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How does landscape influence character? What ties the inner landscape of a character to the world they inhabit? *With Regards from Frankel City*, a novel told in retrospect by a female character in Frankel City, Texas, explores these questions through the intertwining of relationships, community and setting. Spanning more than thirty years, JoDell Orsak, the narrator, and her unlikely roommate and 1977 Frankel City High School Homecoming Queen, Homily Hope Walpole, seek success, friendship and immortality in small town Texas. With the Colorado River valley serving as both backdrop and character, JoDell and Homily fight for their small-town legacy, their greatest inheritance – to have their stories told for years to come over a glass of tea at the Dixie Dog Diner.

WITH REGARDS FROM FRANKEL CITY

by

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To my parents.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

Homily Hope Walpole stared at me and tittered high and loud, like a hyena. Her skin up close was as luminescent as it appeared from the stands at junior varsity football games. She raised her fist and it could have been to slap me but instead she slammed it down on the hood of Jimmy Don's black Ford pick-up truck and said, with her mouth pursed like a cupie doll, "Crazy bitch."

Years later, when I told her why I'd been at her house that day, she smiled with the same cupie doll mouth and said, "Well, it wouldn't have made a difference, would it? I still would have found out." She leaned over and kissed me and it was back when I still didn't know what to make of it, her kissing me, so instead of telling her I could've made a difference back then, that maybe her life would have been changed for the better, I just sat back and let her. It was my second mistake. My first was letting her stay with us at all.

She showed back up in town on a cloudy day in late April 1988. I hadn't seen Homily since our high school graduation a decade before, and to tell the truth, I never expected to see her again. She was one of those girls in high school who had their makeup done and their nails painted red and the whole world tied up in a bow in their hair. In high school I wore second-hand jeans and lived in my dead mother's house with my godmother, Lillian Viola Aschelmann, and worked part time at her uncle's diner. Homily Hope took off to Nashville after graduation like she was going to be some big star, but even a high school nobody like me knew better. Even at seventeen I knew just

because somebody can sing *Barbara Ann* in the school choir doesn't mean they're cut out for the big time.

She turned up one day in April, and the only reason I knew was because Larry, who back then was my sort-of boyfriend, saw her come into town in a beat up '79 Cadillac Seville. It was blue with long scratches down the driver's side door and she was hanging a cigarette out her window and playing the radio so loud he could hear it across the street. Homily wasn't ever quiet, not in choir or in real life, and it wasn't any wonder half the town knew she was back before she drove that Seville across Main onto Travis and up into the hills like a reenactment of the 1977 Frankel City High School Homecoming parade.

I remember the hawks were out the day she came back. I took off from the diner after we got the morning share of truckers and roughnecks but before the evening ones came in – back then, it seemed the later I stayed, the more likely the truckers were to stick a hand up my skirt and forget to leave a tip if I complained to Ramon, the kitchen manager, or Lil, if she wasn't off drinking herself under the table at Randy Whitehouse's bar. Mama had spent a fair amount of time with Lil at the bar, too, before she got sick with cancer and shriveled up on our living room couch. She died the year I turned fifteen and Lil moved into our house because I couldn't afford to pay bills or taxes but didn't have anywhere else to go.

Anyway, I took off from the diner to avoid the late rush and saw Larry sitting on a bench outside the Busy Bee, the gift store on the business highway where tourists stopped to buy pieces of overpriced rusted barn tin to put on their walls. Larry waved me down

and when I rolled down the passenger window I saw them, the hawks, dipping down and floating up again. Mama would have said they were a bad omen but I thought it was just that time of year, when the bluebonnets and the Indian paintbrushes were starting to bloom, and maybe it would be nice to be up there in the current, thinking nothing but how light the clouds feel and the sun hot on your back. I liked the hawks. They told me it was time for spring.

“You won’t believe who I just saw come through town,” Larry said, leaning on his elbows in the passenger window frame.

“Who?”

“Homily Hope Walpole.”

“No. Really?” I jerked around. Without even trying I could see Homily, her mouth turning up at the corners and her laugh like a tree frog screaming as the sun went down behind the expensive houses on Rock Hammer Lake.

“It was her. She came through town in a beat up Cadillac with the radio loud like there was no one else to listen.”

“You don’t say,” I said, and then, because once Larry delivered his news he was done – he was never much of a talker – he pulled back from the window and looked off down the highway. He was only two years older than me, but when he turned his head, silver was starting in at his temples and the root of his neck. “I wonder what she’s doing here,” I said.

“No telling.” Larry shrugged. “Are you working tonight?”

“No. Lil made tortilla soup. You can come over if you want to.”

“Did she put tequila in it again?”

I shrugged. “If you don’t want any, then don’t come.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said.

Over the wheel, the business highway unrolled in a never-ending stretch of blacktop. Larry turned back to the Bee, where a woman in pink shorts and a print t-shirt was hauling a wrought-iron cross the size of a guitar to her car. I watched him watching her until I felt like I might drill a hole in his neck, not meaning to but because sometimes the way he bent his head made me feel hard and teared up inside. Larry had been in the army and after he got out hadn’t had any place to go so he came to Frankel City and worked the pipeline for a while, until there was no more work and they moved him to a shift job at the gas plant fifteen miles out of town. He sometimes came to my house with the scent of chemical scrub hanging on his shirt. I thought it smelled like cherry.

“So are you coming to dinner or what?” I asked him. He smiled.

“Yeah,” he said. “Of course.”

It was easy not to think about Homily after that, what with Larry over to eat the tortilla soup and Ramon calling me up at nine with a chicken-fried steak emergency. Every once in a while, though, I’d picture her in my head, the way she held herself in high school like there was nothing between her and immortality but graduation. Lil came in from the bar late and I helped her get into bed, and when I came back to my bed Larry rolled over and said in a sandpaper voice I should stop helping her out so much and make her get her own damn life together, and once all that came on I sort of forgot Homily and went on into work in the morning, leaving Larry snoring.

Imagine my surprise, then, when after the morning roughnecks left and the diner got dead just after lunch, she showed up, Homily herself, driving that Cadillac into the parking lot like a tank into battle. She walked in and the cowbell over the door clanked and Ramon whistled under his breath, but to me she seemed faded. Her hair was washed out to a paler yellow and her jean shorts were wearing at the rear pocket corners. She walked up to the counter, her hips switching just enough to make Ramon lean out over the expo window and her eyes the color of river grass right after it rains and without warning memories came down over me and I stopped seeing her in the diner sashaying towards Ramon. All I could see was the way she'd stood at the bumper of Jimmy Don Huxley's Ford pickup truck when I was fourteen and she was fifteen and her staring like she might swallow me. My throat was dry with desperation and my chest ached and she rolled her eyes and said, Crazy, like I was a bad taste in her mouth. When she sat down at the counter the word echoed and my stomach sank like a stone.

"Hey," Homily said. "Could I get a cup of coffee?" She enunciated each word like our junior high music teacher, Mrs. Collins, and each one came out on the heel of the next like she was considering them individually before stringing them together.

"Yeah," I said. "Sure." I brought her a full cup on a saucer that wasn't chipped. She took a sip and smiled over the lip of the mug.

"I don't know if you remember me," she said, "but we went to high school together."

"Yeah," I said. I half turned away from her and wiped off the top of the cash register with a kitchen towel. "Of course I remember you."

“It’s been a really long time,” she said.

“It has.”

“How’ve you been?”

“Fine.”

Homily looked over her shoulder, out the window at her Daddy’s boarded up accounting office on Travis. “I swear this town never changes. Does Mr. Aschelmann still own this place?” She waved her coffee cup at the pastry case by the front door, sprinkling the register with black droplets.

“No,” I said, wiping over the coffee spots. “He died when we were in high school. Lil runs the diner now.”

“That’s right. And the To Dye For? And the Rooter Hog?” She tipped her coffee cup up and around so the liquid swirled in a whirlpool of black steam.

“The salon. She sold the bar to Randy Whitehouse.”

“She’s done well for herself.”

“I guess,” I said, scratching at a particularly sticky spot of meringue on the keypad with my fingernail. “She’s done alright.”

“And you?” she asked

“What about me?”

“How are you?”

“Well,” I said, twisting the rag into a point to wipe between the number keys.

“Well?”

“Homily,” I said, pausing to look up at her. “I don’t know if you remember, but we weren’t friends.”

Her smile faded. “Right,” she said. Crow’s feet webbed her eyes, the kind a woman gets from spending too many hours in smoky places. “Actually, you know what I remember? I remember you could sing when we were kids. You had a really nice soprano, even in high school. I never understood why you didn’t sit in the choir.”

I scrubbed the face of the cash drawer so hard it clicked open with a ring. “Really? That’s what you remember?”

“Yeah,” she said, too quickly. The diner was quiet and the street outside it, too, with her staring down at her cup like it might hold the secret to the universe, and me scrubbing and red rising like a rash along my neck. “You know, I hated you could sing like that,” she said.

“Huh.” I threw the towel down on the counter between us. “Yeah. You know, you kind of sucked back then.”

I thought she might get mad and take off but I mean, it was true. She blanched. Behind me, Ramon shouted something to the dishwasher in the kitchen. I walked down to the other end of the counter and checked the coffee pot on the burner behind the pastry case and the older couple in the front booth, the only other customers I had. When I came back I half expected her to have disappeared even though I hadn’t heard any clank from the bell or Ramon whistling at her behind. She was still sitting there, a novelty at the counter with her head hunched down like she was waiting to be kicked. Part of me wanted to go in the kitchen and clean everything in my path and ignore her – but her

coffee cup was empty and it was almost a reflex to get the pot and fill it and when I did she looked up at me with glassy eyes and I could see a long way in there and none of it was anything I understood.

“I did, right? I did suck.”

I sighed. “Homily, what’re you doing here?”

“Visiting,” she said. “For a while.”

“At your mom’s?”

“Kind of.”

