the subway to be dirty and crowded and full of pickpockets. But it wasn't as bad as she'd imagined, and now she took it whenever she could. She liked the way the lights flashed as they sped through the tunnels and the rush of wind that blew through the platform when the train arrived. True, it wasn't the cleanest, but she no longer noticed.

The best part about riding the subway though, was after she reached her stop. Even after eight months in New York, her breath still quickened when she emerged into the street, buildings towering above. Some day she would live in one of them. She wasn't picky about which one, as long as it was tall. Something with a view. She loved heights, loved how no matter where you looked, the earth stretched on and on. Nothing like the mountains she'd grown up in, never able to see beyond the next peak, always feeling like the earth was about to fold up and bury her alive.

A strong gust of wind sent a shower of dusty snow into Kat's eyes, and she pulled her scarf higher. It was a clear day; the bright sun at odds with the snow and frigid air. She hadn't looked at the high for today. Somehow it didn't feel as cold if she didn't know the exact temperature. A lot of the snow was still clean enough to reflect the sunlight, turning the grime a sparkling white. It would be nice while it lasted. In some spots, the snow had already been cleared, and the wet pavement shimmered.

Her phone buzzed in her purse, but she wasn't about to pull it out to see who was calling. They could leave a message. She waited on the street corner for the light to change. Next to her, a little boy fidgeted beside his mother, stepping on Kat's foot. She didn't mind, but the mother jerked the boy's arm, pulling him to her side. "Behave, or you'll be sorry," she hissed, gripping him tighter. "Do you understand me?" The boy nodded and stood quietly, though his eyes darted like spooked fish. Kat stuck her tongue out when the boy glanced up at her, and he grinned.

The walk sign flashed, and they crossed the street. Kat rounded the corner, passing a man humming a Shania Twain song as he dug through a trash can, and arrived at 224 Greene St, home to NYU's English department.

Her nerves flared as the elevator rose. She pulled off her gloves and wiped her sweaty palms on her jacket. She knew that as a freshman, her chances of getting the summer internship at Penguin were slim. If she didn't get a recommendation from Bartlett, who was notoriously stingy with them, her chances were non-existent. Her scholarship didn't cover living expenses for the summer, and she would do anything to not have to go home. She could always get a job waitressing, or as nanny. But that's not why she came to New York.

Her phone buzzed again. This time she pulled it out and was surprised to see it was Brian Carson, a friend from high school. She hadn't talked to him in months, not since his wedding. She'd moved to New York a few weeks later. She considered answering, but then the elevator reached her floor. Though she thought she knew the way, she double checked with the young man at the desk and followed his directions to

Bartlett's office. The halls were quiet, a sharp contrast to the bustle of the streets outside. Her phone buzzed a third time. A kernel of worry grew in her stomach, but she pushed it to the back of her mind. She didn't need any distractions.

Bartlett's door was cracked, but Kat knocked anyway.

"Come in," Bartlett called, "And close the door."

Bartlett sat behind her desk, which was covered in orderly stacks of papers and files. Her curly hair was pulled back into a perfect French braid. She smiled and motioned for Kat to sit. The smile made Kat more nervous, but she tried to hide it and sank into the chair in front of the desk. The chair was old and sagged uncomfortably.

"I'm glad you could meet with me, Kat," Bartlett said.

"Of course." Kat resisted the urge to add "ma'am", which Bartlett hated.

Bartlett opened a folder and laid it on her desk. "I like to meet with all the students I write recs for, just to make sure we're both on the same page. I looked over your resume and transcripts. I didn't realize you are an AnBryce scholar. Impressive." Kat's stomach churned, and she squeezed her hands together in her lap. "But what I really want to talk to you about," Bartlett continued, "is why you want this internship. What are your goals? And not only for this summer, but in the future? After graduation?"

An easy question. "I want to go into publishing," Kat answered.

"Why?" Bartlett pressed. "Why publishing?"

Kat had thought out and polished her response to this question weeks ago, practicing in the mirror. She let her face fall into what she hoped was an earnest, but not too eager expression. "Because I want to make books. Books were my only escape from a

world that didn't go beyond the county line. I want to be part of bringing that to others, making our world a better, freer place."

Bartlett raised an eyebrow. "Nicely phrased. Hundreds of other applicants will say something along the same lines."

Kat blushed. "Well, it's true."

"I never said it wasn't. But that's not going to get you anywhere. Lots of people like to read. Take a minute, right now, and really think about it. Why do you really want to get into publishing? Why not just write the books yourself?"

Kat sat back in the chair, sinking further into the lumpy cushion. Her mind chased itself around for a few moments, before the quiet was broken by a buzzing phone.

"Sorry," Kat muttered, silencing it.

She leaned back in the chair again, and this time closed her eyes. She counted to thirty before she answered. "I meant what I said." She kept her eyes shut, finding it easier to explain herself that way. "But it's more than that. I want to shape them. Like grinding down a hunk of rock until it's something beautiful. I don't need to write the book. I want to be the one to find it, to realize its potential."

"That's better," Bartlett said. "Now we're getting somewhere. Let's talk more about —"

Kat's phone buzzed again, for the fifth time. She ignored it, but Bartlett caught the worry that flashed across Kat's face.

"Do you need to get that?" she asked.

It took Kat a moment to realize she'd heard Bartlett correctly. She'd heard rumors that Bartlett had once thrown a phone out the window because a student answered it in class. "If you don't mind," Kat said. "I normally don't get calls from home."

Bartlett nodded. "Just try to keep it short."

It was Brian again. Kat answered right before it went to voice mail. "Hello?" she asked in a low voice, trying to get out of the chair without knocking over the stack of files on the desk.

"Kat?" Brian's voice sounded strained. It had been a long time since someone had said her name like that, as if there were several A sounds squished into one.

"Hey," she said, turning toward the door. "Is everything okay?"

"Your dad's missing," he blurted.

Her hand froze on the doorknob. "What?"

"His whole crew is missing. I just heard it from Justin. There's been an accident."

"What happened?" There suddenly didn't seem to be enough air in the room.

"We don't know yet."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Kat snapped.

"I mean we don't know," Brian repeated tersely. "We can't get in. The mine's flooded."

She took a deep breath. She didn't realize she was still holding the doorknob until Bartlett pulled her hand off. Kat hadn't seen her get up, but she let Bartlett steer her to the chair and press her into it. "I'll be outside," Bartlett whispered.

Kat waited until the door shut before asking the question that was shouting in her head. “Is there any chance he’s alive?” She rushed the words out, afraid she wouldn’t be able to ask if she waited.

Brian let out a long breath. It whistled through the phone. “There’s a chance. We don’t know what’s going on down there. They might just be stuck, cut off by the water.”

He didn’t need to mention the alternative. “How bad is it?” She remembered learning in sixth grade about how the steam engine was refined because of the need to pump water out of coal mines. They’d watched a documentary on it, with computer simulations showing how quickly the mines could be submerged if the pumps stopped working. But that couldn’t happen today, could it?

“I don’t know,” Brian said. “But the entrance is pretty much underwater, and the current is too strong to get through.” He paused. “I wasn’t sure if I should call. They don’t want us telling anyone anything. And I didn’t want to upset you.” She could hear the fear and anxiety in his voice and remembered that he’d only been working at the mine for six months. They’d graduated high school together last year. “But I thought you should know,” he continued. “I’m sure someone from the mine will call soon, but I thought you’d rather hear it from a friend first.” For a moment, Kat thought she might get sick all over Bartlett’s desk. She closed her eyes and focused on the warm air from the vent in the ceiling blowing on her face and on the hum of Bartlett’s computer in the corner. The ticking of her watch echoed in the empty room. “I know I’d want someone to tell Sophie, if it was me,” he said quietly.

“It’s okay,” she said, opening her eyes. “I’m glad you called. I’m coming down as soon as I can.” Bartlett’s computer flashed as it switched to the screen saver, a picture of three blond kids with the same curly hair. Kat’s stomach knotted. “Do the kids know?”

“Probably not yet.”

Even if someone from the school didn’t tell them, they would probably know before they got off the bus. Half the kids had parents who worked for the mine in some capacity. News would travel fast. Gemma was almost fifteen; she was plenty old enough to look after Henry and Winnie, who were ten and nine. But Gemma would probably go into a panic when she found out.

“Can I ask a favor?” Kat asked.

“Anything.”

“Can Sophie bring the kids home with her?”

“Of course.”

“Just for a few hours, until I get there. I don’t want them to be alone.”

“Don’t worry about it.” There was a shout in the background. “I gotta go, Kat. I’ll try and let you know when I hear anything.”

“Thanks.”

“Take care.”

“You too.”

She didn’t move for a minute, maybe two. If she stayed still, she could pretend the phone call had never happened. Or that Brian would call back and tell her it had all been

a terrible mistake, that Dad and his crew had just gone to Cracker Barrel for an early lunch.

Bartlett poked her head in. “You okay?”

Kat wanted so badly to say yes, of course, everything was fine. “There’s been an accident at the mine,” she said instead. “My dad, he —.” She bit the inside of her cheek. “I’ve gotta go.” She knocked off a stack of folders as she stood, scattering papers across the floor. She scrambled to pick them up, her hands shaking.

“Leave it.” Bartlett pulled her upright, then scooped up the folders and dropped them on her desk.

“I’m sorry,” Kat said, trying to slow her breathing. It wasn’t working very well. “I don’t mean to be unprofessional. I’m not normally like this.” She balled her fists as the tears came. She hated crying, especially in front of others.

Bartlett handed her a tissue. “It’s normal to be upset when you get bad news. But here’s what you’ll do.” Her voice was stern, but not unkind. “Take a few minutes and get yourself under control enough to walk out of here. Go home. Take a few days to take care of things. Keep me and your other professors updated.”

“What about our meeting?”

She waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll go ahead and start working on the letter, and we can meet again when you come back.” She put a hand on Kat’s shoulder and squeezed it. “I’m not going to say things will be okay, because too often that’s a lie. But from what I’ve seen of you this semester, I think you’ll be okay. Now, I’ll give you a few minutes.”

She shut the door behind her, and Kat focused on her instructions. She had to get it together. She took several deep breaths and slowly got her body under control. The shaking stopped. She could take the next flight to Charleston. Make sure her siblings were looked after, until they rescued her dad. She refused to let herself think of any option other than rescue. Then she'd come back, catch up on her school work, and hopefully land the Penguin internship this summer. Her spirits lifted an inch. Things were bad, but they could be worse. Bartlett was wrong this time. Things would be okay. They had to be.

Bartlett was gone when Kat slipped out of her office. She kept her head down as she walked, opting for the stairs over the elevator. She counted each step as she spiraled down. There were one hundred and sixty-four.

* * *

For a Wednesday, there was a lot of traffic. Kat had wanted to fly, but the earliest flight didn't leave for six hours. There was no way she could have waited in the airport that long, even if she bought a book to distract herself. Instead, she'd rushed home and threw the clothes off the top of her laundry basket into a bag, along with her toothbrush. She rented a Subaru, the only car the rental place had with four-wheel drive. The last thing she wanted was to get stuck in the mountains because of a snow storm.

She hadn't driven a car in months, not since she'd come to New York, when she'd sold her old pick-up truck for two thousand to a guy with a small farm in New Jersey and used the money to rent out a tiny room until school started. She kept pressing the gas

pedal too hard. By the time she got out of the city, she'd gotten the hang of the it, but her knuckles stayed white on the steering wheel.

She made good time, watching as the flat ground eased into rolling hills, dotted with cows and horses and hay bales, before stretching up into real mountains. Even in January there were plenty of evergreens scattered amongst the bare trees. It felt strange to see so much green again. Occasionally, she glimpsed a long spear of ice hanging off the rock faces that flanked the highway.

Traffic slowed as she crossed the border into West Virginia. The sun was setting, turning the thin clouds that rested across the mountain tops a deep pink. Both lanes got stuck behind a couple eighteen-wheelers crawling up the mountain with their blinkers on. After finally getting around them, she reached the first toll.

"Do you take cards?" Kat asked the outstretched hand, though she knew the answer.

"Nope. Bill will come in the mail," a bored voice replied. The hand waved her through.

She didn't bother stopping to eat. She wasn't hungry. A little before five, her phone rang. She recognized the Putnam County area code, but not the number.

"Hello?" she asked, struggling to cradle the phone between her shoulder and her ear.

"May I speak to Kat McClellan?" a woman asked. Her voice was cool and professional, with just a hint of a southern accent. For a moment Kat thought it was a telemarketer, but then remembered the area code.

“That’s me.” Kat could picture her mom wincing, hear her reminding Kat for the hundredth time to say ‘this is she’. But Kat was in no mood to be polite.

“My name is Sandy Smith, from Rochester Coal. I’m calling because there has been an incident at the Putnam mine involving your father.”

“I know. I saw on the news,” she lied. “Is he okay?” Maybe they knew more now.

“We believe that your father is trapped inside the mine. We are working on rescuing them as we speak.”

“But is he okay?” Kat repeated. “Have you talked to him?”

Sandy Smith paused. “Not yet. But we have everyone working on it, Ms. McClellan.”

Kat slammed on the brakes as a red truck cut her off. The phone flew into floorboard, and she had to stretch to reach it, praying she didn’t send the car off the side of the mountain.

“How did this happen?” she asked, when she straightened. She put the phone on speaker and set it in her lap as she entered a curvier stretch of road.