I cocked my head at her and she narrowed her eyes and there was Homily Hope the Homecoming Princess again. “Okay,” I said and started to turn, but she reached over and tapped the edge of the counter.

“Mama wasn’t very happy to see me,” she said from behind me. I walked down to the pastry case and set the hot coffee pot back on the burner. “I was mad at her after my father left, so I didn’t exactly keep in touch.”

The steam from the coffee was rich with chicory. “Okay.”

“She’s really upset.” When I turned around, she was shaking her head. Her hair was thin in places I didn’t remember it being thin.

“I’m sure she’ll get over it,” I said. Her head dropped lower. The air leaked out of my chest like a pinhole in a tire. I walked back to her and leaned forward on my elbows.

“She is your mama, Homily.”

“She told me to find somewhere else to stay,” Homily said.

“She did?”

Homily nodded. “She said I needed to learn to take responsibility for myself and then –” She took a deep breath. “– she called me a whore and said I should go back down to town with the rest of the trash.”

“Did she.” I hadn’t seen Emeline Walpole in years – she didn’t eat anything not covered in béarnaise and served at the country club – but as irritating and high-and-mighty as she seemed, there was a sneaking trill in my chest at her telling Homily off. “Well, you’ll find someplace to stay,” I said. “I’m sure you still know a lot of folks in town willing to help out.” And get in your business, too, but I didn’t say that.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” I asked, and then like the headlight of a freight train it occurred to me what she meant. Lil and I had an extra room and anyone in town would know about it. “Oh, Homily, no –“

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she said. “I don’t have anywhere else to go. Did you know Jimmy Don Huxley got married?”

“Yeah. Homily, look, I don’t think –”

“To Elaine Tesarik? The crazy Baptist girl?”

I was momentarily sidetracked. “Wait. You went to Jimmy’s house?”

“Yeah.” She grinned. “I thought Elaine was going to claw my eyes out. I couldn’t believe Jimmy married her – I thought she was married to Jesus for sure. I guess some things do change.”

“Or were never what she made them out to be,” I said. I couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Elaine opening the door to see Homily standing there in her jean shorts.

After Mama's funeral Elaine had stared straight at me in the high school hallway and said at the top of her voice, I don't know if you've heard, JoDell, but the Kingdom of God is closed to Jezebels and sinners. I'd broken two of her teeth before the hall monitor pulled me back.

"Well, Jimmy Don was an ass, so I guess he got what he deserved," Homily said. "I went to the Parsons' too, but Suzy's planning her wedding and her mama is sick and I don't know – it didn't seem right to stay."

"Homily," I said. "Look, I don't think staying with us is a good idea. Lil doesn't really like houseguests."

"I'll pay rent," she said.

"You have a job?"

"No, but I can get one. I mean, it's not like I haven't worked."

"Why?" I asked. "Why me? We weren't friends. You thought I was crazy."

Her forehead was high and her eyes were shining. "I thought you'd understand," she said.

"Understand what?" I asked, although I didn't really want to hear her answer. She cupped her hands around her neck and there were angry crescents around her nail beds where she'd picked at dead skin.

"You know. To have your parents not want you. I mean – to not have anyone." She went white. The edge of the Formica countertop bit into my forearms. "Please, JoDell."

The diner was silent but for the tinny announcer from Ramon's radio in the kitchen. My nails were gray and translucent from dishwater and helping out at Lil's beauty shop every Saturday morning when she was too deep in the bottle to open up on time. I thought about the ladies at the beauty shop chattering with each other and not even noticing me when I did their nails. I thought about Larry and how he wanted me to move out and find a place with him, and how the best part of my day was sitting out on the back deck by myself and looking out over the bayou along the back of the house. But what I really thought about was my father, and the way when I said, I'm your daughter, he turned dark around the eyes and I thought I might break in half at the way he looked at me. I didn't want her to stay and I knew it would be trouble from the beginning, but when she looked cast-aside like that I knew I was going to offer the room to Homily. And I did.

CHAPTER II

Mama's old house sat in the lowest section of Frankel City, a half mile south of the courthouse square. Our street ran east-west behind a cluster of crumbling, open-ended cattle warehouses that'd been abandoned and run down so all the Frankel City population of junkies – Rodney McDowell and his two stick-thin friends from high school and the occasional passing hobo – used it as a place to smoke weed and light stuff on fire. When I was a kid, the warehouses were a machine shop and I remember walking by on my way to the diner and inhaling solder and metal, smells that left the taste of blood in my mouth. Homily and I pulled in the driveway half an hour after my shift ended, the Seville bucking behind my Hyundai and showering our neighbors with exhaust.

“Here we are,” I said. She followed me into the empty living room and made a slow circuit, running her fingers over the pilled fabric of the recliner and the couch.

“It's nice,” she said.

“Thanks.”

She stared at me until the silence stretched to awkward. “Can I put my bag somewhere?”

“Oh, right,” I said, but before I could get to the stairs the front door slammed open behind us. Lil stumbled over the threshold in a cloud of sour mash and permanent solution.

“JoDell,” she said, throwing her purse on the floor and leaning on the console table so it sagged under her weight. “You won’t believe who Melanie Parsons saw in town yesterday.”

“Hey, Lil.” I shoved my hands in the pockets of my uniform. “You remember Homily Hope.” The wattage from Homily’s smile would have powered the Harnett County Christmas Festival nativity scene.

Lil peered at Homily from deep in the folds of her face. “Or I guess you might believe it,” she said slowly, her words melting together in whiskey-soup. “JoDell – what’s she doing here?”

“Well. She’s staying with us.”

She looked from me to Homily and back to me. “What?”

“She’s staying with us for a while,” I said. “Emeline’s gone off her rocker.” I glanced at Homily, but her beauty queen smile didn’t falter.

“And that’s news?” Lil squinted and shuffled forward until she reached the couch, never taking her eyes off Homily. “Emeline’s been off her rocker since high school. What does that have to do with Homily Hope staying in my house?”

“Emeline called her a whore and –” All at once fire rose up in my belly. “Forget it. She’s staying, Lil. She said she’d pay rent and I said she could.”

“Like Hell,” Lil said.

Homily’s smile evaporated.

“Come on, Lil,” I said. “You’re drunk.”

She shook her head like a dog shaking off water and swayed. “Not in my house, she’s not.”

“You mean Mama’s house,” I said. The sunlight falling through the window speckled the rug. Lil shifted to the side, still squinting, the floor creaking under her weight. “Mama’s house,” I said again.

“Your mama,” she said, trying to turn around, but her moccasin caught in the rug and she stutter-stepped forward. I braced low and caught her arm before she fell, pushing up with all my strength until she was standing straight again. She held one hand to her forehead.

“What about Mama?”

“Your mama,” she started, and then, “I think I need to lay down.” The whiskey on her breath was sharp with stomach acid and her breath came in short wisps.

“Okay.” I wrapped an arm around her waist and held on hard, burying my head in her shoulder. “It’s okay. Let me help you.”

Homily was still gaping behind the couch when Lil and I hobbled through the open door of her bedroom. I’d helped Lil down on the bed and was switching her moccasins for slippers when she caught my arm with sausage-fingers. “Jo,” she said, her breath thready. “Your mama.”

“Relax,” I said. “Mama would have wanted us to help her. You need to relax and breathe.”

Lil closed her eyes. “What’s she doing back here?”

I sat down next to the bed and brushed the hair off her forehead. “I have no idea,” I said.

#

An hour later, and I came out on the deck to find Homily watching bristling snatches of mesquite stagnate in the sunset. Our house was perched above the bayou, a green-and-brown tributary of the Colorado River trickling back to the main trunk and dissecting Frankel City northeast to southwest. The land sloped upward to the northeast, towards downtown and into the hill country where all the expensive houses were built to have a view of the river and Rock Hammer Lake. To the southwest across the bayou, the horizon opened up into rocky pastures studded with oak trees. There was a six-pack next to Homily’s chair from our refrigerator. She handed me a can as I sat down.

“Did you eat?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I’m not hungry,” she said. “Is she okay?”

Across the bayou, the sunset backlit clouds so they glowed along the horizon. I took a drink. “She’ll sleep it off. She goes to Randy’s bar for lunch and most days forgets to go back to work. She shouldn’t be drinking, anyway – she’s got heart problems because of her weight and her smoking. But you can’t exactly stop her.” I shrugged. “Are you okay?”

A half-mile down the bayou the rush of cars along the Travis Street overpass shook the bean pods on the huisatche trees. “You’d be surprised,” she said.

“No, thanks,” I said. A screen door creaked and Mrs. Jorgenson next door poked her head out. I waved. “I don’t like surprises.”

“Okay, no surprises,” she said.

“Did you get all your stuff in?” I asked. “You just have the one bag?”

“I brought everything in.”

“You didn’t bring much back from Nashville,” I said. Homily laughed like she had a mouth full of sour candy.

“No,” she said. “I didn’t bring anything back from Nashville.”

The beer ran bitter down the back of my throat and then filtered, tingling, into my legs. “Why not?”

She shrugged.

“Okay,” I said. And what I was thinking was had she really thought it would it be better than sitting here with the sky laid up on you like the warmest blanket and the boards under your feet so familiar you could step over the splinters blindfolded? Her chair creaked and she pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from her pocket and before I could even wonder where the matches came from she had one lit and in her mouth. “So I guess you didn’t like it there much,” I said.

“It was nice,” she said.

“Nice?”

“I mean, it was different.”

“I’m sure,” I said. She took a long drink of beer, the way Lil and Mama would drink – like they were drowning.

“Well. It was a hundred thousand times better than this place, I mean,” she said.

“It was loud. And busy. But there’s always something to do, anything you want and any

time, too, in the middle of the night or on Sunday afternoon or whenever. And the people were all beautiful. It was just – I don't know." She laughed. "I mean, compared to this shitty little puddle, it was heaven."

I leaned forward and faced her. She must have seen something in my face she didn't like because she went from her head back and smoke blowing out of her nose like she was on fire to sitting up and tapping cigarette ash to the side. "I mean, not that this particular place is bad. I mean, your place. It's really nice." Behind her, the corner deck post tilted at a precipitous angle. "It's just there's not exactly a lot to do here, that's all I meant. In Nashville there's always something open or a party to go to or something. So it's just – you know – different."

It didn't bother me so much that she called our town a puddle or even that she hadn't liked it here – who doesn't hate living in a small town sometimes? – but the way it came out, it wasn't just the town or the way the bayou sank into the dirt and exposed the empty beer cans and condoms that came down out of the Colorado into our backyard. She made it sound like it was all of us that lived there, too. I didn't know much about the world outside of Frankel City – I still don't, even after everything Larry and Ray, Ramon's nephew, have told me about Mexico and the Middle East and working oil rigs in Illinois and Bakersfield – but I didn't need anyone to tell me we were worse off than anyone else.

The light was dying over the oak trees studding the pasture, and in the red cast of evening the laugh lines around her mouth stood out like scars. When we were younger I'd watched her in the hallways and imagined what it would be like to be her sister and put

on makeup together or comfort each other when one of us was sad. Along the bayou, purple heather sprang up between the pencil cacti like weeds

“So what happened in Nashville?” I asked.

She smiled and leaned back in her chair. “You know, you’ve gotten direct since I left. What happened to you?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “I guess I never got over not winning Homecoming Princess.”

When she laughed it was light and tinkling. “Yeah, right.”

“So Nashville,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “Nashville. Well, let’s see. I went to the Grand Ole Opry. And I met the Gatlin brothers and Dolly Parton.”

“Dolly Parton?” I asked. Mama had loved Dolly Parton. She used to dance me around the room to her songs, smelling of cocoa butter and nicotine.

“In a grocery store,” she said. “She was really short and she had her hair pulled up under a hat. I even got her autograph. It’s pretty common to meet people like that – famous people, I mean.”

“Really.”

“It’s a little crazy,” Homily said. “Everything is expensive and people can just afford it. I paid sixty dollars to get my hair done. But it’s just what you do. The people who have money there – there are a lot of places for them to spend it.” Her mouth turned downward. She picked up a fresh beer and popped the tab.

“So why’d you come back?”

The blackbirds nesting in the huisatche tree at the corner of the deck fluttered up a few branches. A patch of clouds settled around an oak tree twisted like an old man over the bayou. “I didn’t make it,” she said. “I did okay for a while, sang in some bars. I got an agent and made a couple of demo tapes, but I never had what they were looking for. The bad part is I don’t even know what that was. I even changed my name – I called myself Homily Hope Persimmon because I thought it sounded glamorous. I’d write it on the tape – man, I thought I was something.” While she talked the moon rose opposite us along the bayou, casting the trees in shadow and whitening the mesquite in the pasture. The deck light blinked on. “I played that tape so many times I wore out the magnetic strips and had to have another one made. No one called me back. After a while, even my agent stopped calling me back.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“You know what’s so stupid?” she said, before I could think of anything. “I just kept going. I really thought it would happen, even when I ran out of money. The whole time I thought I was going to make it. I was going to be a star. I mean, really. Homily Hope Persimmon. What country star has a name like that?” She tried to laugh but it sounded like choking.

The night sounds swallowed us, the buzzing of cicadas and the river breeze rustling in the yucca and weeds. Somewhere to the west Larry was at the gas plant, checking meters and playing Hank Williams, Jr. in the trailer on break and carrying the syrupy smell of gas fire with him. I said, “At least you got to go. I mean, you got to live there and all. That has to be worth something.”

She didn't say anything, and then she said, "Yeah."

"Will you go back?" I asked.

"I won't go back there," she said. The porch light over us sputtered and I couldn't see her so well anymore. In the shadow and the smoke of her cigarette she looked like a ghost, and then she said, "Have you ever done something you're not proud of? Do you know what I mean?" She was hidden in the dark like the oak tree. I nodded, because I didn't really know what she meant but I did, too. "And it seems like when you do that thing once it doesn't really matter if you do it again, because you already did it once and it's not like the second or third time would really make a difference. But then when you look in the mirror you can't figure out who you are anymore and it seems like the only things you know are the bad things you've done." The light flickered back on as she finished her speech and she was watching out over the dark of the field. She leaned back in her chair and her hair fell away from her face and she was just barely there with me at all.

I couldn't think of anything to say, so instead I got up out of my chair and stooped over and hugged her. I hugged her because I didn't know what else to do, and because I thought she might have something rotten inside her she couldn't get rid of, and because what she said about doing things you're not proud of, I knew something about that, too. Her body was sharp and tense against me and her hair smelled of tropical fruit and I didn't know what she thought, and as soon as I did it, hugged her, I was embarrassed and so I backed off and sat back down and said, "I'm sorry," although for what I was sorry – the hug? her troubles? – I wasn't sure. When I let her go she stood up and went inside

with the screen door slamming behind her and I sat there feeling like it was 1974 all over again, and I was standing outside her parents' house. The stars appeared one-by-one in the sky and I wondered where I could go where every second of my life wasn't something I would regret in the next second. Ahead of me, the horizon stretched from one end of Texas to the other and in its darkness I could see nothing and somehow everything to the end of the world.

CHAPTER III

When I was fourteen, a tourist riding through town during a motorcycle rally took a turn too quickly and slid into Sharla Jorgenson and her daughter, Jené. The women were holding hands and walking along the shoulder of Main Street two blocks out of downtown on their way to the annual Polka Festival. I was sitting on a bench in front of the Ward Family Drug Store, finishing an orange Dreamsicle push-up and keeping an ear out for the three dance team girls around back. They were smoking Camel menthols and waiting for Homily Hope Walpole to come out of her grandpa's store with stolen lip gloss and Sunkist.

There was a scream, and then silence. The sun beat down on the pavement and the damp from the early morning thunderstorms rose up in steamy columns. When I try now to remember exactly how it happened – how fast the motorcycle was going when it hit them, or how their bodies rose up and then broke in the road – all I see are the dance girls running around the building and then stopping and piling up and throwing down their cigarette butts. Drivers pulled over, another biker and a sedan and then a pickup, and then I was there, too, kneeling next to Jené with her knee bent at a right angle in the wrong direction. A few yards down the road someone grabbed a blanket out of their trunk and covered Sharla. The biker in the ditch stood up and dusted himself off and then knelt down, just knelt there, not moving. I sat in the koleche on the shoulder while a man in golf shorts and a sweater vest felt under the blanket for Sharla's pulse.

“Should we do CPR?”

“Her neck might be broken. Don’t move her.”

“I can’t get a pulse,” the man in the vest said. Voices rose and fell. I reached out and put my hand on Jené’s hand and there was blood on her wrist. Sneakers went running past me into the drugstore. Someone shouted, “Get an ambulance.”

“I think she’s dead,” the man said. On the pavement, Jené moaned. Next to her, the copper smell of Sharla’s blood rose off the blanket.

It could have been an hour until the ambulance came, or maybe it was minutes. When it pulled up in flashes of red and blue I covered my ears with my hands and Jené turned her head and the whites of her eyes were bloody. It was enough to make me sick and I slid back across the shoulder on my knees until I was on my feet and around the ambulance parked between me and the drug store and running until someone caught me around the waist and lifted me off the ground.

“JoDell,” a man said. It was Wayne, the deputy county sheriff and one of Mama’s old boyfriends. I shook my head and kicked until he set me down. “Can you talk about it, JoDell?” he asked. “Can you tell me what happened?”

My hands were covered in orange ice cream and koleche dust gone pink with blood. Behind Wayne, the three dance team girls were huddled in a pink and denim cluster, looking from me to the ambulance and back to me. The door to the drugstore opened and Mr. Ward came out and behind him, Homily Hope, shielding her eyes from the sun and pushing her way through her friends to where Wayne and I were standing.

“What happened here?” Mr. Ward blustered. Wayne bent down on a knee in front of me and held my elbow.

“It’s okay, honey,” he said. “You can tell me. It’s okay.”

Homily and her friends crept forward.

“I saw –” I started to tell him. Had the world gone completely crazy? Four sets of black-rimmed eyes stared at me. Four cherry-glossed lips pursed in anticipation. There were spatters of red on the pavement at my feet and on my shirt. I took a breath and then my stomach rose up in my throat and I leapt over Wayne and shoved Homily aside and threw up behind them in the parking lot in a mess of orange syrup and half-eaten grilled cheese.

“Oh,” Homily said from behind me. “Oh, gross.” When I looked up at her, she was frowning at a smear of orange and pink on her tank top.

Wayne knelt next to me and patted me on the shoulder. “It’s okay,” he said. “It’ll be okay.” I just sat there, rocking back and forth on my ankles.

“What about my shirt?” Homily asked.

Wayne frowned at her. “Go on, now,” he said, standing up and shooing them away, Mr. Ward and Homily and her friends. “Get out of here. Go on.”

I squatted there until my ankles were numb, heaving, the smell of vomit ripe in the late spring heat. When I finally got up, the ambulances were gone. Wayne was taking statements at the door of Ward’s. Near the accident site, a crowd milled around police tape and the swath of bloody pavement. Homily and her friends were halfway down the block. She had her hands around her neck, pretending to gag.

I thought about that a long time after, wondering what might've happened if I could've told what I saw to Wayne and those girls, if I would've maybe been interviewed by the news people and Mama would've left work and come down to the drugstore and wrapped her arm around my shoulders. Maybe at school they would've asked me, too, what happened and what did they look like, Sharla and Jené, and I wouldn't have been invisible anymore. Maybe if I'd been able to talk to Wayne and the girls, maybe if I'd been a hero on the news and the girls had asked me to slumber parties and the boys to movies or the skating rink, maybe if all that had happened fourteen wouldn't have been the year I started asking too many questions about who my daddy was.

I asked Mama, who shut me down with a hacking cough, and Lil, who turned on me with a right-eye glare. I asked our neighbors, grandmother Jorgenson who lived next to us in a gray peeling cake-box and spoke with such a heavy Czech accent I had a fifteen-second delay to figure out what she was saying.