“I’m afraid I can’t comment on the cause of the accident until an official investigation has been done,” Sandy Smith said.

“That’s a load of bull, and you know it,” Kat snapped. A glob of spit landed on the steering wheel.

Sandy Smith didn’t rise to the bait. “I assure you, Miss McClellan,” she said, her voice dripping with well-rehearsed sincerity. “We are doing everything in our power to

rescue your father, and we will keep you updated on our progress. If you wish, you all are welcome to wait at the mine site, where we have a special area set aside for family.”

“No thanks.”

“Of course, it’s your choice. Is there anything else we can help you with?”

“Just get my dad out.”

“We’re certainly doing our best. One last thing, Miss McClellan. For your own safety and peace of mind, we urge you not to speak to any press or reporters. We don’t want to cause any undue panic or accidentally release misleading information. We also stress not to believe any reports that don’t come from us.”

Like the Henderson mine accident, Kat thought. She’d only been eleven at the time, but she remembered it clearly. An explosion resulted in thirteen miners trapped underground. The news reported that ten of them were alive, but when the rescuers reached them two days later, there was only one survivor. The media had a field day figuring out how the wrong information got leaked. Kat had begged her dad not to go to work. She’d faked being sick and stayed home from school, waiting the whole day to hear his truck pull in the drive.

“Are you still there, Ms. McClellan?”

“Yes.” Kat realized she’d stopped listening. “Anything else?”

“That’s all. We’ll be in touch. Remember to try to stay calm and —”

Kat hung up. She hit her hand as hard as she could against the top of the steering wheel. She was anxious before, now she was anxious and angry. Angry at the mine and at Sandy Smith. And angry at her dad for being in this mess in the first place.

She turned on the radio. She was tempted to find a news station but didn't trust herself to drive safely. She found a country station instead, cranked up the volume, and sang along at the top of her lungs. Anything to keep the different scenarios out of her head. She imagined her dad crushed beneath a machine. Buried under tons of dirt and rock. Hunched in a ball, trying to conserve his air. She turned the music up every time her imagination strayed, but it didn't help much.

She got off 79 when she reached Charleston. Normally, she enjoyed driving through the capitol. The way the roads were built made it feel like she was driving in the sky. The last light of the setting sun glinted off the gold dome of the capitol building. In her opinion, Charleston was the only city worth seeing in West Virginia. Its streets and houses were charming and well kept. There were actual bookstores, not just the book aisle in the Foodland full of trashy romance novels.

Despite the beautiful landscape, the state had been built by industry, and most of the cities reflected that. They were either dead or dying. Row after row of small, old buildings, crushed together to take advantage of every flat piece of ground. They weren't too bad, if you ignored the mildew creeping up the side, or the way they looked as if they would collapse from one good gust of wind.

She exited the interstate a little way past Charleston. Traffic immediately thinned, and she reached Hometown in less than an hour. It was as pathetic as she remembered. Tucked into the valley beside a wide bend in the Kanahwa River, Hometown's population was a grand total of three thousand. And that was if you counted those that didn't technically live within city lines but were closer to this town than any other. In New York,

no one believed her when she told them where she was from, and after explaining for the hundredth time that Hometown really was the name of a city, she'd started telling people she was from Charleston.

The first D in the grocery store's sign was out. It now read Foo land. She passed the school, one building for kindergarten through twelfth grade. More people lived on her apartment floor than had been in her entire class. Next to it stood the original one-room school house, which still had been in use until sixty years ago, when it was converted into a town museum. Surprisingly, they'd finally finished the new Dairy Queen, the first addition to the town in ten years. Kat already missed the city, the bustling crowds, the noise, the skyscrapers. Here, she felt exposed and trapped at the same time.

Above it all towered the massive smokestacks of the power plant, where the coal her dad dug was burned by the barge load. Two of the stacks were wide, big enough to fit a football field inside. The others were twice as tall and skinny. For as long as she could remember, there'd been two of each, but they recently built a third tall one last year. She didn't like that they were now uneven. One of the fat ones belched a thick column of white smoke as tall as itself into the dark sky.

On a normal night, people walked up and down Main Street, even when it was cold, popping in and out of the few shops that were still occupied. Tonight though, it was dead. She supposed everyone was glued to their televisions and phones, waiting to hear about the miners.

Sophie called as Kat passed the hardware store. "We're at the church," Sophie said. "There's a group gathering, to pray and stuff. Gemma really wanted to go. I hope

that's okay." The last thing Kat wanted to do was have to deal with a lot of people, and at the church no less. But it was too late now. They probably all knew she was coming.

"It's fine," she said, trying to sound fine. "I'll be there in a few."

CHAPTER II

Night had completely fallen when Kat reached the church building. The parking lot was fuller than it ever was on a Sunday. The church itself was small and square. It sat on top of a hill, the graveyard stretching out behind it. Kat found a parking spot near the back and sat in the car for a few minutes before she made herself get out. Thankfully, no one lingered in the parking lot.

Inside was even more crowded. She knew most of the people, by face if not by name. The ceiling fans spun at full speed, rocking back and forth precariously, but they did little to help the heat. A red carpet flanked by rows of pews led to a stage, on which sat an ancient organ, several pews for the choir, a podium, and an altar, on which someone had lit the candles.

She didn't see them at first, but then she spotted Sophie's unnaturally bright red hair in the front pew. Beside her sat Henry and Winnie. Even from behind, they looked as if they'd grown. Sophie turned around and waved when she saw Kat.

Kat tried to weave her way through the crowd. She made it a yard before she was snagged by Carla, who had taught the Sunday school class for twenty years.

"Oh, you poor thing," Carla said, squeezing Kat's arms so tightly her acrylic nails bit into Kat's skin. "But don't you worry. The Lord's gonna take care of it."

Kat mumbled something about knowing he would. She extracted herself from Carla's sharp grip, only to run into Mason, the history teacher, and one of the few black

people in town. “Well if it isn’t Kat McClellan, come back to us at last,” he exclaimed.

Kat fought against rolling her eyes. He made it sound like she’d been gone for years, not months. “We’re praying mighty hard for your daddy, you know.”

Before she could respond, another hand grabbed hers and pumped it. “Welcome home.”

“Kat,” a deep voice boomed, and she automatically turned toward the sound. Pastor Steve stood in front of her, blocking the aisle. He was a large, balding man, with glasses that were too small for his wide face. He had a kind smile. Despite Kat’s less than enthusiastic attitude toward church, he’d always made her feel welcome. “It’s great to see you,” he said. “I wish it were under better circumstances.” He put his large hand on her back and steered her through the crowd. People took the hint and fell back a step.

“Me too,” she said. “And thanks.”

He led her to where Sophie sat with Henry and Winnie. Linda, Pastor Steve’s wife, held Winnie’s hand, probably to keep her from darting into the crowd. But it was Henry who barreled into her, nearly knocking her over. She squeezed him tightly.

“Missed you too, bud,” she said. She found herself tearing up and blinked rapidly. She hadn’t seen them in months, and she hadn’t let herself think about how much she missed them.

“Henry, let me have a turn,” Winnie whined. When Henry pulled away, she threw herself in Kat’s arms. She’d grown at least an inch, maybe two, since the summer, though she was still on the small side. She grinned up at Kat, looking like a tall Shirley Temple with her gold curls and round cheeks.

“Where’s Gemma?” Kat asked. Winnie pulled back and pointed behind Kat. Kat turned and was struck by the difference in her sister. Gemma’s lankiness had balanced out into a slim, willowy figure, and her hair was shiny and straight, not its usual mess of frizzy curls. At least she hadn’t grown. Kat was still taller, though not by much.

“How are you doing?” Kat asked as they embraced. She immediately regretted asking such a dumb question.

“Okay,” Gemma said with a small smile.

“How was the drive?” Sophie asked.

“Long,” Kat said. The last time she’d seen Sophie was when she was the maid of honor in Sophie’s wedding, right after they graduated. It was strange to think her friend was a married woman now. “But not too bad.” Across the church, Kat caught the gaze of a tall young man in a Carhartt jacket. He dipped his head toward her, then joined his father, the police chief, on the far wall. She swallowed. That was cold, coming from Tim.

“Don’t worry about him,” Sophie whispered, following Kat’s gaze. “He’s just nervous about seeing you is all.”

Kat shrugged. “Whose idea was all this anyway?”

“I dunno, but Gemma really wanted to come.”

“Of course she would.” Gemma had always been more involved with church. Kat dropped her voice so only Sophie could hear. “Has there been any more news?”

“Not much. Have you seen it yet?”

“Seen what?”

“The mine.”

Kat shook her head. With a glance at the kids, who were being occupied by Linda, Sophie passed Kat her phone. It was already open to a live news feed. Kat sank into the pew. When Brian had said the entrance was flooded, she'd pictured a few feet, making it difficult for rescue crews to get through. In reality, the mine entrance, a nine-foot-tall tunnel opening, was completely underwater. A swift current flowed out.

"Brian says it may not be as bad as it looks," Sophie murmured. She sat beside Kat and leaned over. "The entrance is one of the lower parts. They could have gotten to higher ground."

Kat heard the logic in her words, but there was so much water. She felt the panic building in her chest, the tears threatening. She pictured a wall of water smashing into her dad, his body thrown by the torrent, bouncing off the tunnel walls like a pinball machine. She'd never felt so helpless.

"Where did so much water come from?" she asked, mostly to think about something else.

"They're saying it's from Horseshoe," Sophie said.

Kat should have known. When she was fourteen, they'd all gotten out of school the day they closed Horseshoe Mine and opened the new mine nearby, the one that was now underwater. Rochester Coal, which owned the mines, had flooded the old tunnels to keep people out. Less of a liability. Horseshoe had been open for nearly eighty years. That was a lot of tunnel to fill. A lot of water.

"But how?" Kat asked. "Don't they know where the old tunnels are?"

Sophie's grimaced. "They aren't saying anything on the news. But Brian said rumor was the maps were wrong."

Anger coursed through Kat. No wonder Sandy Smith hadn't wanted to give her any details.

Pastor Steve stood up before she could ask any more questions, though it took him a few tries to get everyone to quiet down. Kat sat on the end of the pew near the wall, in case she had to make a quick exit. She would have preferred to sit in the back, or even better, stand against the wall. Gemma sat with a group of her girlfriends on the other side of the church, her hands folded tightly in her lap. The other girls leaned toward her, as if drawn by a magnet. Kat wished she had Gemma's faith that God was going to fix this. But God had never seemed very interested in what was going on down here. He hadn't done anything when her mom had left.

Pastor Steve opened in a prayer, then Lonnie, the choir director, led them in dragging versions of "Victory in Jesus" and "Blessed Assurance". Another prayer, more songs, followed by a short sermon on Daniel in the lion's den. Candles were passed around. Kat's didn't have that little circle that catches the wax, and it only took a few seconds for it to drip on her skin. She bit the inside of her cheek. The air, already hot and thick, grew stuffier. Sweat slid down her back, and the walls felt closer with every breath.

"Excuse me," she finally mumbled, to no one in particular. She brushed her way through the bodies lining the wall, careful not to drop her candle. She didn't stop until she breathed cool, crisp air. She walked around to the back of the church and leaned against

the brick. The candle hissed when she dropped it in the snow. The air was cold and dry. She watched her breath fog and fade into the night.

The graveyard sprawled down the hill below her. It was snowing. The flakes settled on the chain linked fence surrounding the stones. The fence was rusting and needed replaced in some areas, but under the moonlight and snow it looked delicate, like a piece of lace. Four generations of McClellans were buried in that graveyard. Kat used to play in it as a kid. She remembered trying not to get tagged as she darted through the stones, crouching down behind the larger ones.

She was seven when her dad showed her the family plots. She'd sneaked out of Sunday school class, which wasn't hard. Carla was bad at keeping track of them. Her dad found her sitting on a grassy grave, making a daisy chain.

"You should be inside," he said, crouching beside her.

"But it's pretty out," she argued. It was a fresh spring day, warm enough to go without a jacket.

"That it is." He sat down and handed her another daisy from her pile. He waited until she finished attaching it before asking, "Do you know who we are sitting on?"

She was confused. She hadn't ever thought about sitting on top of a person out here before. She didn't like the thought. "No," she said, putting down her project.

Her dad pointed to the faded headstone behind them. "This is your great, great grandfather's grave. Elliot McClellan." He pointed to the one on their right. "And this is his wife, Rachel. Your great, great grandmother."

She'd heard the names before, traced them on the stones. But never had she thought of them as real people. "Are they still down there?"

Her dad laughed. She liked his laugh, warm and rough. "Yes," he said. "But they're nothing but dirt now."

She'd learned in Sunday school that God made Adam and Eve out of dirt, and everyone turned back into dirt when they died, but she'd never truly thought about it. She ran her hand along the ground. "That doesn't seem so bad," she decided. "Flowers grow in dirt."

"No, it doesn't seem so bad," Dad agreed. Kat noticed he'd forgotten to clean the dirt from beneath his fingernails that morning. Her mom wouldn't be happy when she saw. "Not bad at all," he repeated. He took her daisy chain and tied the ends together. "Do you see over there in the corner, where there's some empty grass?" He pointed to the back of the graveyard, toward the left. "No headstones?" She nodded. "That's where I'll be buried when I die. And you and Gemma."