“No-no, little potato,” she said. She was always calling me some endearing vegetable. “Your mama, she loves you. You run along to play, potato.”

“But Mrs. Jorgenson – “

“No-no,” she said again, spattering me with water droplets from her garden hose. Behind her, Jené's twin boys rocked in bouncy chairs on the sagging front porch. After the motorcycle accident, Jené's husband lost it and split for the offshore rigs in Louisiana and Mrs. Jorgenson took in the babies and then Jené, once she came home from the hospital.

I didn't become the town hero. Instead, fourteen was the year I went searching around Frankel City, trying other people's fathers on for size. I asked Mrs. Michelsen, whose husband managed the Piggly-Wiggly grocery store. When she shook her head at me in mild disapproval I walked the half mile back into town to ask Mr. Paul Nelson, Mama's friend who ran Nelson's Auto-Body Shop ("Everybody Needs Some Body Sometimes!") and the Texaco station next door. Even Mr. Paul, who let me sit on the tailgate of his truck after school or in the evenings if Mama wasn't home yet, wouldn't tell me anything. I sat and listened to the clink and hiss of his auto body repair, telling him about dissecting roaches in natural science class, but when I asked him about Mama he turned a cold eye on me and growled I should just get on home and wait for Mama there if I was looking to dig up trouble. I didn't know what that meant, and I opened my mouth to ask but he walked into the shop office and slammed the door. I was certain Mr. Paul couldn't have been my daddy, seeing as how he was a hundred years older than Mama and had been married to the same woman forever before she got cancer and died just before my twelfth birthday. Still, instead of going home I walked the three blocks down to the diner Lil's uncle owned.

I came in through the kitchen door and nobody was around except the Mexican lady who washed dishes, Solange, a name I thought of when I pictured being married to one of the junior varsity football players or maybe one of the rough stock riders I knew from 4H. It'd just be me and Michael or Jorge or Cody and our pretty little blond girl, Solange, in one of the brand new brick houses in the rich people's neighborhoods uphill from us. Lionsgate, they were called, Hampton Creek, Glen Rocks. None of those folks

ever came down to the south side of River Road where Mama and I lived in our drab two-story with the porch that sagged and caught at your toes with splinters. I thought of living in a place like that and having a beautiful blond haired girl named Solange with my husband, the perfect gentleman, not like Ray Martinez, Ramon's raggedy nephew with his tattoo of Our Lady of the Guadalupe on his forearm who I'd let kiss me behind the roller rink the month before.

I was thinking of asking Solange about my daddy, if I could remember enough Spanish to get the whole question out, when Lil and Ramon, who back then was just the Mexican fry cook, came in together through the back door.

"Where've you been?" I asked.

"Smoke break," Lil said, and then frowned and grabbed me by the collar and hauled me out to the counter. "What're you doing here this late?" she asked

"Nothing," I said. "Well, not nothing." I told her how Mr. Paul scrunched his eyebrows at me and slammed the door when I asked about my daddy. "What did he mean?"

Lil looked around, her eyes flickering across the empty booths and resting for a minute on Ramon's shadow through the expo window. He and Ray had shown up in town the year before, and Ramon went to work at the diner and put Ray to work for a lawn-mowing service. I asked Ramon once why Ray didn't go to school with us and he growled at me in half-Spanish about pesos and estúpido and minding my own business.

“Well, don’t you tell your Mama I told you this,” Lil said finally, combing knots out of her hair with thick fingers, “but Mr. Paul was pretty sweet on her back when she was younger.”

“But Mr. Paul was married, Lil,” I said. Didn’t I deserve someone better than Mr. Paul? A mysterious stranger who whisked Mama off her feet? A high level government operative who couldn’t come back after I was born because of a dangerous mission? Mama said my daddy ran off and left us, but I figured there had to be more. “Wasn’t he?”

“JoDell,” Lil said. She picked up a towel and started wiping the counter. The roots of her hair were so bleached the blond had gone a mushy dishwater gray. “Sometimes men don’t think about what’s right when they have feelings. You know what I mean.” I knew about sex, but I hadn’t had any yet, although my one brief experience with Ray had been instructive.

“Mr. Paul wanted to have sex with Mama?” I wrinkled my nose.

“That’s probably putting it harshly for Paul.” Lil was going to wipe away the Formica from the counter if she didn’t quit wiping the same spot. Behind her, a Mexican announcer babbled from the kitchen radio. “He helped take care of your Mama after your grandparents died and she was trying to keep everything afloat.”

“But Lil. Mr. Paul’s old.”

“Not so old,” she said. “Paul’s only eight years older than me and your mama, Jo. He’s known both of us since we were kids and your mama since she was born.”

Ramon stuck his head through the expo window and muttered something. When he disappeared back into the kitchen, Lil tossed the towel into the sink behind the counter and fluffed her hair again.

“You stop messing around with that old business, anyway,” she said. “There ain’t nothing in this town people won’t dig up just to have a story to talk about, and there’s no reason to dig that up. When your Mama wants you to know more about your daddy, she’ll tell you.” She turned to the kitchen door.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Smoke break,” she said.

“Another one?” The door swished closed behind her.

I thought Lil knew everything there was to know about everything. How it had infuriated me, the way she and Mama treated me like a child! I was tempted to follow her through the kitchen doors and tell her I’d let Ray put his hand up my shirt and by God, if that wasn’t the sign of impending adulthood, I didn’t know what was, but the cow bell clanked and two senior boys I knew came in with their look-alike cheerleader girlfriends. The girls looked at me like I was a slug on the toe of their shoe and one of them smirked and made a noise that could have been gagging. I whipped out the door with my head low and made for home.

It didn’t stop me from wondering, of course. I knew Lil was right – people liked to talk in Frankel City, just like I figured they did anywhere. I didn’t want to drag up anything that might hurt my Mama. She was already started downhill with her lung cancer, although I didn’t know it then. When she came home most nights she’d make

dinner and not eat any of it while I talked about school and the diner and the cars I'd watched Mr. Paul work on and ignore her cough and the blue cloud of cigarette smoke circling her shoulders. That night, though, I was silent, glowering at her for keeping secrets from me.

“Is something wrong, Jo?” she asked, but I shrugged and poked at my cold potatoes.

“No, Mama.”

She narrowed her eyes but before she could say anything else I took my half-eaten food to the sink and huffed up the stairs, leaving her staring out the window at the pots of dead flowers on the deck. She'd stopped taking care of them, her potted plants, and the honeysuckle along our side beds and the crepe myrtles growing up over the front windows. She was working all the time at the old folks home fifteen miles out to the highway, turning old men over to keep them from getting bed sores and spooning apple sauce into their gummy mouths.

I couldn't help being angry with her for keeping secrets. I didn't understand then that sometimes people have a good reason for not telling you something. No, I just ignored the way she kept cinching up her jeans and picking at her food and puffing on her goddamn Marlboro lights like they were the only nutrition she needed. But at the same time, part of me, the part that couldn't keep from coming back downstairs a few hours later to cuddle during Johnny Carson, didn't want to make her any more unhappy than she already seemed.

Fourteen was Mama's year of worry. She was worried about money and me going to school and who I was hanging out with (not that she had to, I knew most everybody in town but I didn't have a lot of friends) and was I doing my homework? Getting myself set up for a scholarship for college? Ignoring Ray, who walked me to school most days and patted me on the head like a pet before I went inside? And any other boys who might be bothering me? I told her yes, yes, yes, although my grades were no better than average and really only that because I knew she'd make me come straight home from school and study instead of sitting with Mr. Paul or Lil. I'd work hard enough to get a C or sometimes a B, and it was work, to be honest, I was no good at numbers and I could tell a story but writing one down or reading somebody else's was a different matter entirely – and she'd glance at my report card and shake her head, as though she'd lost something and couldn't remember what it was. When she looked up she'd shift into a smile and we'd go into the kitchen and she'd file my nails and shape them and paint them any color I wanted out of her kit, even blue or black. Or she'd make a meat loaf and we'd sit on the couch together and watch sitcoms and she'd scratch my back and tell me about how she and her mama and daddy used to do the same thing. The only school subject I ever brought home A's in was biology, because I could remember parts of the body and plants and animals, the way it worked together like a system. It reminded me of the way Mr. Paul could fix any sort of car but then had to hire somebody else to be his accounting man and figure out how much money he was making. I would bring home A's in those classes, biology and health, and then Mama would beam at me and say she knew I could do it, I could do anything I wanted, and I knew my days of sitting on Mr. Paul's truck bed

or on the bench outside the diner were safe. I was doing more and more of sitting in those places, too, because she was working more and more, taking more shifts at the home. I think now it was because she knew she might not be there much longer and I'd need the money, just like she had when her parents died. When I think of it now, how she did all of it for me, it cuts me in a place I've almost forgotten existed.

It was sitting at the body shop I decided the way to figure out my father's identity was to try all the men in town on for size. What if he was someone I knew or had seen at the grocery store or even at the Wal-Mart when they built it out on the main highway? The idea made my heart pound. Sitting on the truck bed or on the diner bench, I had a full view of downtown, the county courthouse with the gargoyles hanging high up, the lawyer's office and Mr. Walpole's accounting firm, the natural health store (what could be more natural than health? I wondered.), the boutiques, the Texaco station I thought would be there forever but was purchased by Shell and is now set to be torn down. I watched men as they came in and out of the stores and walked along the street, talking in pairs or hurrying along in sneakers and socks pulled up to mid-calf. They came in all shapes and sizes, men, with pine-smelling cologne and short, squatty builds, square like a chess rook with a flat top haircut. I especially liked the long ones, the men with long legs and slim torsos that strolled along the sidewalk lithe and graceful. Mr. Walpole was one of those, in his charcoal gray suits, or, on Fridays, his light colored pants and navy sports jacket and bow tie. I was tall, with bony legs, skinny hip bones that stuck out in front and no rear end to speak of, so it was the tall men with goose necks and wide shoulders I paid the most attention. Something about the way they moved made me pause, my stomach

and heart and lungs blink like déjà vu. The day I saw Larry for the first time, I remember that same feeling. It was like he was someone I knew.