She examined the spot. It was sunny, covered in thick, green grass. It was a nice place to be buried. "What about Mom?"

He looked down at the chain in his hands. "She doesn't want to be buried. At least, not here. She'd rather be cremated."

"What's that?"

"It's when they burn your body instead of burying it."

"They burn you!" That seemed terrible, even if you were dead and couldn't feel it.

"It's like skipping a step," he explained. "You just turn into dirt a lot faster."

“Oh.” She still didn’t like the idea of her body being set on fire. Or her mom’s.
“But you and Mom aren’t going to die for like, a hundred years, right?”

Her dad leaned back on his hands and looked up at the clouds. He smiled. “That’s right. Not for a hundred years.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Good,” she said, relieved. Her dad always kept his promises.

He put the chain of daisies on her head and pulled her to her feet. “It’s time to go back inside, kitten.” He brushed a strand of brown hair behind her ear. “Before we both get in trouble.”

The wind gusted, blowing snow into her face and bringing her back from green grass and daisy chains. Kat blinked away the tears. She’d been so stupid, refusing to call. Granted, he hadn’t called either. She’d inherited her stubbornness from him.

Snow crunched. “Hey,” Tim said, rounding the corner.

“Hi.” She was surprised he’d sought her out.

He leaned against the wall beside her and propped a foot on the bricks. “Thought you might like a drink,” he said, holding up a thermos.

She raised an eyebrow. “A little sacrilegious, don’t you think? Drinking in a church?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I didn’t say it was alcohol.”

“It isn’t?”

“Well, yeah, it is,” he admitted. “But technically, we’re outside the church.” He handed her the thermos. She unscrewed the cap and took a swig, coughing as the moonshine burned a path down her chest. Tim chuckled, and she glared at him.

“Those northerners have made you soft,” he said. His tone was friendly, but she didn’t miss the bite behind the words.

“Your dad make this?” she asked instead. She’d never thought it was odd that the chief of police made the best moonshine around, until she moved to the city. Her new friends, especially Emily, had thought it was hilarious.

He nodded. “You can keep the rest.”

“You sure?”

“You need it more than I do.”

A cardinal landed on a tombstone, a small twig in its mouth. Kat was aware of the deep sound of Tim’s breath beside her. She knew she should say something, apologize for breaking up with him the way she did. But she didn’t. She was leaving in a few days anyway.

But she promised herself she would apologize to her dad, when she saw him. Eight months of barely speaking, not seeing him or her siblings. And for what? Because he was mad she moved to New York? And she was mad that he wanted her to stay? It all seemed trivial now. Her face grew hot as she recalled the cruel words, the slamming doors, tossing her suitcase in the car.

“I told him I was never coming back,” she blurted. “I told him I didn’t care if I never saw him again.”

“Told who?”

“Dad.” She’d hoped she’d feel better after the admission, but all she felt was hot shame. The memory of her last conversation with her dad, face to face, had been haunting her since Brian’s call.

“Well, you’re back now, aren’t you?” Tim asked.

“He doesn’t know that.”

“He will, when he gets out.”

“But what if —”

“They’ll get him out, Kat,” he said.

She bit her lip. The wind picked up, and she shivered.

“Tim, I —”

“Come on,” he said, pushing off the wall. She didn’t realize how much of his warmth had been radiating to her until it was gone. “We should go inside, before they miss us.”

She nodded and followed him back to the front of the church. The service had just ended, and people filtered out. She tried to catch Tim’s eye, but he slipped through the crowd.

“Kat!” Sophie rushed over to her, phone in her hand. “It’s Brian. They found them. They’re alive.” She pressed the phone into Kat’s hand. “Here, you talk to him.”

Kat plugged her open ear with her finger. A cheer went up from inside. Sophie must have shared the news. “Brian?” she said, raising her voice. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah. Can you hear me?”

She took a few steps away from the crowd. “Now I can. Is it true? He’s alive?”
She couldn’t help but be suspicious, the Henderson mine disaster still fresh in her mind.

“We’re as sure as we can be. All nine of them.”

“Is he okay?”

“Well, apparently Jim and a couple other guys got beat up pretty bad during the breach, but they say they’re okay for now.”

“Thank God,” she said. “So how long before you get him out?”

Brian sighed. She recognized the exhaustion in his voice, the same exhaustion she felt in every bone and muscle as the tension drained out of her body. “It’s going to be tricky,” he said. “Real tricky. They found some higher ground, but at the rate the water’s rising, it’ll flood before we can get a big enough drill down there.”

The tension flooded back. “What are you going to do?”

“We made an air bubble, by blowing air down the drill to keep the water back. Unfortunately, that also means we can’t stick another radio down there. They’ve got most of us trying to get the water level down from the other side, which is why I haven’t called in a while.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Who knew how long it would be before Sandy Smith called, or if she would even call at all. “So you’re just gonna keep the water from rising until it starts going down inside the mine? How long will that take?”

“Too long. It could be weeks before the water’s down enough to get in there. We’re gonna have to drill a bigger shaft and send down a canister. The thing is, if we drill in the wrong spot, we pop the air bubble, and the tunnel floods. Quickly.”

She swallowed. “So, you only get one shot?” she asked.

“Yeah. But it’s a good one,” he hurried to add. “We’ve got the best people working on it. Folks have come from Henderson, Rockingham, there’s even folks here from Ohio and Pennsylvania.” He sounded choked up. Kat knew how he felt. Whenever something like this happened, it reminded every miner, and their families, that it could easily happen to them.

After she hung up, Kat returned to the church. “See?” Carla said loudly. “Our prayers have been answered!”

Kat smiled, but she just wanted to go home. She hunted for Gemma, shaking off the hands and words of encouragement. She found her in the center of her girlfriends. “Let’s go,” Kat whispered in her ear.

“Go?” Gemma asked. “But everyone wants to talk to us. Dad’s okay!”

Kat didn’t want to talk to anyone. She was tired. She wanted her bed, and she wanted quiet. “Please, Gem,” she ordered more than asked. Gemma glanced at her face, and her eyes softened in a way that made Kat’s cheeks burn.

“Okay,” Gemma said softly.

They collected Henry and Winnie and said goodbye to Sophie and Linda. Despite Kat’s best efforts, they were stopped several times on the way to the car. She tried to smile and act grateful for the others’ sakes, but she let out a long sigh when she climbed in the Subaru and shut the door.

“I told you God would save him,” Gemma said as Kat backed out. “I knew it.” How did you know, Kat wanted to ask. But she didn’t. One of them should have some sort of faith.

It was late, almost midnight. Henry and Winnie quickly fell asleep in the back seat. Gemma stayed awake but silent as they wound their way up the mountain. Gravel crunched when Kat pulled into the driveway of the yellow house on top of the hill. She’d forgotten how quiet it was out here. A deep bark broke the night, and Fitz jumped on the fence that surrounded the front yard. Henry woke at the barking, but Winnie stayed fast asleep. She was too big to carry inside anymore. Kat gently shook her awake.

They stumbled into the house through the side door that led to the kitchen. For the most part, it was exactly as she’d left it. Peeling yellow wallpaper, crooked cabinets, corded phone hanging on the wall, antlers above the hideous orange sofa. It wasn’t as clean. There were dishes in the sink, and the floor looked like it hadn’t been mopped since she left. She felt a flash of guilt, then annoyance. She wasn’t a housekeeper. Her dad should have been able to manage without her.

Fitz whimpered and scratched at the front door. He bounded around the living room when Kat let him in.

“He’s missed you,” Gemma said as the golden retriever jumped on Kat.

“I missed him too,” Kat said, giving him a good scratch. She’d raised him since he was a puppy, and she’d missed him more than she’d liked to admit, maybe more than the rest of her family.

She made sure Winnie and Henry got in bed, not bothering to make them brush their teeth. Fitz followed her every move, his tail thumping against her legs. She nearly tripped over him coming out of Henry's room. Winnie used to share a bed with Henry, but it looked like she'd taken Kat's place on the bunk bed Kat had shared with Gemma.

Kat paused outside her dad's door, then pushed it open. The room was clean, but mostly because there wasn't much in there. There was a bed, covered in a faded blue quilt. She considered sleeping in it, but it felt too weird. She would just sleep on the roll-away cot in the basement. Against the wall was a small dresser and a hamper with a plaid shirt hanging out. She pulled the shirt out and pressed it to her nose, inhaling smoke and wood and soap. She put it back in the hamper and closed the door behind her.

Fitz trailed her as she fetched her bag from the car and carried it to the basement. The basement was finished, but bare, with a concrete floor and lit by a single lightbulb. Her dad's gun safe, a freezer, and a closet full of cardboard boxes took up one of the walls, and the washer and dryer took up the opposite one. The house was built into the hill, so there was a door that led out to the space under the deck, where they stored the extra wood. In the empty space in middle of the room sat the wood stove, an ugly brown box with a pipe feeding into the brick chimney. She set up the cot and stretched a sheet over it. That's all she would need for heat sleeping feet away from the stove. She opened the stove door before getting into bed. The fire would probably last for the night, but she prodded it a few times with the poker and added a small log, just to make sure.

It was like she'd never left.

But she was too tired to think about it or feel sorry for herself. She collapsed on the cot and was asleep before she could pull up the cover.

* * *

Kat jolted awake, her phone ringing. She reached for her it, but remembered she'd left it in the kitchen. She rolled off the cot and ran up the stairs.

“Hello?” Her voice was cloudy from sleep. She glanced at the clock. It was 1:42.

“Miss McClellan?” a deep voice answered.

“This is she.”

“I'm Andrew Walton, from Rochester Coal.” He made no attempt to hide his strong accent. “Sorry for waking you at this hour, but we've got some great news. The drill's almost reached the men, and we expect to pull 'em out in about two hours. If y'all would like to be there, you're plenty welcome.”

She thought she should feel more excited, but all she felt was a crick in her neck and relief that the waiting was over. “Of course,” she said. “We'll be there as soon as possible.”

“Wonderful. Brandon'll meet you at the gate.”

After hanging up, she splashed her face with cold water. Gemma was already getting dressed when Kat opened their door. She must have been eavesdropping in living room. Gemma smiled widely, and Kat smiled back. She left Gemma to rouse Winnie and went to wake Henry.

Kat shook his shoulder until he opened his eyes. “Get dressed,” she said. “We’re going to get Dad.” Saying it out loud, the excitement flooded through her. She changed into the clothes on top of her suitcase and ran a brush through her hair.

Johnny Cash crooned softly as they drove to the site, the car filled with excited tension. It was like a dream. Kat imagined the feeling was similar to when your parents woke you up in the middle of the night to take you to Disney World. It had never happened to them, but she’d always wished it would. Maybe she could convince Dad to take them after this.

A short man in a suit, Brandon, she presumed, met them at the gate. He reminded Kat of a secret agent, and he seemed out of place amongst the dirt and the workers in their coveralls. The whole site was so lit up with floodlights that it felt more like noon. Kat kept an eye out for Brian but didn’t see him. Brandon led them to a golf cart. Winnie squeezed in the front with Kat, sitting half on Kat’s lap, and Henry and Gemma rode in the back. They drove through the mine, passing men and buildings, and piles of dirt. They crossed the railroad, where a train sat, its cars heaped with coal. She noticed Brandon took the long way round, out of the way of the flooded mine entrance. He led them to an area roped off with caution tape, where families of the other miners stood, waiting anxiously. There were about thirty of them in all. She recognized a few faces, and several of the women greeted them with hugs.

They waited. Kat wished it were daytime. Something about the bright lights in the dead of night was wrong, making her even more anxious. Winnie yawned and leaned against her. Kat studied the drill positioned about a hundred feet away. A thick cable

slowly disappeared into a gap the size of a manhole cover. Around the site, workers and administrators scurried like ants. It seemed as if every miner in the state had been called in. She knew many of them, like Brian, had volunteered, coming from other cities and states.

The media was limited to the helicopters buzzing overhead. The rest of the press had to wait outside the gate, Brandon had told them. Only the local news station had a camera set up, and Brandon had assured them they weren't allowed to go live. Kat liked to think that was out of respect for the miners and their families, but it was more likely they were concerned about something going wrong. Rochester Coal had already gotten enough bad press.

Finally, the cable stopped, and after a long pause, began to rise. After fifteen excruciating minutes, the top of the yellow capsule appeared. The whole site held their breath as the capsule swung away from the hold and over to the receiving platform. All of the families leaned forward, anxious to know if it was their loved one inside. Henry grabbed Kat's hand, and she squeezed his.

They secured the capsule and opened the door. A man with blond hair staggered out. Not their dad.

"Bobby!" a woman in the crowd cried out. She hugged the man beside her, her husband, Kat assumed. They were older, probably Bobby's parents. The man was temporarily shielded from view by the miners and administrators, but he wriggled his way through them. His parents pushed their way to the front of the crowd, running out to meet him. Everyone clapped and cheered as they embraced, a moment from a movie.

Suddenly Kat wanted nothing more than to hug her dad and say that she loved him, that she was sorry for their dumb fight.

The miner, Bobby, pulled away from his parents. He was no longer smiling. He walked toward the caution tape. “Kat McClellan?” he called in a hoarse voice. “I need to talk to Kat.”

Kat swallowed. She stepped forward, but a hand grabbed her arm. Gemma’s. Kat gently pulled her sister’s hand off. A hush fell over the crowd.