All the summer months of the year I was fourteen, I watched men. I memorized their movements – old Mr. Jorgenson with his white tufts of hair flying, coming in the diner each day at 8:30 a.m. to eat an egg-white sandwich with two shakes of Tabasco, the lawyer Stephens leaving his office at 4:30, setting his briefcase on the ground and turning to lock the office door with a key in his left-pants pocket. Once school was out, I watched in the morning after Mama went to work her twelve- and sometimes sixteen-hour shifts, Lil feeding me grilled cheese and Coke with cherry syrup and sometimes Key lime pie if her creepy uncle wasn't there to see it. I'd sit on the bench or the tailgate or sometimes on a blanket in the town square, scenting their trail like a good retriever, imagining the taste of their breakfast or lunch. They ate at the diner and carried sacks of fast food back into offices and stores. It was like a puzzle, watching them, trying to fit the pieces of them all together like the pieces of a person, my person. Here's one with a skinny butt, here's one with sandy hair and long feet like board slats, here's one that stands a head over the others. Could any of them be him?

“What are you doing, sitting out here all by yourself?” Lil asked me. She knew. Mama might've been distracted with work and not feeling well and had even quit going out to Lil's uncle's bar with her on Saturday nights, but every day Lil watched me come around the corner of Travis onto Main Street and sit down on the bench outside the diner or in the square under the oak trees. I'd bring a book but it sat unread in my lap unless a group of sophomore cheerleaders or dance team girls were passing my way and I needed

to duck and hide. She knew and although I never asked her I think she let me do it so I wouldn't have time to think about Mama.

“Reading,” I lied. She'd shake her head at me and watch as the girls came by and then the men. When Lil watched men, it was different. Her eyes would tighten and the lines on her face would cave in until it looked like she had rivers running down her cheeks.

“JoDell,” she said. “You keep your mind out of other folks' business, do you hear me? You keep your mind where it needs to be, on your mama and your schoolwork. Your mama deserves some peace.”

She'd say things like that and then disappear back into the diner and refuse to say anything else, sometimes even refuse to feed me a grilled cheese so I'd have to go down to the convenience store for pretzels or beef jerky – or, if I was flush, hitch out to the Dairy Mart for a chocolate dipped ice cream cone – and then go sit on the tailgate at Mr. Paul's. I learned not to ask him any more about Mama but he did tell me a lot about other people in town. Back then he still took care of almost everyone's car, before the dealerships took over most of his business. He was always saying he knew more about our town than anyone but the priest at Christ the Redeemer Catholic Church and he knew a fair amount about Father Riley, too. He said he could tell everything about a person by how they took care of their automobile.

“Like this one,” he said one day in early August, sliding out from under a navy blue sedan with a forbidding front bumper. “The interior's clean. The engine's wiped out. The fluids have all been changed. Here's a man who takes care of his automobile.” Old

Mr. Nelson, Mr. Paul's father, was sitting in a folding chair at the side of the shop rolling a toothpick around in his mouth, hunched half-over from his arthritis. In the next bay, two mechanics were rotating tires on a dilapidated GMC truck that, like Lil's hair, had been so damaged it was an oatmeal gray color.

"The real truth, though, is underneath the car," Mr. Paul went on, wiping his hands with a rag and then reaching for a lug wrench. "Blown hoses. Mud everywhere. Gray clay caked on. This car's been to task down near the river. What I see here," he said, "is a man with teenagers."

Old man Nelson spat on the concrete next to his chair. "You talk more than any mechanic I ever met," he said. His face had sunk into a permanent scowl. "Most women, too." He spat again. From where we sat, at the corner of Main Street and River Road, we could see all the way up into the hills to an occasional gabled roof and bricked chimney.

I thought about how the owner of the blue sedan took care of his automobile, how inside the vinyl seats were wiped down clean and a plastic sack was tucked onto the back of the passenger's seat for trash. When Mr. Paul opened the glove box to put in his auto shop card there were maps stacked in a leather folder and the repair manual laminated in glossy paper. In my room at home, I used white plastic containers in my drawers to separate out socks and underwear, or in my desk for papers and clips and pens, and my bed got made every morning no matter how late or sick or ratty I was feeling. I thought about all those things and it occurred to me this could be him, the man with the blue sedan, that maybe it wasn't just what they looked like or how they walked or what they liked to eat. Maybe it was who the man was, how the owner of the blue sedan, if he was

my daddy, would sit down with me on a Saturday afternoon and show me how to press pictures into scrapbooks so they didn't spill out of boxes and overflow onto the closet floor like Mama's. Or maybe we would stand after dinner and wash the dishes together, me scrubbing at all the spots and him wiping them dry with a clean blue-and-white checked towel. Maybe it was him, the fellow with the blue sedan, who was even more like me than the lithe sandy-haired men on the sidewalk. My fingers danced in my lap, picking at a loose thread in the hem of my t-shirt. When I asked Mr. Paul who the car belonged to, the blue sedan clean and ready to roll once Mr. Paul had done his repairs, he grinned.

“Well, that's Mr. Walpole's car, JoDell,” he said. “Homily Hope's daddy.”

CHAPTER IV

It was a couple of days after Homily Hope came back to town, a Saturday morning, when I woke late enough to hear her noises in the next room. The air outside was warm and thick enough to leave a mist of humidity on my window. The bed groaned as she rolled out and thunk-thunk-thunked into the bathroom across the hall and the pipes whistled and then screamed when the water came on full. It rushed down the insides of our walls and made its way out into the drains and eventually back into the tributary behind our house, where the water sometimes stank of sulfur. Homily had gone to Nashville and met Dolly Parton, and while she was gone Mama lay in the ground and Lil forgot how to breathe out of anything but a bottle and my father drank wine in Coahuila and pretended none of us existed. I curled up on my side and shoved my head back in the pillow, until someone started banging pots in the kitchen. The phone rang once and cut off.

Downstairs, Lil's snores gasped and rumbled from behind her closed door. Larry stood at the stove, cracking eggs into a frying pan and ripping open a package of sausage.

"When did you get off?" I asked, easing him to the side with a hand on his back and taking down a coffee cup from the cabinet.

"Just now. I brought groceries." He took his coffee to the table. "Who was on the phone this early?"

I frowned. "I thought you answered it."

He shook his head. “Did you shower?” My hair was dry and tangled in a rubber band. “I thought I heard the shower.”

“That was Homily.” I opened the refrigerator and grabbed a tray of soft mushrooms and sprinkled them across the pan. For a minute, the sizzle of the eggs and the slow drip and bubble of the coffee pot were the only sounds in the kitchen.

“Homily Hope? Walpole?”

“Yup.”

“JoDell?” Larry asked. I folded the eggs over the filling and stuck two pieces of toast in the toaster.

“I let Homily move in for a while.”

“You did what?” Larry was sitting in the shafting sunlight at our picture window, and in the morning light he looked pale, like the Jesus up on the crucifix at Christ the Redeemer. He unrolled himself from the chair, his head and neck first and then his arms and torso and butt, all peeling up off the seat to form a tower of man.

“I let her move in. Just for a while.”

“She couldn’t find anywhere else to stay?”

The toast popped out of the toaster. I tossed it on the counter and stuck my head in the refrigerator again, considering the number of calories in Mrs. Michelsen’s home-bottled strawberry preserves. When I came out, he was staring at me with his face screwed up in a frown.

“No,” I said.

The eggs popped. I tried to flip the omelet, but the bottom ran and mushrooms and hamburger sausage leaked out onto the pan. It was browning to black along one edge and running along the other.

“What about her mama’s house? She couldn’t go there?”

“Mrs. Walpole said she had to find somewhere else to stay.” I glanced over my shoulder at him where he leaned against the counter, and then heaved the omelet onto the flip side, dripping mushrooms and all. “Her own family didn’t want her. What was I supposed to do?”

Larry’s face was red and tight. I hadn’t seen him look so bothered since the anti-military people from Austin came to town and picketed the Frankel City War Memorial Celebration in October of 1984. “Please tell me you’re joking,” he said. I shook my head. “This is what happens when I work graveyard? You let somebody else move in without – damn, JoDell.”

“Don’t you cuss at me while I’m sitting here making your breakfast.” I slapped the omelet with the spatula so that grease spattered up on my t-shirt. “Don’t you ever cuss at me. This isn’t your house.” I scooped the half-cooked omelet out of the pan onto a plate and slammed it down on the kitchen island in front of him. He jerked back like I’d slapped him.

“Jo, come on.” He picked up a fork and speared a piece of egg and it mostly stuck together, but then he just stared at it until I thought maybe I’d burned it after all. The way he tipped his head to the side and his shoulders dropped made me ache.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “It’s done now, anyway.”

“I thought maybe you were finally thinking about moving in with me,” he said, studying his eggs.

I didn't want to lie, so I didn't say anything. Larry wanting me to move in with him made me feel like I had thorns in my head. I knew we were a good match, the way we both liked to spend Saturdays working in the yard and the way we both kept the house and even the way my body fit with his at night, cupped in the curve of his chest. More and more nights, though, after he rolled over and hunched up like a walnut and fell asleep, I'd shiver to see him lying there, all naked and exposed, like he was offering himself to me. Or he'd say he wanted to take care of me, and I'd go hard and shaky. I wish I'd put my hand on his shoulder that morning and told him I loved him. When he comes into the diner now with his hunting buddies or one of the Johnson cousins or even Ray, and smiles at me from across the room like he still knows me inside and out, I wish that from the bottom of my stomach all the way up into my throat. But I didn't tell him I loved him. I just went back to my toast. It tasted like hard-packed dirt.

The screen door off the deck cracked like a gunshot.

“What did Lil say?” Larry asked.

“What did Lil say about what?” Ray Martinez asked, coming around the corner and into the kitchen.

“Jesus. Didn't your parents raise you to knock?” There was a sneaking flutter of relief in my stomach to see him.

“I don't have parents.” His eyes were hooded and puffy. Larry snorted through egg and hamburger. “You got another one of those?” Ray asked.

“An omelet?” I asked. “Do I have on my apron? Do I look like your uncle?” The oven clock clicked over to nine. “What are you doing up before noon? Did you come straight from the bar?”

Ray brushed past me and scraped omelet bits out of the pan with my spatula. “Lawn work,” he said. “Ramon wanted me to come take care of it before work.” Paul hired Ray to work in the garage the year I graduated high school.

Larry examined Ray, his eyes narrowed, and then turned to wash his hands at the sink. “Lawn work.”

I shrugged.

“So what did Lil say about what?” Ray asked again, and then Homily’s footsteps thunked on the stairs. Larry jumped and my stomach turned over. Ray didn’t move, just took another bite of leftover egg. “You make a mean scrambled egg,” he offered.

“Not much,” I said to Larry. “She’s been scarce. And it was an omelet.”

“Lil’s been at the bar, and some at Ramon’s,” Ray said, wiping his mouth on the hem of his t-shirt. The blue and green tattoo on his forearm flashed up and then he was standing straight with his chest puffed out. Larry’s face went dark with a frown.

“Good morning,” Homily said from the doorway.

“Good morning,” we said in unison.

Her hair was wrapped in a blotchy maroon towel like a turban, and her eyebrows were considerably thinner and paler without makeup. Her eyes crawled across the three of us. It was eerie, the way her face could contort itself into that kilowatt smile. “I didn’t know we had guests.”

“Homily, this is –” I started to say, but Larry leaned down and pecked my cheek.

“I was leaving,” he said, without looking at Homily. “Love you.” He walked out the door still drying his hands on a paper towel.

“I’m Ray,” Ray said. “I’m –”

“The help,” I said, scowling. “He’s here to do the lawn.”

“Nice to meet you.” Homily beamed. Her robe brushed the tops of her brown thighs. “I’m Homily Hope.” She looked at me. “Can I get a cup of coffee?”

“Do I look like I’m at work?” My cheeks burned. I slapped Ray on the arm. “Get out before Lil gets up.” He shied back from my open palm. “Get out, get out, get out.”

“Fine,” he said, muttering at me in Spanish under his breath. “Nice to meet you, Homily.” The storm door clapped behind him.

“Well, aren’t you Miss Friendly in the morning?” Homily’s smile faded but it left color in her cheeks that matched the towel on her head.

“Weren’t you going to get a job?” I asked, pulling another coffee cup down out of the cabinet and handing it to her. She watched me for a minute with the empty cup in her hand and then grinned.

“Okay,” she said. “Good point.”

“I’m just tired,” I said. “Do you want eggs?” I gestured behind me to the cabinet littered with mushrooms and bits of burnt hamburger meat. Homily grimaced.

“No thanks. Do you know how many calories are in one teaspoon of egg yolk?” I picked up Larry’s coffee cup from where he’d left it on the counter and started scrubbing it in the sink. “Enough to add two-thirds of one full pound of fat on my ass.”

“I’m starting to think your diet consists entirely of coffee and alcohol,” I said.

“Well,” she said. “A woman must have her beauty secrets.” She filled her cup and walked back to the table, coming down toe-soft-heel-hard on the throw rugs. The conversation died. Talking to her that first week was like talking to a one-night stand when you couldn’t quite remember what all happened the night before. She stared out the window, down past our deck to where Ray was pushing the lawnmower. He’d taken his shirt off and his skin was browning to black along his broad shoulders.

“You know, this is a pretty nice place you have,” she said. Below the window, the wallpaper was peeling off the walls at the baseboards.

“It’s okay.”

“No, really. You’ve got lots of room and the riverbank is pretty. A couple of coats of paint, paper –” She toed a scratch in the linoleum. “Maybe some new floors – and you could really have a nice place here. Is it yours?”

“It was my grandfather’s and then Mama’s,” I said. The hair on my arms prickled. There was something about Homily Hope sometimes – the way she looked at things with eyes wide and hungry – but when I looked back at her she was smiling and her face was open and lit from the window. “I wasn’t old enough to take care of it. Lil was living in an apartment anyway and she wanted to buy a place and I needed somewhere to live. She put up the money and I pay her rent. It’s not too bad.” I closed my mouth to make the words stop coming.

“She seems like a nice lady.”

“Have you talked to her much?”

Homily shook her head. “I told her I’d try to pay her some rent as soon as I could find something to do.”

“She gets pretty stove up,” I said. “When she comes in like that even I wouldn’t call her nice and she’s the only family I have.” Homily blushed and I caught myself feeling smug when it wasn’t pretty. Her whole chest turned red above her cotton robe. It bled up into her face and her cheekbones, but blotchy, like she’d caught a rash.

“Okay,” she said. “But having a drink now and then doesn’t make you a bad person, does it?”

“I guess not.” Lil’s snores rose and fell behind us like an idling engine. When I was a little girl, Lil and Mama would take me down to the beauty shop and curl my hair and paint my nails, and somewhere in between they’d put away a box of wine so the paint on my fingers would smear off into my nail beds. “You know, if you’re looking for something to do she might need some help down at the salon,” I said.

“Oh yeah?” Homily said. She coughed into her cupped palm in a delicate puff of air. “Maybe. What about the diner?” she asked.

“I don’t –”

A screech cut through the den. Homily jumped, her coffee sloshing. “What the hell is that?”

“Lil’s alarm,” I said. The screeching settled into a jabbering Mexican deejay. Behind the announcer were distant sounds, Lil hammering on the nightstand with the palm of her hand and the buzz of the lawnmower. Homily was looking out the window again and Ray was mowing the same patch of grass as five minutes before. Her eyes were

wide and there was a dawning in her face, a knowing that sometimes comes with living in a small town. She giggled.

“So I guess its true – what they used to say about her liking the heel of the loaf,” Homily said. The sun sparked off the window where the glass channeled and bubbled with age. I was brooding at her when Lil came in, her hair bunched up on the back of her head in an old lady’s shower cap.

“What?” Lil asked.

“Nothing,” I said. Homily’s shoulders were shaking underneath her robe.

“Well, give me a goddamn coffee cup, then, Ms. Nothing.”

“I am not the waitress, for Christ’s sake,” I swore.

“Last I checked Jesus isn’t here, love,” Lil said, pushing me to the side with a fleshy wrist and slamming open the cabinet. “Where’s your good-for-nothing boyfriend who keeps sleeping in your bed and eating our food but not paying a single cent of rent?”

Homily’s shoulders went still.

“He just left,” I said. “He brought groceries over this morning for breakfast. There’s left over hamburger and eggs in the fridge.”

Lil threw her head back so that her face flattened out and her double chin quadrupled. “Don’t be smart,” she said, still ignoring Homily. The stink of gin and stale tobacco hung around her shoulders. “Your Mama would’ve whipped you for that.”

“Lil, Mama never whipped me for anything.”

“Is what’s-her-name still here?”

“Homily, Lil.” Lil knew her name. Why didn’t she say her name? Homily’s fingers were knotted in her lap, twisting in the folds of her robe. Lil turned to look at her, the coffee cup still empty. Behind Homily, behind Ray, Jené Jorgenson’s boys cut a path along the rim of the bayou, their sun-bleached heads bobbing.

“Good morning,” Homily said, smiling.

“Indeed,” Lil barked. In her robe, she was massive, a great flowering mound of flesh vibrant in green and pink. Homily could have been facing the firing squad. Part of me wanted to tell Lil to cut it out, but the bigger (and smaller) part of me was getting more than a little pleasure out of watching Homily Hope Walpole squirm at someone else’s mercy. Out the window, the Jorgenson kids stopped to knock each other into the dirt, and then just as quickly dusted themselves off, laughing, and disappeared down the bayou.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I said suddenly. Lil turned back to me and her polyester robe swirled around her like leaves in the fall.

“Well he sure likes to hang out in your bed for someone who’s not your boyfriend.”

“Well, he’s not.” Behind Lil, Homily sagged. “So don’t go saying that and giving him ideas.”

“You should call him your boyfriend yourself,” she said, reversing herself. “He’s 100% madly in love with you, that’s for sure.” She turned back to Homily and frowned.

“Why is Ray mowing my lantana bed?”

“There’s no call to go naming Larry names like that,” I said. Lil harrumphed and made for the coffee pot. I was about to say how it might make things harder for me if I had to end it with him when she looked over my shoulder. Her eyes went wide and round. They were steel gray and flecked with purple.

“Who in this town thinks coming to my house at this godforsaken hour is a good idea?”

I snorted. “If you only knew,” I said, but she edged me to the side, watching through the window over the kitchen sink. A shiny silver four-door sedan pulled up the gravel of our driveway. I squinted through the car’s front windshield but between the sun and Lil’s meaty shoulder in my way, I couldn’t see who it was.

“Who –”

“That’s my mama,” Homily said from behind us. She was pale white and shrunken and frightened-looking, like Robin Michelsen in elementary school when she cut her knee on a broken bottle in the playground and had to get five stitches and it looked like all the blood in her face had gone out the gash in her leg. Homily looked at Lil and back to me and back to Lil and said, “Oh God. Please don’t tell her I’m here.”

CHAPTER V

We stared at her like she was speaking Latin.

“What?” Lil’s face went pruny. Behind us, a car door slammed.

“She doesn’t know I’m here,” Homily said.

Out the window, Emeline Ward Walpole cut her way across the grass, her thick heels sinking divots into the lawn. The dull rumble of the lawnmower advanced and retreated as Ray mowed vertical stripes in our backyard.

“But –” I started to say, but she shook her head and cut me off.