“I’m Kat,” she said when she reached Bobby. Up close, he looked rough, scruffy from not shaving for several days. Every inch of exposed skin was covered in dirt, and he stank of earth and piss.

“He said you’d be here. Said you’d come.” Kat wasn’t sure how to respond. He was about her age, she realized, younger than he’d looked from a distance. He took a deep, gulping breath, like he couldn’t get enough air. “He made me promise to tell you first. I promised.”

Kat bit the inside of her cheek. She wouldn’t cry. “Tell me what?” she whispered.

Brandon hurried up to them. “Sir,” he said, taking Bobby’s arm. “You really should go see a medic.” He tried to lead Bobby away, but he jerked his arm out of Brandon’s grasp.

“He’s gone,” Bobby choked out. “He was hurt, when the wall burst. Got thrown into the digger.” Brandon muttered something into his radio. “We stopped the bleeding, and thought he was gonna be alright, but he must’ve been bleeding inside, cause he got

real weak and fell asleep. He died a few hours ago, I think.” He’d rushed out the words, as though he was afraid to pause and take a breath. “I’m sorry.”

Kat nodded. Her movements were stiff, like someone had poured glue over her body. Two more suited men hustled toward them. It was clear they knew.

She moved back to the crowd as if on autopilot. Brandon darted in front of her. “Miss McClellan,” he said. A distant part of Kat’s brain was impressed he remembered her name. “If you would come with me, I’d like to take your family to a more private space while they bring your father up next.”

She ignored him. The crowd parted around her. Brandon put his hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged him off. His footsteps followed, but he didn’t try and speak or stop her again.

Kat pulled her siblings close. Gemma’s face was white. She knew something was very wrong. Henry and Winnie both looked confused and frightened.

“They’re bringing Dad up next,” Kat whispered. She was surprised she managed that much. Her throat was swollen and tight, and it felt like something was trying to push its way out. “He —.” Her throat started to close. “He didn’t —”

“No,” mumbled Gemma, closing her eyes. “No, no, no, no.”

“What happened?” asked Henry. “Is Dad okay?”

His blue eyes bored into Kat’s. “No.” She took a deep breath. “He didn’t make it.” For a heartbeat no one moved. It was as if the earth had disappeared from under them, and they were motionless, floating in space.

“Why not?” Winnie asked, breaking the spell. She looked at Kat blankly.

Kat opened her mouth, but it was as if someone had stepped on her chest, pushing all the air out. “I don’t know, Win,” she managed. “He just didn’t.”

Winnie’s lip quivered, and Henry’s eyes were misty. Gemma looked like a statue, white and unmoving. Brandon loomed a few feet behind Kat. Somehow, she found her voice again. “We can go somewhere else while they bring him up, or — ”

“I want to stay,” said Henry fiercely. Winnie nodded.

“Me too,” Gemma added.

“Okay,” Kat said. She straightened.

Brandon stepped closer. “Miss McClellan, I’m afraid I must insist —”

“We’re not going anywhere,” she said. Her words rang out through the hush, surprisingly firm and steady. “Not until they’ve brought him up. Then, you’ll take us to see him.”

He looked like he wanted to argue, but he nodded and stepped back. Word was spreading throughout the site. A hand squeezed Kat’s shoulder, but she didn’t turn to see who it belonged to. She didn’t look at anyone, didn’t want to see the pity on their faces, the secret relief that it wasn’t their loved one who had died down there. She stared out at the grass, at the drill, at the cable descending into the hole. The wind whipping through the canvases and the whirl of the gears were the only sounds.

The minutes stretched on. Kat began to hope she’d imagined the whole thing. Maybe Bobby had been mistaken, and her dad was just badly hurt. But a glance at the miners’ faces erased any doubt. The cable crawled upward. Winnie wrapped her arms around Kat’s waist, pressing her cheek into Kat’s chest. Kat tucked an arm securely

around her. Gemma held Henry in front of her. Her other hand found Kat's and gripped it tightly.

The whirring of the crane increased. Gemma shook too hard for Kat to feel her hand anymore. Or maybe it was Kat who was shaking.

When the yellow capsule appeared, it was quickly obscured by bodies. She caught only a glimpse of someone being laid on a stretcher before being covered with a blue tarp. Kat was struck with the image of the miners below trying to fit a large, limp body into the upright canister in the dark and fought back a hysterical giggle.

Brandon tipped his head, and they followed. The eyes of the other families burned holes in Kat's back. He led them to a nearby tent, which had been thrown up as a workstation for the rescue crews. "Wait here," he said. "There's just some official business to tend to first. It shouldn't take long." A woman brought them a rough piece of canvas, which they spread on the ground and sat on. Despite the chill, they refused her offer to wait somewhere more comfortable. Finally, Brandon reappeared. "You can see him now," he said.

"Let me go first," Kat said. Not even Gemma argued. "I'll come and get you in a minute."

The tent was a sort of make-shift office, with folding tables covered in charts and computers. There was another door on the far side, and Kat figured whoever had been in here a few minutes ago had gone out that way. A couple tables had been pushed to the side to make room for the stretcher. The blue tarp was folded back, leaving his face and

upper half of his chest exposed. He looked like he was asleep, except for the dark brown stain creeping up from his stomach. The worst of it was hidden beneath the tarp.

“Can I touch him?” she asked.

Brandon nodded, his face softening. “I’ll give you a moment. I’ll be outside with the children, if you need anything.”

She didn’t realize she was crying until drops starts to wash away the dirt on his face. She found a box of tissues on one of the tables. She grabbed one and wiped at his cheeks. “It’s me,” she said. “Kat.” She brushed the hair back from his forehead. He needed a haircut. “I’m sorry. For everything.” The situation hit her like a train, and the sobs came fast and hard. It was like whatever was stuck in her throat had finally loosened, and it all came rushing up and out. She was never going to get to tell him she loved him. Never get to say she’s sorry. Never feel his arms around her again or the scratch of his beard as he kissed her cheek. She put a hand over her mouth and tried to get herself back under control. The others couldn’t see her like this. She had to be strong for them. After a minute, she’d calmed the sobs, though she still shook. She pressed a wet kiss to his forehead. “I’ll take care of them,” she said. “I promise.”

The kids stood when she opened the door. Brandon lingered to the side, looking uncomfortable. “Do you want to see him one at a time, or together?” she asked.

Gemma grabbed Henry’s and Winnie’s hands. “Together.” They nodded.

When Gemma saw him, she dropped their hands and let out a sound that cut to Kat’s core, a cross between a moan and a bobcat’s cry. Gemma wrapped her arms around her chest and rocked on her heels. Henry’s face went white. Slowly, he stretched out a

finger and brushed their dad's cheek, then jerked it back. Winnie hid behind Kat, frightened by Gemma's outburst. Kat pulled her forward.

"Don't you want to see him?" Kat asked. Winnie shook her head, looking away from the table, toward the canvas walls. "He's still Dad," Kat said. Winnie needed to see him. Kat needed her to see him, while he still looked like himself, in his mining uniform, face dirty, hair tangled. Not prettied up for a funeral. "Look," Kat said, giving Winnie's arm a soft tug so she would watch. "You can touch him." Kat ran a hand down his arm.

Hesitantly, Winnie followed her example. Her thin fingers looked tiny against his arm. "He's cold," she said.

"He's dead," snapped Gemma. Henry jumped. Winnie started to cry, burying her face in Kat's chest. It wasn't her loud obnoxious cry, the one she used whenever Henry cheated at Candyland, but a deep, quiet cry. Kat wrapped her arms around her youngest sister and slid down the wall until she hit the floor. The canvas bowed under their weight, but it held them. She cradled Winnie awkwardly in her lap. Henry sat beside her and leaned his head on her shoulder. He sniffed, trying to hold back tears.

"It's okay to cry, Henry," Kat said. "It's okay."

Applause and cheers roared from outside, loud even through the walls. That should have been them out there, laughing and clapping. Kat wanted to smash something. She held Winnie tighter. Gemma stared down at their dad for a long while, her face twisting as the applause rose and fell. Eventually, she sat beside Kat's free shoulder. It was easier on the floor, where they couldn't see him. The tears slowed, but every time the

cheers rose, Kat bit her lip so hard it bled. Winnie's and Henry's breathing deepened, until they were asleep.

Gemma spoke first. "What's going to happened to us?" she asked, as calmly as if she were asking about the weather.

As if it were a question. A part of Kat's mind was already rebelling, but she didn't have the energy to listen to it right now. "You'll stay here. With me."

CHAPTER III

Kat dozed for an hour or so but never slept. She gave up around seven and stepped outside, not bothering with a coat. It was a beautiful winter morning. Snow still covered most of the ground. The birds' songs and the windchimes wove together, and the sky was a clear, pale blue. At the bottom of the steep hill below, a group of wild turkeys picked their way through the snow.

It was all just a bad dream, she thought. They were still working on the rescue, and it was just her nerves and overactive imagination playing tricks on her. The car was in the driveway, right where she'd left it the night before, and she had no memory of driving home.

But she frowned when she noticed a piece of paper stuck under the windshield wiper. It was a receipt, on the back of which someone had scrawled: *Keys under door mat. Sorry for your loss. God bless.*

A vague memory returned, of a man insisting on driving them home. She'd hadn't talked much to him, but waved thanks before ushering everyone inside. It wasn't a dream. Her dad was really gone. She crumpled the note and threw it as hard as she could off the porch. It hung suspended in the wind, before dropping into the brush below.

The chill was no longer pleasant. She retrieved the keys from under the mat on her way inside. She started a pot of coffee and made herself presentable while it brewed. There wasn't much to be done about the purple half-moons under her eyes, but she tried.

Once the news got out, people would start showing up, bringing casseroles and spaghetti. They'd want to sit and talk, reminisce, remind them that their dad was in a better place now. Kat knew the drill; she'd done several similar visits over the years with her mom. Kat always carried flowers or a card while her mom carried the food. Kat had found the visits awkward and would pick a corner to sit in and smile and pretend to pay attention while everyone chatted.

She locked the door.

There wasn't much in terms of breakfast food, but she found a box of frozen waffles and placed two in the toaster. She poured herself a cup of coffee while they cooked. Her dad didn't like creamer, so she had to add milk instead. Hadn't liked creamer, she reminded herself.

She felt unbalanced, like when you had an ear infection and everything just felt off. She couldn't believe how normal the morning was. The sun was rising. The toaster cooked the waffles. The garbage truck honked as it passed by. But at the same time, everything was different. A voice in her head kept repeating phrases. *Dad is dead. Dad died. My dad died. My dad is gone. Dad was killed.* No matter how she thought it, it didn't seem to make sense. They were just sounds with no meaning.

She was an orphan, now. Kat almost dropped the milk when the thought struck her, and she spilled a bit on the counter. Not that the label changed anything, but it was an odd feeling. Everyone's parents died at some point, but she never thought it would happen until she was far older than twenty. She grabbed some paper towels and wiped up the spilled milk. And her siblings might as well be orphans too. Their mom disappeared

over six years ago. Got in the car and drove away, and they'd heard nothing from her since. She might as well be dead.

Mary wasn't Kat's real mom, but she'd raised Kat since she was three. Kat had no memories of her birth mother, but still, there was the fact that both of her parents were dead. The voices shifted. *Dead. Gone. At peace. Passed away. Gone home*, as Sophie would say.

She was coating her waffles in butter when a heavy hand knocked on the door. She kept spreading the butter, hoping whoever it was would leave. They knocked again.

Her dad would have let them in right away. Her mom had never cared much for visitors, always felt they were too nosy. But her dad would stop whatever he was doing, grab a couple beers, and chat for an hour with whoever had dropped by.

She sat down her waffles and looked through the peep hole. It was Pastor Steve. Kat opened the door. His smile was comforting, and as he wrapped her in a solid hug, she let herself pretend she was a little kid again, that someone else was going to make it all okay.

"Coffee?" she asked when he pulled away.

He shook his head and glanced at her plate of waffles. "Don't let me distract you from your breakfast. I wasn't sure if you'd be up yet," he said, sitting down at the table. She joined him. "But I wanted to beat the rush." He leaned back in his chair and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "You know," he said. "You don't have to see anyone today if you don't want to. Me included."

She took her time chewing her bite of waffle. “I know,” she said. “But it’s what Dad would want.”

“He’d also want you to take care of yourself,” he said gently.

“I’d rather just get it over with, instead of having to deal with it the next few weeks.”

“You’re not going back to school?” His bushy eyebrows raised over the rim of his glasses.

She blinked. “Who else is going to take care of them?”

“There are always other options,” he said. “We could try and locate your mother.”

“No,” she said sharply. “She obviously doesn’t care enough to be here. She’s never even called. And I’m not putting them through that, only to be disappointed.”

“Are there other relatives?”

She shook her head. “There’s no other family. Not that I’ve ever heard of.” Her grandparents were dead, and her dad was an only child. Her mom had been raised in the system, bounced around between foster homes. Even her real mom’s family was gone.

“Okay,” he said. “I just want to make sure you weren’t feeling...forced into this.”

Kat focused on her coffee. “I basically ran this house for six years,” she said. “I doubt this time round will be much different. Besides.” She peeked into the living room to make sure none of the others were up yet. “I don’t know if Dad ever told you, but he officially divorced Mom and got her custody revoked. Abandonment or something.” She doused her waffles in syrup. “He made me their legal guardian when I turned eighteen. In case something happened.”