“Please. Please don’t tell her,” Homily said again. The doorbell chimed with a sharp pang and Lil was already through the open arch of the kitchen to answer it. Homily sat back down at the table like a ship sinking. I stood between them in the kitchen doorway, watching.

“Hello, Emeline,” Lil said.

“Hello, Lil.” Emeline had on white Sunday gloves I hadn’t seen worn since I was a little girl. Lil had taken her shower cap off and her hair hung whitish-blond down her back like a wild animal. “I’m looking for my daughter.”

“It’s good to see you, too, Emeline. I’m well.”

“I’m relieved to hear it,” Emeline said, gritting her teeth. She tilted her head back and sneered at the grime on the doorframe and the peeling shutters of Homily’s upstairs window. “What a nice place you have.”

Lil cocked her head to the side. “What do you want?”

“Homily,” Emeline said, tapping her black loafer against the threshold. “Your Mexican told me she was here.”

“My Mexican?”

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Emeline said, waving her hand as if Ramon was an irritating fly. The flowers on the back of Lil’s muumuu writhed. “The cook. Goodness, is that JoDell?” She peered around Lil, her eyes eating up her face.

“Hello, Mrs. Walpole,” I said. Lil threw a hip across the door, but Emeline just peeked up over her shoulder like she was standing on her tiptoes.

“Well, haven’t you turned out to look just like your mother,” Emeline said, shaking her head. “Better her than your father, I guess.”

Cold washed over me.

“Can I help you with something, Emeline?” Lil stepped forward to fill the door frame completely. “Other than my Mexican?”

“My daughter,” Emeline said, as if she was ordering a meal. I think now if Lil had had a chance to speak she would have lied for Homily just to spite Mrs. Walpole, but before either of us could get any words out, Homily put her hand on my elbow and pushed me aside so hard my shoulder bounced off the kitchen doorframe.

“Damn, Homily.”

“His name is Ramon, Mother,” Homily said. She angled around Lil, the towel dropping off her head into a puddle on the carpet.

“Homily,” Emeline said, like all of the air in her chest was expelled with the word.

“Hello, Mama,” she said. “You’re a little early for a social call.”

“Thank God you’re okay.” Emeline smiled and her nostrils flared out like a rodeo horse. “When I heard you were in town and staying here –” She shook her head.

“Mama, please don’t start.”

“I can’t believe it,” Emeline said, ignoring her. “I haven’t seen you in so long. I didn’t even know you were in town until some fellow called the house for you and then I called Melanie Parsons and went down to that place and they said you were staying here. Here? Why are you here?” Her eyes leapt from the doorframe to the cracked wood paneling to Lil’s florid muumuu and finally settled back on Homily. Her words registered with me in a dark, bleak place. “And what have you done with your hair?”

“Mama, why don’t you go home now, and I’ll come see you tomorrow, okay?” Homily said. Lil took a step back. “Go home and I’ll come up tomorrow and we’ll visit, okay?” The last word split into a plea. Through the open door, the hum of the lawnmower sputtered and then roared closer.

“No, that is not okay,” Emeline said. “Will you come out here and talk to me for a minute, please? This is ridiculous. And, for God’s sake, don’t wrinkle your eyes like that. It’ll give you laugh lines.”

“No, Mama.”

Emeline pawed the threshold like a penned horse, her eyes sweeping the living room again. She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Homily,” she whispered. “You can’t stay here.”

“Jesus. What is this, the town dump?” Ray asked from behind her, startling all of us.

“Oh God, another one,” Emeline said, jolting around to face him.

“Another what?” Ray asked, growling. Behind him, the lawnmower idled. “And who made these hoof marks in the front yard?”

Emeline reached behind her and her nails were dark purple like talons and I think she meant to grab Homily’s arm and pull her out of the way, as though she could hide Homily from Ray, but Homily jerked hard enough to knock her off balance instead. Emeline stumbled into the doorframe and then leapt back as if she’d been burned.

“Lil,” I said, jumping forward, but she was already there.

“Emeline.” Lil bent down to help her up, but Mrs. Walpole recoiled at her offered hand. She pulled a handkerchief out of her purse and wiped off her glove where she’d touched the door, gently at first and then scrubbing at the pristine white as though it were covered in ash.

“Go home, Mama,” Homily said. Her voice was firm. “You don’t need to be here. It’s not good for you here. You should go home.”

“Homily.” Mrs. Walpole was almost wheezing, still scouring her glove. “Honey, you can’t stay –”

“Enough,” Lil said. She stepped forward until Emeline dropped the handkerchief and cowered back in her shadow. Mrs. Walpole’s mouth twisted downward. “I’m sorry to see you like this Emeline. But you go on now. Go on.” Lil shooed her like a pet dog, and Ray closed in behind her until Mrs. Walpole had no choice but to back up a few steps down the lawn or run into them. When she was halfway to her car, she stopped and pushed her shoulders back so her thin breasts rose out of her chest.

“Well,” she said. “Good morning, then.”

The silence was total. Her heels sank into the dew-damp ground and then she was just a shadow behind the car windows and the growl of the engine was like a live thing. We stood at the door, Homily and Lil both with hair hanging wild down their backs and me still hugging my shoulder where Homily had slammed me to the side. Ray watched us all, his eyes flickering to where Homily’s robe fell in a crescent hook across her chest.

“Who the hell was that?” he asked. Homily sagged.

“My mother,” she said. “That was my mother.” She laughed, a weak sound that only lasted a second. Ray and Lil smiled back but all I could think about were the things Emeline had said. I shook my head and turned away from them, throbbing.

“JoDell,” Homily said.

Out of the corner of my eye, Lil put a hand on Ray’s bicep. “You want to tell me why you were mowing my lantana?” she asked, her voice receding around the side of the house.

“So,” Homily said. Out the window, Ray had let the crepe myrtles grow up over all the ledges, so all I could see were green leaves and pink blooms and a sliver of sky through the blinds.

“Yeah.”

She didn’t look at me; instead, she walked back towards the middle of the room and picked up the towel that’d fallen off her head. “I guess I need some help.”

I shrugged. “Right.”

“I hate to ask.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“JoDell,” she said, and in her voice was the same plea I’d heard when she asked Lil not to tell her mama she was in our home. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“I couldn’t go back there,” she said. The space around her eyes was white and dry.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” I said, to the couch, to the stairs, to the ceiling. But even though she’d manipulated me, part of me felt shivery at the thought of living with her mother for the years after her father left. Homily had left for Nashville the day after graduation. Maybe I didn’t understand anything.

“Do you want me to leave?” She crossed her arms and gripped her elbows.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I have to go.”

“Where?”

“The diner. Some of us have to work, Homily.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “That’s a good idea. Maybe I could come with you.”

“No.” I didn’t have time to babysit her all day, but she was picking at the beds of her nails and talking fast over me before I could get anything else out.

“I could get a job there. Work there. I’ve waited tables before.”

“No,” I said flatly. Her shoulders crumpled.

“Is there anything else?”

“Sure,” I said, brushing past her towards the stairs. “Try the Piggly-Wiggly. Or maybe the Wal-Mart out on the highway.” Her mouth twisted.

“Oh.” She leaned against the couch and tilted her head back and her eyes skated across the pictures on the wall behind me. “What about that place?” It was Lil, behind the bar at Randy Whitehouse’s roadhouse. “What about the roadhouse?”

“The Rooter Hog?”

“Yeah.”

My stomach curdled. I made the steps and gripped the banister with white knuckles. “Of course,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll go over there today and check it out,” she called after me, the words coming quick and high. “I bet I can make a hundred dollars a night if everything goes right.” I didn’t say anything, just kept climbing the stairs. “Jo?”

“Sure,” I said. “Whatever.”

CHAPTER VI

Did we know what stalking was in 1974? It seems like all I do these days is try to remember years past. Ray comes over and sometimes Larry, and they talk about the county football playoffs or what's being built out on the business highway and I listen and smile, but it's always a bit of relief when they leave and I can go back to just sitting in my living room and remembering. The past feels so much more real, the times I spent with Lil or Mr. Paul at the auto body shop, the afternoon I met Larry in the post office on Bowie Street in the spring of '84. And the August I was fourteen, three months before my birthday, the days still heat-hazy and stretching from one to the next like Homily's daddy's shadow on the sidewalk.

I guess you could say I stalked him, Mr. Walpole. I don't know if I even really know what stalking means. We just called those folks crazy, like Margaret Ann McCaskill who got so obsessed with the high school quarterback, Trevor Gentry, she camped outside his house for the first three days of that August and refused to eat anything but what she found in the Gentry trash.

"I hear she even ate his jock strap," a cheerleader said from the doorway of Ward's as Margaret Ann shuffled down the sidewalk, tucked between her parents as they led her home. Her hair was matted and specked with grass and flecks of paper. The cheerleaders brayed laughter, but I kind of felt for old porky Margaret, with her braces

and her stomach falling out of her too-tight jeans, Margaret Ann who just wanted somebody to notice her and maybe love her, too.

As August wore on I spent more and more time downtown, watching Mr. Walpole. It started with little things, recording his movements and making a list of all I knew about him in my school notebook, and it got to where he was all I could think about. At night I'd watch the revolutions of my ceiling fan and imagine the moment I'd walk into his office and sit down on his couch and tell him I knew he was my father. I'd wear the prettiest dress, just the color of the heather when it bloomed in the spring, and he'd sit in his leather chair, proud of me for figuring it out.

"I'm an adult now," I'd start, leaving out how my adulthood was partially the result of five minutes of groping with a Mexican lawn boy. "We're all adults now. We can all be honest." I'd tell him I understood he couldn't talk about it back when Mama was pregnant, what with being just married and Homily just born. I'd tell him I was realistic and of course didn't expect him to come home with me and be with Mama. Maybe if he and I could just get together for a visit or two during the week and lunch on Saturdays? When I finished, he'd take my hand. Staring at my ceiling in the dark, I'd clutch my hands together, imagining the warmth of his fingers.