“I’m aware,” Pastor Steve said. “But I don’t think he thought something would happen this soon, when you were fresh off to college.”

She shrugged. Neither she or her dad had thought it would ever happen. “Doesn’t make any difference.” She didn’t want to think about leaving school or New York. She wished he would let it go. “I’m here, and that’s that.”

“Well, that’s very selfless of you. Very Christ-like.” He smiled when she rolled her eyes, then cleared his throat. “I know it’s early, but I thought you might want to get the particulars out of the way, in terms of funeral arrangements.” Kat frowned. She hadn’t thought that far ahead. “No need to go into right now,” he said. “But I thought I’d offer to do the service, and to go down to the funeral home with you if you want.”

“Sure. Dad would like that.” And she was glad she wouldn’t have to make those decisions herself.

“Just let me know when.” He stood. “I’ll get out of your hair. Just remember that you’ve got a lot of people here that love y’all.”

After he left, she made herself a second cup of coffee and settled on the couch. Golden sunlight bathed the living room. Through the window, she could see the next peak over, and just above it, the tall smokestacks of the power plant. Seeing three of them, when there had always only been two, was like seeing a second sun in the sky. Her chest throbbed and she turned away from the window.

A door creaked, and Winnie stumbled down the hallway, rubbing sleep from her eyes. It was unusual for her to wake up first. She crawled into Kat’s lap. She took up much more space than she used to, and Kat had to carefully arrange her coffee cup

around her. Winnie nuzzled into her shoulder. They sat like that until Gemma woke up. She headed straight for the kitchen, and Kat slid her way out from beneath a dozing Winnie to join her.

“There’s coffee,” Kat said. Gemma nodded. Her eyes were red and bloodshot, though her hair somehow look flawless in its messy bun. “And some waffles.”

Gemma put the waffles in the toaster. “There’s probably going to be a lot of people here today, so I would get dressed soon,” Kat continued. Gemma nodded again. Kat paused, unsure of how to phrase what she wanted to say. “I don’t expect,” she began. “I mean, you don’t have to —.” Gemma started at her expectantly. Kat sighed. “What I’m trying to say is, if you want to lock yourself in your room all day, or go to a friend’s house, or hide in the basement, I don’t care. I’m not going to make you sit through all the visiting if you don’t want to.”

“Okay,” Gemma said, her voice raw. Probably from crying. Kat wondered why she hadn’t been crying. She felt empty. Maybe she’d dumped everything out last night at the mine.

“I’m here for you,” Kat said awkwardly. “You know, if you need anything. Or want to talk.”

Gemma sat down at the table, and Kat watched as she cut her waffles into tiny pieces.

* * *

Marge, the next-door neighbor, popped by around nine, and there were at least two people an hour for the rest of the day. Kat tried to talk as little as possible, and most

people left after twenty minutes of standard condolences and some reminiscing. By the end of the day, she'd had dozens of versions of the same conversation.

Yes, he was a good man. A loving father. The kids are holding up as well as could be expected. Yes, we have plenty of egg salad and casserole. I do remember the time he helped haul Mike out of that mud pit. Thank you so much for the food, it's a big help. It's true, he was signed to play professional baseball when he was younger. Yep, it was him and Roger that egged the old school house when they were teenagers. We're holding up okay. Yep, I'll be around. Thank y'all for stopping by.

Though she refused to let them in, she did her best to graciously accept the food they brought. By the end of the day the counter was covered with dishes: fried chicken, potato casserole, dinner rolls, a fruit plate, pumpkin pie, meatballs. When the fridge was full, she took dishes to the extra freezer in the basement and crammed them in around what was left of last year's deer meat. She also started labeling where each dish had come from with a piece of masking tape, so she could get the containers back to the right people.

Sometimes Henry or Winnie would stand by her at the door, but mostly they hung back in the living room. During the lulls, Henry, Winnie, and Kat would play Go Fish or Candyland or Checkers on the living room floor, Fitz stretched out beside them. Gemma stayed in her room, only coming out to grab food or use the bathroom. Sophie texted and promised to stop by soon. Tim showed up near the end of the day, bearing an entire deer roast.

“Figured you had enough casseroles.”

“You got that right,” Kat said. “You want to take one home?”

He shook his head. “You need anything? Milk? Wood? Bananas?”

“Thanks, but I don’t think so.”

“Just call if you do. Anytime.”

“Thanks,” she repeated.

He jerked her into a hug, releasing her almost as quickly. “See you around,” he said. She watched him back out of the drive before taking the roast to the basement.

In the afternoon, she sent a short email explaining the situation to her professors. Then she called the office in charge of her scholarship. It was as she’d thought. Despite the circumstances, she wouldn’t be able to keep her scholarship if she took a semester off or classes online. She couldn’t apply for financial aid until the following year, and there was no way she could come up with enough money for tuition, even if she took out loans. The lady on the phone was very nice and sympathetic, and she clearly explained the process for withdrawing from the university. Kat pulled the website up on the computer but couldn’t bring herself to click the button. It could wait.

* * *

It was strange, standing next to her dad’s casket, the others in line beside her. He looked good, dressed in his best shirt that he’d often worn for church. Kat had decided against putting him in a plaid one, but his favorite ball cap was arranged in his hands. Part of her didn’t want to look, but part of her never wanted to stop. Soon the casket would close, and she’d never see him again, except in photos and memories.

She shook hands, hugged bodies, kissed cheeks. The worst part was when they'd pull back from her and their faces would cave when their eyes moved to Gemma, Henry, and Winnie. But then there was someone else to grab her hand and offer their condolences or story about her dad. The line was never ending. She knew he had known a lot of people, but this was overwhelming. The room was packed full, with the ushers trying to squeeze extra chairs into the back. A lot of them were miners. Kat wasn't sure if he'd known all of them personally, but she wouldn't be surprised if he had.

The funeral was short. Pastor Steve did most of the speaking. Kat didn't remember much of it. She kept an arm around Winnie, and Gemma held Henry's hand beside her. Kat tried not to look at them. She only cried once, when the room sang "I'll Fly Away", her dad's favorite hymn. They rode from the funeral home to the church with Pastor Steve in the first car behind the hearse. Kat stared out the window and watched the town crawl by.

The graveside was cold and windy. They'd cleared the snow away, leaving an ugly brown hole against the white. Kat just wanted it to be over.

Pastor Steve read some more verses, said a prayer, and then it was finally done. The four of them stayed seated as the crowd milled about and headed to the church. Kat wished they could just go home, but she knew the women had put a lot of work into the meal. When the people had mostly cleared from the gravesite, she stood, and pulled four roses from the flower arrangement on top of the casket.

Gemma put her hands on the casket. Kat couldn't watch. She looked out across the graveyard, up toward the church. She saw a flash of blond, a thin, pointed face. It

stood out because it faced them, while most of the crowd walked away. The hairs rose on Kat's arms, despite her coat. A clump of people passed between them, and when they'd moved, the figure was gone.

"What now?" Henry asked in a small voice.

Kat pulled her eyes away from the crowd and turned to Henry. "Now we go inside. They've made us lunch."

"Do we have to?" Winnie asked.

"Come on," Gemma said, grabbing Winnie's hand. It was clear Gemma didn't want to linger. "There will probably be mac 'n cheese." She led Winnie toward the church. Henry followed a step behind.

Kat let out a shaky breath. She pulled off her glove and pressed one hand to the casket. It was like ice. She couldn't grasp that it was her dad in there. That he was going into that hole. That all that would be left would be a stone marker and some grass. Her legs shook, and she leaned against the casket, afraid she might fall.

A hand covered her hand, wrapping gloved fingers around hers. Sophie stood beside her, and she gave Kat a wobbling smile when Kat glanced up. They stood in silence, then Kat took her friend's hand fully, and let Sophie lead her up to the church. With each step, she breathed deeply, inhaling the cold, dry air, pushing the pain and memories down as possible. When she reached the church, she could take a breath without tears prickling. She squeezed Sophie's hand gratefully.

The lunch was as much of a blur as the funeral. Kat knew she ate, but she didn't taste anything. Kat kept her eyes down as she moved toward the trashcan. She threw her

plate away without any interference, but as she turned, a hand caught her arm. She held in a sigh and turned to see Bobby.

It took her a heartbeat to recognize him: clean-shaven, in a blue suit, and no longer covered in dirt. The suit was slightly big for him and made him look small and young. Despite being cleaned up, he didn't look well. He was pale, though his cheeks were flushed red, and he chewed his bottom lip. Kat caught a whiff of alcohol. She didn't blame him; she would have liked a stiff drink herself.

His eyes bounced around the room, darting back to Kat every few seconds. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Sorry 'bout your dad," he said. "He was a good guy. Good to work with. Taught me a lot."

"Thanks," Kat said. "And thanks for coming. It means a lot."

She expected him to move on, having said his piece, but he didn't. He stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"How are you doing?" she asked, mostly to fill the silence.

He shrugged. "Okay. I'm not doing much. They've given us two weeks paid leave. But I'm not going back."

"I wouldn't," Kat said. "But what are you going to do, then?"

He shrugged again. "My uncle's got a farm up north. Cows and stuff. Might do some work for him for a bit."

"That will be a good change," she said, trying to sound cheerful. "It will be nice working outside."

He let out a long breath. "Yeah." He glanced toward the ceiling.

Silence fell again. Kat waited several long seconds. She was just about to make an excuse and leave, when he reached in his coat and pulled out a bulky envelope.

“Here.” He thrust it at her. She took it. Her fingers tried to feel what was inside, but all she could tell was that it was thicker than paper. “It’s from Jim.”

Her grip tightened on it. “What is it?”

He swallowed. “A goodbye note. We all wrote them, just in case…” His lip trembled.

A lump formed in Kat’s throat. “Thank you,” she managed. He fingers caressed the envelope.

Bobby nodded several times. He twitched, as if he was going to try and hug her or shake her hand, but changed his mind. He dipped his head toward her, then darted away.

Part of her wanted to tear the envelope open and drink in the words, right there by the trashcan. But she knew she couldn’t. She hurried back to her seat and slipped the envelope into her bag.

“What’s that?” Gemma asked.

“Just a note,” Kat said, flushing. She wasn’t sure why she didn’t tell them yet. She would, eventually. It was selfish, but she wanted to be the first to read it. Alone.

The gathering dragged on long after the eating was done. Kat and Gemma sat at their table, interacting as little as possible, but Henry and Winnie ran around with the other kids. The ladies packed up even more food to send home with them. “You sure you don’t want someone to stay with y’all for a bit?” Linda asked as they loaded the food in the car.

“No thanks,” Kat said. “I think we just need some rest for a little while.”

It was quiet in the car on the way home. Gemma cradled the roses in her lap. Kat wasn't sure what they would do with them. Maybe she could put them in a shadowbox or something.

Kat slowed when she saw the beat-up Ford in the driveway. Her heart sank, thinking at first that someone had come to bring more food or try to visit. But there was no one in the car, and no one waited by the door.

“Stay in the car,” she said, releasing her seatbelt. “I'll come get you.”

“You think someone's inside?” Gemma asked.

“I don't know. Just wait here.”

The storm door was unlocked. They used to keep them unlocked all the time until a string of home robberies several years ago. The entire town had lamented the need to lock their doors for weeks. Kat wished she had her dad's pistol with her, but it was down in the basement, locked in the gun safe.

Kat didn't hear Fitz barking, but that didn't mean much. Anyone that gave him a scratch behind the ears was a friend. She pushed the door open and saw him splayed on the kitchen tile. His tail thumped. Kat noticed the smell first, roasting vegetables and spices. Venison. A woman stood at the stove, her back to Kat.

Kat blinked, certain she was seeing things. Her pulse pounded in her ears. Maybe she was having a breakdown, or a panic attack or something. “Mom?” she asked.

CHAPTER IV

“Kat!” her mom exclaimed spinning around. A smile spread across her face. Kat stared. It was her mom, but not the mom she remembered. This woman was tan, hair blonder than its natural color. Had her teeth always been so white? But it was the same thin face and large front teeth, same way she cocked her head to the right, as though she was sizing Kat up.

Her mom wiped her hands on the floral apron around her waist. The same apron she’d always worn. It had hung on its hook for weeks after she left, until Kat threw it in the trash. Her dad had dug it out and rehung it. They’d reached a sort of truce when Kat had put it in the back of the cabinet under the sink. Kat wondered how long it took her mom to find it.

Her arms encircled her before Kat could move, pinning Kat’s to her side. Mary’s head hit right beneath Kat’s nose. Her hair smelled like oregano.

“I’m making supper,” her mom said, releasing Kat and returning to the stove. “I’m sure it’s been a long day.”

Kat’s head spun. She had a thousand questions, but the one that came out was, “Were you there?”

“Was I where?”

“At the funeral.”

Mary kept her back to her, stirring the pot. It smelled like some sort of stew or soup. “I got into town just in time to catch the graveside service. If I had known, I would have come earlier.”

“You should have called,” Kat said.

“Well, I was driving most of the time, so I—”

“You should have called,” Kat interrupted. “You just vanished. No calls, no news. We didn’t know if you were dead or alive.”

“I was fine,” her mom said, waving her hand dismissively. “I just thought a clean break would be easier.”

“Then why are you here?” Kat didn’t realize she’d raised her voice until her mom jumped. “Six years, and then you just waltz back in here? Make supper? You thought that would be okay?”

Her mom turned around, wooden spoon in hand. Kat remembered all the times she’d been threatened and spanked with it. “I saw on the news, about Jim,” her mom said calmly. “I knew you needed me. I had my reasons in the past, but I’m here now. You don’t have to take care of everything anymore.”

“You’re wrong,” Kat snapped. “We don’t need you. And we don’t want you.” Let her feel what it was like, Kat thought. To not be wanted. Her mom’s eyes narrowed, then her face smoothed. Kat could tell she was trying hard to hold her cool. Though it had been years, they’d gone through this routine, this build up, dozens of times. “Leave. Now. It’s what you’re good at anyway.” Kat thrilled as the words came out.

Her mom’s eyes narrowed again. “You can’t kick me out of my own house, Kat.”

Kat grinned. “Well, that’s just it, isn’t it? It’s not yours anymore.” She enjoyed the look of confusion cross her mom’s face. “Dad changed the will, and your name was never on the paperwork anyways. The house passed to me.”

“Jim wouldn’t do that.”

“He did. He divorced you as soon as I turned eighteen.”

Rage filled her mom’s eyes, and she slammed the spoon down on the counter. That was the mom Kat remembered. Bitter, angry, and sharp as a poker. “Fine. You stay here. The kids can come with me.”

“No, they won’t.” Kat crossed her arms.

“I’m their mother!”

“Not anymore. Ask a lawyer. It’s called willful abandonment.”

Her mom rushed toward her, but Kat held her ground. Kat was six inches taller, after all. She wouldn’t be intimidated anymore.

“They are my children.” Her mom emphasized each word with a sharp jab to Kat’s chest.

“Guess you should have thought about that before you left, huh? You stopped being our mom when you walked out that door.”

Her mom bared her teeth, their faces inches apart. “I was never your mother.”

“Get. Out,” Kat snarled.

Her mom balled her hands into fists, and Kat could feel the phantom burn in her scalp as her mom shook her by the hair.

“Mom?”

They turned toward the door, where Gemma stood, wide eyed, like a deer caught in the headlights. Her mom shrunk back, seemingly losing a couple inches, and Kat felt the tension draining out of her shoulders as well. She suddenly wanted to sit.

“I told you to stay in the car,” Kat croaked. The details of the room rushed back in. The bubbling pot on the stove, the hum of the fridge, the smell of stew. A man stood behind Gemma, and Kat was surprised she hadn’t noticed him sooner. Bill, the ex-cop that lived a few doors down, was a large man.

“We thought something was wrong,” Gemma said, her eyes finally tearing from their mom to Kat.

“Gemma,” their mom breathed. She stepped toward the door, but Gemma stumbled back against Bill. His hands steadied her, while his eyes assessed the scene. For a moment Kat could see it through his eyes. She and her mom were standing close enough for punches, obviously at odds. She took a step back, and his shoulders relaxed.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

Her mom straightened herself and smiled. “Just a misunderstanding, that’s all.”

His brows creased. “Mary?”

“Good to see you too, Bill.” She flashed him another wide grin. “How’s Susan?”

“She’s fine,” he answered, still surprised. “Thanks.” He studied them for another moment. “So, no one broke in, then?”

“No, she did.” Kat said. “Break in, I mean.”

“I used a key,” her mom protested.

“It’s not your house anymore,” Kat reminded her, the anger returning.

“Why don’t you prove it?”

“Whoa, whoa.” Bill took a step closer. “Let’s just calm down. What do you mean, this isn’t her house?”

“It isn’t hers,” Kat repeated. “She’s not been here for over six years, and Dad passed it to me.”

“You’ve got paperwork?” Bill asked.

“The lawyer does.”

“And you don’t want your mom to stay here?”

Kat glanced at Gemma’s pale, blank face. “No.”

Bill turned to Mary. “Look, Mary. Until we get this sorted out, I think it’s best if you stay somewhere else tonight. I’d offer you our extra room, but Susan’s renovating it into a sewing room, and it’s a mess right now. Is there somewhere else you can go? Otherwise I might have to get the chief out here.”

Kat thought her mom was going to start yelling at him. But she glanced at Gemma and said, “Of course. I didn’t mean to make a scene, but you know how emotions can get out of control.” She picked up her coat from where it hung on the back of a chair. “The stew should be ready in a few minutes,” she told Kat. “I’ll get a hotel tonight and go by the lawyer’s tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Mary,” Bill said, obviously relieved things were being resolved peacefully, at least for the night.

Mary slid on her coat. “I’ll see you both soon,” she said. Gemma darted out of the way as she left.

Bill still looked confused, but he followed her out without asking more questions. Before the door closed, he tipped his head toward Kat and Gemma.

The kitchen suddenly felt empty. Gemma and Kat stared at each other until Kat spun toward the stove. She resisted the urge to throw the stew in the trash. No use wasting good food. “Are the others still in the car?” she asked Gemma.

“Yes. I locked it.”

“Good job.” Gravel crunched as a car pulled out. “You can get them now.”

“What do I say?” she asked.

Kat stirred the stew. Some pieces had stuck to the bottom of the pot. “I don’t know, Gem. I don’t know.”

“Do I tell them?”

“No,” Kat decided. “She might not come back.”

“But she said —”

“I know what she said. But don’t tell them. Not yet.”

The door slammed shut behind her and opened again a minute later. “Who was that?” Henry asked as soon as he walked in.

“A friend,” Kat said. “No one important.” She noticed Gemma’s sharp glance toward her but ignored it.

“That smells good. Did she bring the food?” Winnie asked.

“Who?”

“The lady.”

“Oh. Yes, she did. And it will be ready soon, so go change.”

Kat pulled off the black dress and tights she'd worn for the funeral, hating how her hands shook. For years she'd envisioned this exact scene, where her mom returned, wanting to be part of the family again. Of course, in Kat's daydreams the reunion had never gone the way it had just played out. Instead, her mom would beg for forgiveness, or give Kat a shopping spree as a make-up gift, or promise to love her forever. But as the years went by, her mom's return seeming more impossible with each passing day, she'd stopped dreaming.

Kat replayed the interaction, wishing she could have prevented Gemma from seeing it. Gemma was only nine when their mom left. Old enough to remember, too young to understand. Not like Kat had understood much either, and she'd been fourteen.

She'd tried to understand what had happened, what had gone wrong, for so long. She'd never been good enough for her mom. One of Kat's earliest memories was being locked in her room because she'd spilled her juice on the carpet.

There were good memories too. Her mom used to read Kat bedtime stories with her dad, and they would do all the voices. Sometimes she took Kat out after school for ice cream or to the park. But even then, Kat had known something was off. She remembered always wanting her mom's approval, and never getting it.

Gemma was born when Kat was six, and both she and her mom had a hard time adjusting. Kat was always too loud, or too slow, or too needy. She quickly learned to do things on her own: make cereal, get herself dressed. Though now, Kat could look back and deduce that a lot of her mom's actions had been motivated by exhaustion and

hormones, Kat still remembered feeling like a nuisance that her mom would have loved to get rid of.

When Henry was born five years later, it got worse, and this time, Gemma, previously the baby and center of attention, was also shoved to the side. Maybe things wouldn't have gotten as bad if it had stopped there, but their mom had almost immediately gotten pregnant again, and a few months later, she had Winnie.

Their mom went from irritable to flying off the handle at the smallest offense. Mary and Kat could hardly be in the same room without fighting. Kat sometimes disobeyed or pushed her mom's buttons on purpose, but just as often she'd have no idea what she was being punished for. And it only made her mom angrier that her dad often took Kat's side, or stayed out of it completely.

It all went south the day Kat had found Fitz. She was taking the trail down the mountain that led to Sophie's house, where they were going to do makeovers and gossip about Sophie's new crush, when Kat heard a tiny whimper. It didn't take her long to find the trash bag filled with puppies. The smallest one was the only one still alive. Kat bundled him in her shirt, whispering encouragement to him all the way home.

Her mom refused to let Kat keep him. He'd be too much trouble, too much money.

"Pretty please," Kat asked. "I'll take care of him. I'll feed him and walk him and give him baths."

"Maybe at first," her mom said. "But who's going to be taking care of it in two months? Me, that's who. As if I don't have enough to do around here. Keep y'all fed,

keep this house clean, only for y'all to trash it in five minutes, make sure the babies are happy.”

As if to prove her point, Winnie's cry came from the living room, where she was standing in her pack'n'play, Henry snoring beside her. Mary marched into the room, fetched the pacifier Winnie had thrown, and gave it back. Winnie quieted.

“Oh, let her keep it,” Jim said, leaning against the door frame. “It's about time the kids had a dog.”

Her mom whirled on her dad. “Of course, you'd say that. Why even ask me? You've never asked my opinion on adding a member to the family before, why would you start now?” Her mom's face was white, and Kat had a feeling she was missing something. This felt like a conversation she wasn't supposed to hear.

Her dad's eyes flashed, and Kat grew nervous. He rarely got angry. “Mary,” her dad said in a warning tone.

“Don't you dare Mary me,” she shrieked. “Ever since you brought me to this god damned town I've done everything you wanted. And how have I been repaid? Landed with one kid after another, always being shoved to the side.” Her chest heaved. Her dad's face had softened slightly, and his eyes were wide. Kat had never heard her mom talk like this before, and she wondered if her dad hadn't either.

“I never wanted kids,” she continued. “Do you have any idea what it's like, to be nineteen and have someone hand you a three-year-old and say good luck?”

“That's enough,” her dad said, his voice hard again. He glanced at Kat. She wanted to leave, but she didn't want to draw her mom's attention.

“No,” her mom yelled. “It’s not enough. You don’t know because you were gone, while I was stuck in the house with her, all day, every day.” With a jolt, Kat realized her mom was talking about her. “We were going to travel. But ever since Kat showed up we’ve not left this god damned state.”

“What do you mean since I showed up?” Kat blurted. Something about the way they were talking about her felt wrong. Handed a three-year-old? What did that even mean?

“She means since you were born,” her dad said.

Her mom’s eyes flicked toward her. Her cheeks were flushed. “No, that’s not what I mean.”

“Mary,” her dad warned again.

“She’s old enough to know.”

“Know what?” Kat asked angrily. She didn’t like being kept in the dark.

Her mom crossed her arms. “To know that I’m not your real mom. Your birth mother was a piece of trash that got herself killed.” Kat and her mom looked at each other, and suddenly it all made sense. The lack of pictures from when Kat was a baby, though they’d told her they couldn’t afford a camera. How her mom never answered questions about Kat’s birth. Maybe it explained why she seemed to dislike Kat so much.

Kat was shaking, though she couldn’t tell from what emotion. The room spun. “I’m adopted?” she sputtered.

“No,” her dad said fiercely. He wrapped an arm around Kat’s shoulders. “You’re my daughter. My real daughter.” He glared at her mom, as if daring her to argue.

A strange look crossed her mom's face. "Of course. Of course, you would choose her." She spun and marched to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

"What did she mean by that?" Kat asked. Her dad said nothing and followed her mom into the bedroom. Kat thought about following but decided against it. Instead, she crouched down by the box they'd put the puppy in. He already looked better. His tongue tickled her fingers, and she tried not to think about what she'd just learned.

Her parent's raised voices floated into the kitchen, but Kat hummed, trying to drown them out. A few minutes later, steps thundered down the hall. Her dad walked out the door without looking at her. It slammed shut behind him.

Kat waited to see if her mom would follow. When she didn't, Kat slinked down the hall. She peered into the bedroom through the cracked door. A suitcase lay open on the bed. Her mom was taking clothes from the chest and putting them in it.

"I know you're there, Kat," she said. She didn't sound angry, but her voice was flatter and more disinterested than normal. Kat didn't like it. She pushed the door open all the way and stepped inside. The folding closet doors had been pushed open, and the closet was half empty. Her mom continued folding clothes and placing them carefully in the suitcase, her movements sharp and controlled.

"Where are you going?" Kat asked, hating the way her voice quivered.

"Anywhere," her mom said. "Anywhere but here."

"When are you coming back?"

She paused and glanced at Kat. "I don't know."

Fear gripped Kat's stomach. True, they fought, but she didn't want her mom to leave forever. "You have to come back. What about us?"

"Jim's a parent too. And you're old enough to help out." She shut the suitcase with a snap. Kat stood between her and the door.

"Is that why you don't love me?" Kat asked, looking at the floor. "Cause you aren't my real mom?"

Her mom's face betrayed nothing when Kat glanced up. "I never said that." she said. She was talking to the suitcase, not looking at Kat. "Our lives were going to be perfect. I gave up everything for you, and Henry and Winnie and Gemma. I don't have anything more to give."

Tears rushed to Kat's eyes. She didn't really understand what her mom was saying, but she knew how scared she felt. She stood frozen as her mom heaved the suitcase off the bed, brushed past her, and walked down the hallway. The front door creaked.

Kat ran down the hall and threw open the door. Her mom put the suitcase in the trunk and was walking around to the driver's door. "Fine!" Kat yelled, dashing outside. "Leave! We don't want you here anyway." Her mom paused, her hand on the door handle. Kat stopped in front of the car and crossed her arms. "We'll be happier without you."

Her mom's control snapped. "I saved you," she screamed, lunging at Kat. Kat shrieked as her mom yanked her hair and shook her like she was cleaning a rug. The world rolled out of focus. "I saved you, you ungrateful —"

Kat's hand found her mom's face, nails digging into skin. Her mom let go, and Kat staggered back, landing on the cement driveway.

They looked at each other, chests heaving. Her mom had a thin, red scratch on her cheek. Kat felt sick. Her mom looked left, and Kat followed her gaze to see her dad standing in the open garage. For a moment the world was still, then her dad walked over and pulled Kat to her feet. The ground rocked, and she leaned against him.

"Mary," her dad said, but she ignored him and got in the car. Tires screeched as she backed out. They watched until she went around the bend, but she didn't look back.

Her dad led Kat into the kitchen. "She's coming back, right, Dad?" Kat asked. "Right?"

He didn't answer. He pulled out an icepack from the freezer, wrapped it in a paper towel, and placed it on her head, pulling her hand up to hold it in place. She put a finger under the icepack and was surprised to find a goose egg forming.

Her dad picked up the puppy and stroked it. He looked like a stick of butter in her dad's large hands. "What are you going to name it?" he asked.

Kat swallowed. "Fitzwilliam." Her dad raised an eyebrow. "Fitz for short. We just read *Pride and Prejudice* in school."

"Ah, I should of known it was from one of your books. Fitz it is." He put the puppy back in the box. He sat in the rocker by the window and stared out at the drive.

CHAPTER V

Kat sighed in relief as she walked out of the lawyer's office into the sunlight. Mr. Norman was nice enough, but his office was cramped and stuffy, with only one small window. She glanced at her mom, who was walking beside her, but she couldn't read her face. Kat had sat quietly while her mom grilled Mr. Norman on ways she could regain custody. Kat had been nervous, but she had been happy to hear that unless she signed it over, it was going to be expensive and time consuming for her mom to do anything about it.

Kat expected her mom to say something in the parking lot, maybe start yelling at her again, but she just walked determinedly to her car. Kat headed toward her dad's old truck. Sophie had helped her turn in her rental car in Charleston yesterday.

"Wait a sec," her mom said as Kat opened the truck door. She paused and looked over at her mom. "Look," her mom said. "I get what you're doing. It's noble, sacrificing what you want for them. But you don't have to anymore. Stop and think for a minute. You could go back to New York. Go back to your school, your friends. Don't throw that all away just because."

"It isn't just because," Kat said. She wondered how her mom had learned all of that.

"Then don't throw it all away just because you're mad at me," her mom amended. "Just think about it," she said and got in her car.

Kat slammed the truck door shut and gripped the steering wheel. She hated to admit it, but her mom had voiced many of the thoughts that had kept Kat awake for most of the night. Maybe her mom was right. She closed her eyes and imagined it. She saw herself going back classes, walking through Central Park on a warm day, seeing her friends again. She missed them, especially Emily, and Jenna, and Jonas. She wondered what they were doing now. Emily had texted her a few times, but it felt awkward. Though it hurt, Kat understood. They were in different worlds now.

Plus, Kat had done her time. The weeks after her mom had left had been terrible. They didn't eat very well that first month. Mostly canned ravioli and Spaghetios. They ran out of cereal after a week, and breakfast became peanut butter toast or bread mixed in a glass of milk and sugar. When her dad finally went to the store, he came back with lots of frozen foods, corndogs and lasagna and stir fry, but no eggs or milk. Kat had been grateful when school started, because at least they could eat lunch in the cafeteria. But as time went on, she learned how to manage both her siblings and her dad.

She took care of them for six years, still a kid herself, before grabbing her chance and escaping to New York. And now she was signing up for another, five, eight, nine years? Until Winnie graduated? Her mom had offered her a second chance, another escape. She deserved her shot at success, at having fun, at doing normal twenty-year-old things.

But then she thought about Gemma's face last night. Gemma hadn't said much, but Kat knew she was a mess of conflicting emotions. Henry and Winnie had been so

young when their mom had left, they hardly remembered her. How could Kat just leave them to deal with all of that on their own and go back to her life?

The answer was as much as she wanted to, she couldn't. She would never forgive herself.

At home she got out her computer and pulled up the school website. Her hand hesitated a moment over the mouse, then she clicked the button to withdraw, and the button that asked if she was sure. She shut the laptop harder than she meant to.

She felt sick, and she started unloading the dishwasher to have something to do. The silverware clattered as she tossed it in the drawer.

"Are you okay?" Henry asked. He stood in the middle of the kitchen, gazing at her with those big blue eyes. Her own eyes burned, but she wouldn't cry in front of him.

"I'm fine," she said with false cheer. "Just putting the dishes away." She wasn't sure he bought it, but he joined her at the dishwasher. She bit her lip. Henry had never made a fuss about helping around the house, and had often, like now, helped without being asked or told.

"Kat," he scolded. "You put the spoons in the fork spot," he said, looking in the drawer.

"Oops," she said. "Here, you take over the silverware. I'll put up the cups."

They finished unloading the dishwasher in quiet. They finished quickly, and Kat still felt antsy. "Do you want to do something?" she asked.

"Like what?"

"I dunno. Maybe take a walk. It's nice today, not too cold."

“Okay.”

She checked with Winnie and Gemma. Winnie jumped up excitedly, but Gemma just shrugged and said, “I’m good.” She fell back on her bed and stared at the ceiling.

“You sure?” Kat asked. She didn’t want to be pushy, but Gemma had hardly left the house except for the funeral. “It might be nice to get outside.”

“I said I’m good.”

“Then maybe you should go see Toni or Kate,” Kat suggested, naming a couple of the girls Gemma often hung out with. She’d been surprised Gemma hadn’t asked to hang out with them. “It might be good to get your mind off things.”

“Can you just leave me alone?”

Kat shrugged. She joined Henry and Winnie by the door, pulling on boots and jackets and hats. Fitz ran circles around the kitchen when he realized they were going outside.

Henry and Winnie ran full speed down the hill. Kat followed at a swift jog, trying not to twist an ankle. She remembered the days she sprinted down the hill herself. What she wouldn’t give to have that kind of energy again. They waited for her at the edge of the trees, though Fitz dashed ahead, crashing through dried leaves and branches. There shouldn’t have been any bears or snakes around; it had been too cold. Still, his noise would send any critters scurrying long before they showed up.

They followed the faint path as it wound through the trees and down into the gorge. The brambles were getting bad again. Before the summer she’d have to get back here with a machete. Maybe she could hire one of the high school boys to help. One of

the old maples had also fallen across the path, probably from the storm last month. She'd heard it had rained hard for several days, then iced, and the heavy trees hadn't stood a chance. A lot of people were without power for days as the trees took out power lines and blocked roads. They climbed over the thick trunk. The thorns she could deal with herself if she had to, but she would definitely have to hire someone to come cut the tree up. At least it would make good firewood for next year.

She relaxed as they walked. Occasionally, Henry or Winnie would exclaim over a deer track or an interesting rock, but mostly they meandered in silence. The woods were also quiet, though distant groans and bleats of cows and goats reached them from the Mallory's farm a few acres over. Sound traveled far through the empty woods in the winter.

She'd forgotten what it was like, to be somewhere so still. She let herself stop thinking, pushing aside branches and brambles that fell in her way. They snagged at her jacket as she passed.

"Gross!" Winnie exclaimed. Kat looked up. They were stopped a ways ahead, near the roots of a giant tree that had fallen several years before. It was too rotted to make good firewood, and it was several yards off the path, so her dad had left it. The smell hit her before she reached them. The thick, cloying smell of something dead. She held back a gag and breathed through her mouth. A few steps later she found the source of the smell.

A small fox was stretched under the trunk. It was clearly stiff and had probably been dead a couple of days. Because of the cold, it hadn't decayed much, despite the smell. She was surprised nothing had eaten it yet.

She looked at it closer. “Get back,” she said sharply to Henry as he crouched beside the carcass. He obeyed but looked at her quizzically. “Ya’ll didn’t touch it, did you?” she asked. They shook their heads no. “Something killed it,” she said, pointing to the matted blood around the throat. There was also a deep gash in its side. “But didn’t eat it.”

She waited, curious to see if either of them could figure out what she was implying. This was something they should know. Signs they should learn to look for. Henry’s eyebrows scrunched. “Was it rabid?” he asked.

“I think so,” she said. “At least, whatever killed it probably was. Otherwise it would have eaten it. I could be wrong, but this is as far as we go today.”

They headed back up the trail. “You sure you didn’t touch it?” she asked again. “You won’t be in trouble, I just need —”

“We didn’t touch it,” Henry said. “But what do you think killed it? A coyote?”

The wound was too small for a bear bite. “Could be. Or maybe a dog. I’ll call Chief Rollins and let him know about it.”

“What about a wolf?” Winnie asked.

Kat frowned. Officially, wolves had been extinct in the state for a hundred years, though every so often there were rumors that one had been spotted. She wished she’d looked for tracks. Maybe she would go back later, without the kids. “I doubt it, but it’s possible. For the meantime, you guys be careful outside. Don’t go into the woods without me.” And she wouldn’t be going into the woods without a shotgun.

* * *

She called the chief when they returned to the house, and he offered to come out immediately. It must have been a slow day. Kat went out to greet him when he pulled into the drive.

“Thanks for coming,” she said. “It might be nothing, but I figured better safe than sorry.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Chief Rollins said, clapping her on the shoulder. “I take all rabies threats seriously.”

“I know. That’s why I called.” She was glad to see him pull a shotgun out of his back seat.

Chief Rollins looked nothing like his son. Where Tim was thin and lanky, all limbs, Chief Rollins was a boulder, stout and thick, but strong. You didn’t want to be in his way when he got going.

Kat led him over the hill and into the woods, along the trail they had taken earlier. The wind had changed direction, and she didn’t smell the fox until they were almost on top of it. She stepped back as Chief Rollins examined the carcass. He picked up a stick and prodded it, trying to roll it and get a better look at the bite on its neck.

“Could it have been a coyote?” she asked.

“That was my first thought, but this bite is pretty big for them,” he said. “It could be one of them hybrids.”

“Hybrid?” That sounded like some sort of freaky mad scientist thing.

“Maybe you’ve heard them called coywolves?” he asked. “But the name’s not really accurate. They’re mostly coyote, with some dog and wolf genes thrown in. Just

enough to give them a boost in the size and speed department. They've been trickling down from up north. Damn Yankees."

He pointed at a bit of moss. Most of the ground was too frozen to form much of an imprint, but there was a clear paw print in the moss, about four inches across. "Print's bigger than a normal coyote too. Though it could just be a big dog."

"But do you think it was rabid?"

"Oh yeah. I'll have to send it to the lab to be sure, but predators don't just leave prey lying around like this. Though I doubt this poor guy had much time to pass it on. Most likely it got away once it was attacked, then collapsed here."

He stepped away from the carcass and pulled on a pair of latex gloves. "You didn't move it, right?" She nodded. "Good. Rabies shots are nasty." He pulled two black trash bags from his coat pocket and flapped them open.

"Have you had them before?" she asked.

"Twice, though not for a while. Isn't too uncommon. Marcus is the only game warden in the county, so we end up dealing with a lot of this stuff." Kat nodded. Growing up, she'd spent many meals at Tim's house, where they'd listened eagerly to his dad's tales of chasing a crazed goose or a catching a deer that got trapped in a cow pasture. But she'd never heard him mention having to get rabies shots.

Carefully he picked up the fox and dropped it in the bag, tying it securely. He dropped that bag into the second one and tied it as well. "I'll tell the guys to keep an eye out," he said. "I'd be careful going into the woods for now. And keep Fitz in the yard. Do you mind if a few of us come back out here today or tomorrow? If the animal's sick, it

might not travel very far. He might already be dead by this point, but I'd like to make sure."

"Of course," she said. "Anytime."

"Thanks. We'll park down the road so we aren't clogging up your driveway."

They left the woods and hiked back up the hill. Even in the cold, she was sweating by the time they reached the top. Chief Rollins declined her offer for a cup of coffee.

"Want to get this feller to the lab as soon as possible," he said. "Take care, now."

She waved as he drove off, then sighed. Just one more thing for her to worry about.

* * *

The next morning, Kat stepped on Winnie's bed so her head and shoulders were level with Gemma, still buried in her covers. "I said, get up." Kat yanked the cover off.

Gemma groaned and threw an arm over her eyes. "And I said no. I'm not going."

"Why not? You love church."

"You know why not."

Kat sighed. She didn't want to go much herself, but she wanted to keep things as familiar for them as possible, and her dad had taken them to church every Sunday. This morning they'd skipped Sunday school, and she and was just trying to get them there in time for service. She hadn't expected so much resistance from Gemma, who normally was ready first and urging them out the door. Kat knew it would be tough without their dad, but she thought that would only make Gemma more anxious to get to church.

“Look, it will be good for you. Now get up.”

“No.”

Kat swallowed the urge to yell. Instead, she leaned in closer to Gemma’s face. “Come on. Winnie’s getting herself ready,” she said softly. “Are you really going to let her be the mature one here?”

Kat counted to three before Gemma sat up, nearly knocking her head into Kat’s nose. Kat lost her balance as she leaned back. She slipped off the bed and stumbled into Winnie, who was struggling to pull up her tights. She had to grab Winnie’s shoulders to keep both of them from crashing to the ground. Gemma looked down at them, let out an exasperated sigh, and muttered. “Fine, I’ll go. Happy?”

“Overjoyed,” Kat said. “Just get dressed. And help Win, will you?”

She hurried to the kitchen, just in time to catch the toast before it burnt. Well, at least before it had burnt to the point where it couldn’t be eaten. She quickly scraped as much black as she could off the toast and into the trashcan. Fitz ambled over, hoping for crumbs. “Fitz,” she scolded, shoving his face away from the trashcan with her knee. She sat the stack of toast on the table. It would have to do.

She glanced at the clock. They needed to leave soon, and she still wasn’t dressed. When she’d lived at home, she could get the four of them, five on Sundays, out of the house like clockwork, but she was out of practice. And Gemma hadn’t been so difficult.

She threw on a sweater dress, leggings, and boots. The dress was itchy, but at least it was warm. They kept the fans at church running year-round to help with the older

ladies' hot flashes. Though they had been needed the other night, with the usual sparse Sunday morning crowd, the building would be freezing.

"Keep moving," she called down the hall. "Breakfast is on the table."

Thank goodness her dad had added an extra bathroom in the basement, the only addition he'd ever gotten around to. It was small, and tall people had to duck their head because it was squeezed under the staircase, but it held a small sink, toilet, and shower. Kat quickly did her hair and makeup while the others used the upstairs bathroom. She kept track of the running water. "Make sure you brush your teeth, Henry," she yelled up through the grate over the stove.

"I am," he yelled back, muffled as if he had the toothbrush in his mouth.

Finally, they piled in the truck, each quickly devouring a piece of toast. They made it just in time. Kat ushered them inside before service started. They joined the few people trickling into the chapel. Kat headed for their usual pew, the fourth from the front on the right, but froze.

Her mom sat in the middle of it, turned sideways to chat animatedly with Carla. Her blond hair was perfectly curled and pulled back into a ponytail. Kat's pulse rushed and anger bubbled in her chest. She realized they were blocking the aisle, and she darted to one of the empty pews on the left and sat, motioning for the others to follow. They only hesitated a moment.

Kat tried to will the flush to leave her cheeks. She knew the shift from their normal pew would be noticed, then dissected and discussed over lunch. Her mom didn't turn around, but Kat thought that she knew exactly how Kat had reacted. Kat grew angry

at herself. She should have just marched up to the pew and pretended her mom wasn't there. She debated doing it now, though it would cause even more talk. She was just about to ask the kids to move when Pastor Steve stepped up to the podium and started the service.

The service felt longer than usual. Maybe it was because Kat hadn't been to one in a while. Or maybe it was because she couldn't stop glancing over at the back of her mom's head. Kat tried to figure out why she was so angry. She didn't even like church; why should she care if her mom came? But it was the audacity of it. To sit in their pew, as if she'd been there every Sunday for the past six years. Kat noticed she wasn't the only one stealing curious glances, and twice she met the eyes of people stealing glances at her. They looked away quickly, and Kat kept her face blank.

Gemma sat with her hands tucked under her legs. She stared at the floor or the window, which was very different from her usual rapt attentiveness. Henry and Winnie looked as bored as they always had, but also confused. Especially Henry. Kat watched him look between her and their mom. She gave him an encouraging smile when she met his gaze.

Maybe that was also part of her anger. She hadn't discussed their mom's return with Henry or Winnie yet. She wasn't sure if they recognized their mom or not; they'd only been four and three when she'd left. But they knew something was going on involving this blond woman. Kat would have to tell them today, before her mom could spring any more surprises.

Finally, Pastor Steve finished the closing prayer. There was a collective sigh as the congregation reawakened. “Let’s go,” Kat said quietly to the kids. “I’m pretty hungry,” she lied. Really, she didn’t want to have to talk to anyone else, especially to or about their mom. Gemma stood quickly, apparently with the same thought. Henry and Winnie looked even more confused, but they didn’t argue.

The small lobby was full of people milling about, catching up on what had happened over the week. Kat tried to hurry through, not really wanting to reminisce about the last few days, but a short, petite lady stepped in front of her. It was Mrs. McGreggor, who had taken over the Foodland when her husband passed away last year.

“I’m glad I caught you, Kat,” she said. “I’ve been meaning to call. I heard you’ll be needing a job now that you’re back.”

Kat didn’t recall telling anyone she needed a job, but it wasn’t surprising to hear that others were talking about it. She did need one after all. “That’s right,” she said.

“Well, you’re always welcome to work at the shop. I’m afraid I can’t afford to pay you full-time, but you can always work part-time.”

Kat tried not to frown. Had she put in all the hard work in high school and college just to work at the Foodland? And part-time, no less? But she reminded herself that it was only temporary. Just until she could figure out something more permanent. “That’s very kind of you Mrs. McGreggor. I’d love to.”

The older lady patted her arm. “It’s the least I can do. Can you come by tomorrow?”

Kat nodded. “Anytime.”

“I’ll see you at ten, then.”

“Sounds good.” Kat hurried the kids out the side door before anyone else could snag them. Pastor Steve would notice they’d skipped the greeting line, but she didn’t care. Outside was a drizzle of freezing mist. They hurried to the car, sighing in relief when they were inside. The truck was dry, if not warm. She drove faster than usual, and by the time they were home, she felt exhausted, like she needed to sleep for another eight hours.

She reheated one of the casseroles for the kids, but she wasn’t hungry. “I’m going to take a nap, okay?” she told them.

It was a relief to get out of her itchy dress, and she buried herself under the covers. She was tired, but after lying down, she realized she wasn’t sleepy. She rolled onto her side and faced the wall. Her eyes traced patterns through the stucco.

She didn’t know what to do about her mom. Whenever she thought about her, she felt angry and betrayed and confused. She wasn’t sure what to tell Henry and Winnie, but she had to tell them something. They would probably have a lot of questions. They’d asked a little bit about their mom growing up, but Kat hadn’t given them many details. They’d seen the pictures, had known the woman in them was their mom and that she was gone. Kat felt a twinge of guilt, but she pushed it away.

After all, she wasn’t the only one that had shielded them. In some ways, it had been as if their mom had never existed. People would slip her some grocery money, or ask how she was doing, but they never mentioned her mom’s name, though she felt the pitying stares and heard pieces of the gossip. She tried not to talk about her around her

dad and tried her best to keep Henry and Winnie and Gemma from talking about her too. At first, they asked about her constantly. On a good day, Jim's eyes would grow distant and he'd fall silent. On a bad day, he'd slam a fist against something, the table, the wall, the stove, and storm out to the garage, leaving Kat to deal with the meltdown of whomever had asked the offending question. But soon they learned which topics were to be avoided, and her dad's rages dulled.

It wasn't like Kat had lied to them. Not like her parents had lied to her.

She was sixteen before she worked up the courage to ask her dad about her mom's departure, about what she'd meant when she'd told Kat, 'I saved you'.

They were in the garage. He was tinkering on the tractor, and she sat on the ground beside him, passing him tools as he asked for them. He was quiet for a few seconds, and she thought he might ignore her, but then he said, "I guess she did in a way." Kat's heart pounded. She waited, afraid if she spoke he wouldn't say anything more. "When I got the call, I had no idea that you existed." He kept his eyes fixed on the tractor above him as he tightened down a bolt. "I was scared as hell about having a kid, and I wanted to just sign over my rights." Kat swallowed the lump in her throat. "Of course, I'm glad I didn't. But she was the one who convinced me to give you a chance. Just to go meet you before deciding anything. And of course, as soon as I saw you, I was a goner."

Kat's cheeks flushed. Her dad wasn't big on showing affection, especially since her mom had left. It gave her the courage to ask, "Did she know my real mom? She said she died."

“No, they didn’t know each other. Pass me the wrench.” Kat placed the tool in his outstretched hand. “Izzy was in the year below me in school. They moved away suddenly. We never really broke up. She was just gone. After I got the call, it made sense why.”

“What call?”

“Saying she died. Poor Izzy. She was a good girl, but she had a rough life. Her dad was real fucked up. You got her eyes you know.”

She didn’t know. She’d never even seen this woman. Her dad seemed to reach the same conclusion, because he said. “When we finish here, I guess I can show you some photos, if you want.” He stretched out another hand. “Screwdriver. The big one.”

“I’d like that,” she said.

When they were done and had cleaned up, he pulled a dusty box out from the closet in the basement. He flipped through an old year book until he found a certain page, then laid it down open on the box. There was a small stack of photos that had been pressed between the pages. “There,” he said, finger pointing to a small square. “That’s Izzy.”

It was your usual high school senior photo: blue cloth backdrop, black fabric draped across a small frame. She had dark brown hair, curled into a poof around her head. Her smile was slightly higher on the right side, Kat noticed, her stomach tingling. Just like her own.

The other pictures were mostly of Izzy and Kat's dad, though some were just of Izzy. She was pretty. Not a knock-out, but pretty. The opposite of her mom, Izzy was tall and pale, with dark hair and blue eyes.

Kat handled the photos gingerly. "Can I keep these out?" she asked.

Jim nodded. "Just be careful with them. Mary –"

Kat was surprised to hear him use her mom's name. "She didn't like me having these pictures around. That's why they're down here. But you should have them."

"Thanks," she said. Her dad squeezed Kat's shoulder and lumbered up the stairs. But she remained in the basement, poring over the pictures in the yellow light.

For several weeks she'd studied them. She'd hold them up beside her reflection in the mirror, trying to pinpoint exactly what traits she'd inherited. Her hair for sure. Kat's nose had the same hump in the middle too.

She tried to ask her dad what Izzy had been like, but he wouldn't tell her much. Kat imagined Izzy had liked to read, like Kat did, books about travel and adventures. Maybe she too had dreamed about leaving here one day. She decided that her dad and Izzy must have been passionately in love, soulmates, and she dreamed of a life where Izzy hadn't moved away, had lived, and had been her mom. In her daydreams, Gemma, Henry, and Winnie were there too. They were a happy family. Izzy would teach her how to cook, and they would take trips to Disneyworld and to the beach.

Kat came up with stories for how Izzy died too. In some versions, Izzy had a terrible illness that she'd suffered nobly through, trying her hardest to stay alive for her

daughter. In others, she'd died in a tragic accident, jumping in front of a car to save a younger version of Kat, or trying to help an old man being mugged.

Sometimes Kat would try as hard as she could to remember her. If she was three when Izzy died, she thought she might have at least a few memories of her hiding somewhere in her mind. Kat would lie on her bed, squeeze her eyes shut, and try to remember until her head was pounding and she'd soaked the sheets in sweat. Sometimes she thought she could see a smile, a glimpse of a face, but she didn't know if it was her brain creating images from the photos or a real memory.

She didn't share her daydreams with anyone, not even Sophie. She felt if she did they would dissolve into nothing, fade like fog in the sunlight. But at a sleepover, after several shots of whiskey that Sophie had smuggled out of her dad's liquor cabinet, she convinced Kat to talk about why her mom left, and Kat had admitted that she had not been her birth mother.

It had thrilled her to admit it, and Sophie had acted appropriately shocked. She pressed Kat for details, but Kat was still reluctant to share her daydreams. In them Izzy had become the ideal mother, doting, kind, funny, who always knew exactly what to do when Kat had a problem.

Kat admitted she didn't have much to go on besides photos, and Sophie suggested they look online. Kat agreed after a lot of pestering. She was excited, but terrified. She didn't want the daydreams to end, but at the same time, she desperately wanted to know who Izzy had been.

It took a bit of research, since they only had a rough time period and a pretty common name. But eventually they found several news articles and obituaries for an Isabel Smith. Her picture looked out at them from the screen, the same face that Kat kept under her pillow. She was only a couple years older than them, though Kat thought she looked younger in this picture than in the ones she had.

When she read the headlines of the news articles, Kat thought she was going to be sick. She felt as if someone had punched her in the gut. “Meth Lab Fire Kills 2 in Trailer”. “3-Year-Old Girl Only Survivor of Meth Lab Fire”. “2 Dead in Trailer Explosion”. “Mother Dies in Fire”. They kept clicking through them, dreading the next, but unable to stop. They were quiet, until Sophie asked, “Do you remember the fire?”

“No,” Kat said. “I don’t remember it at all.”

They gathered the gist of it from various articles. Izzy had become a meth addict and was living in a run-down trailer with her dealer boyfriend, who had started experimenting with making his own supplies. Something exploded, caught fire, and the trailer was engulfed in minutes. Her mom had been badly burned in the explosion, but in a rush of adrenaline she was able to get Kat, who had been sleeping in the back room, according to one newspaper, out with hardly a singed hair. Izzy had died in the hospital later that night.

Finally, Kat couldn’t look anymore. Her mom had been right. Her real mom was trailer trash, an addict. Had she been that way when she dated Kat’s dad? She couldn’t picture it, but then, she’d never imagined this either.

And now Kat had nothing. One mom was gone, the other dead, and neither was the stuff of daydreams.

Though she didn't say anything, she knew Sophie could tell she was upset. "She saved you," her friend said, attempting to comfort her. "That's pretty amazing. She must have loved you a lot."

"I don't care if she loved me or not," Kat said, more harshly than she'd intended. She shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. "She's dead. What does it matter?"

They went to sleep soon after that, both glad to move on from the painful subject. Kat cried into her pillow until she drifted off, grateful that Sophie was such a deep sleeper.