"Oh JoDell," he'd say. "I've managed to stay away from you and watch you from afar all these years and now that you're here in front of me – well, I couldn't imagine not spending every afternoon with you and all day Sunday, too."

He'd say those things and wrap me up in a big Daddy hug and we'd both cry and then – if I'm really being honest, I should tell this, too – he'd put me in his dark blue

sedan and drive me up the hillside to his Lionsgate home. I'd cook dinner and we'd watch Johnny Carson together and then he'd kiss me and send me to bed.

"You'll never want again," he'd say. "I'll take care of you," he'd say. I never pictured Mama there with us, or Homily or Emeline, just Frank and me, two peas in a pod with an afghan over our knees in a living room that didn't smell of stale Marlboro Lights and something more sinister underneath.

Maybe I didn't picture Mama in my fantasy future because she was hardly ever home with me in the present anymore. She was working double shifts at the retirement home six days a week and when she was at our home, on her off-day Wednesdays, I'd come into the living room and find her on the couch, hacking brown and red phlegm into a tissue. I'd kiss her goodbye as I left for the square with my notebook. While I was downtown during the day I was sure she got up and did something, bought groceries maybe, because when I came home she'd be lying in the same place, groggy, but the cupboards would be full. She must've worked hard to get so tired, I'd tell myself. Lil told me years later she and Mrs. Jorgenson used to bring over groceries and sit with Mama, trying to convince her to go to the doctor, but Mama refused to admit she was sick like I refused to see it.

Despite all my watching and note-taking, I was never satisfied with what I knew about Mr. Walpole. When had he first noticed my mama? How had they fallen in love? I tossed and turned, wondering. I needed answers, proof, ammunition to put down in black and white. I came downstairs the morning after the worst of my restless nights to find Mama halfway out the door to the old folks' home. She paused when she saw me.

“You okay, Jo?”

I could count the bones in her sternum, she was so thin. “I’m okay,” I said, but then all in one breath I asked. “Mama, have you ever been in love?”

“Of course I have, love bug,” she said, tilting her head and smiling. “I love you more than anything else in the world.”

“That’s not what I mean,” I said.

She watched me from the door, her purse over her shoulder and her scrubs loose around the bones in her hips. “Well, I’ve been in love,” she said slowly. “When I wasn’t much older than you, I thought I was in love so deeply I’d never get over it. But I did.” She rested her head against the doorframe. Excitement sparked under my rib cage. I’d been born when Mama wasn’t much older than me – twenty.

“What happened?”

Mama tapped her nails on her elbows. Her nail polish was chipped and peeling. “It didn’t work out,” she said. “Sometimes that’s how love goes. We were very different people and very young. But I got over it. The thing to remember about love is that it’s almost never your last chance.” She arched an eyebrow. “Are you in love, JoDell?”

“No, Mama.”

“Good.” She leaned over and kissed my bowed head. “I’m not ready for my girl to be in love with some old boy yet.” She was halfway out the door again when I raised my head.

“Was it with my daddy?” I asked her. She shook her head and her shoulders sagged as though her purse was suddenly heavy.

“Enough of that, now,” she said. “I’m going to be late for work.”

I watched her car make the corner onto Travis before rushing into the living room. Her yearbooks were on the bookshelves above the television, four years of musty brown Frankel City High School. The excitement in my chest surged. Mama and Mr. Walpole had been in the same class in high school – when they weren’t much older than me.

The page with Mama’s senior picture on it was dog-eared from all the times I’d turned to it, but I flipped past it without a second look. There weren’t a lot of pictures of her – she wasn’t on the Pep Squad or in the Glee Club or even in the FFA – but I found one more, a snapshot in the back section titled “Friday Fun! Marie Orsak chats with friends outside study hall!” She was turned three-quarters away so I could only see the angle of her profile, the way her nose tipped down and her ponytail looped around her breast and disappeared into the books tucked under one arm. I knew she wasn’t beautiful and neither was I, no matter how many times she said so. She was interesting. Regal, like the tilt of her head said, I know more than you think I do. She was leaning on a desk, surrounded by students: Lil, already pooching out at the stomach and butt, and Bobby Johnson, the Johnson brother who went to Vietnam in ‘67 and came back and got drunk and drove his car off the west bridge into the Colorado. I didn’t want to see Lil, though, or Bobby Johnson either, no matter how morbid and interesting it was to look at the dead. No, the student I was hoping to see was standing to the side of the group, wearing his letter jacket and smiling at Mama with a raised eyebrow. It was Mr. Frank Walpole.

It’s a miracle I didn’t burn the photo away, the way I studied it. Was that a glint of love in his eye? Mr. Walpole’s arm extended behind Mama, cocked at a funny angle.

Was he holding her hand? Smudges at the bottom of the frame might have been their fingers interlaced. I searched the yearbook but there were no other photos of the two of them, only of Mr. Walpole. I examined his handsome senior picture and concluded our eyes were spaced out the same, wider than necessary but not so much it was displeasing. He was on the football team, standing on the front riser, a senior class officer (vice-president), a senior superlative (“Most Likely to Succeed!”). Mama wasn’t in the Glee Club but Mr. Frank Walpole was, wearing his football letter jacket in the group picture even though everyone else had on a tie and blazer. I knew Homily could sing like I could, so it only made sense we got it from our father. Our father. I couldn’t imagine Homily Hope and I had the same father. I closed my eyes. How everyone would talk when they heard! Homily would have to notice me; maybe she would even teach me some of her cheer moves and let me borrow her clothes. My heart fluttered. Would I know what to say to my sister? The word was like candy in my mouth. I whispered it to the empty room and the moody sunlight across the couch.

I’d almost closed the book when a signature on the inside front cover caught my eye. Tucked between the cramped notes and mysterious blocks of writing – Why did Katherine Ramsey tell Mama to “Remember Thrill Hill and may the blue horse ride forever!”? What did Lil mean by “Too bad double trouble never figured out the combination to B.K.J.’s locker!”? – was a small two-liner in square handwriting not unlike my own: “Hope to see you this summer. With Best Regards, Frank J. Walpole.”

After that, I was a shark scenting blood. I spent hours on the bench outside the diner, watching the door of the Walpole accounting firm, not even trying to hide from Lil

or anyone else who might see me. I was so sure I was right, I wanted Lil to notice. I wanted recognition. I wanted to scream out loud I had finally figured it out. I memorized Mr. Walpole's hours and made sure I was there every day right through the last week of summer, lurking outside his office, squinting against the Indian sun into his windows when I thought no-one was looking and hoping for him to come out. I'd almost given up when the last Friday before school started the door burst open and air conditioning billowed out.

There's no wind in the Colorado River valley, not on a good day but especially not on a day at the end of August, when the heat and the humidity press down so you have to take shallow breaths and old folks without air conditioning are rounded up in the Christ the Redeemer school bus and taken to the high school. When Mr. Walpole came out the office door, the air in my body dried up. All I wanted was for time to stop so I could stare at him, at his hands with the square nails, at the way he ducked his head like the world was too small for him. The door swung shut behind him. Above us, the gargoyles hung with mouths open in a scream.

I was standing a few feet away, but it felt like a mile. Did he see me? Did he know? He glanced at me and I gawked at him and oh God, now it makes me sick to think how I thought he was so perfect and how I put what I wanted on that man, not a good man or a bad man but just a man trying to walk through our town without stepping too far into anybody else's business. His eyes crinkled at the corners and he smiled the confident smile of someone who'd had women staring at him his whole life. I tried to smile back but ended up just sort of gaping and hunching my shoulders. He turned and took off

down the sidewalk towards Main Street, and I watched him go like a glass after the water's been poured out. He never looked back. My obsession multiplied with every step.

School started the Monday following and I went with a heavy heart, wondering if maybe in the hours I would spend there he would somehow disappear, just pack up in the middle of the night and get in his sedan and go away to Dallas or even to Oklahoma or New Orleans. It ate at me, sitting in my freshman homeroom class and watching Justin Tuckett inch his fingers along his desk towards Susan Parson's rounded back. I didn't hear a thing Mr. Hanesford said in algebra class. I was too busy staring at the notebook into which I'd tucked my numbered list of proof Mr. Walpole was my daddy. I didn't dare open it in my classes, but it was all I could think about. Where was he at that moment? Had he gone to work? Was he eating turkey on rye, or a hot dog from Jones' Lunch?

"JoDell, did you hear me? About the *Danaus Plexipuss*?" Robin Michelsen asked, poking me with her straw. I was sitting with her at lunch, staring at the wall while she told me about the wingspans and food habits of the butterflies she'd collected over the summer. Across the room, Homily Hope was draped across her sophomore boyfriend, Jimmy Don Huxley. Being trapped away from our daddy all morning was almost enough for me to walk right up and ask her if he was well and at work and eating his lunch and all the things I would've known had I been on my bench downtown.

"What? Oh, sure," I said. Jimmy Don leaned over to Homily and whispered in her ear. She squinted an eye at him and then stood up and walked towards the parking lot door. Behind her back, he made a thumbs-up sign to his friends

“Are you okay?” Robin asked.

“Sure,” I said again. “No, I’m fine.”

“Mama said you saw the Jorgenson accident,” Robin said, her nose almost in her mashed potatoes on the lunch tray.

Homily disappeared through the door to the parking lot with Jimmy. My sister, I thought. That’s my sister. Am I like her? Mama told me to stay away from boys and work hard in school. Mama, on the couch coughing up mucus. Homily, Mama, Mr. Walpole. It came together in my mind like a dream.

“I have to go,” I said, shoving my chair back so it skidded across the linoleum.

“JoDell, I didn’t mean to –” But I was already running through the hall toward assistant principal Pulczinski’s office, almost ripping the door off its hinges when I pulled it open. A knot of people were standing on the other side, their faces round with surprise. I jumped back. It was the McCaskills.

“JoDell,” A.P. Pulczinski said from the back of the group. “Is everything alright?”

“Fine,” I panted. “I’m fine. I just – I realized I forgot to come see you about something.”

“Come on in,” he said. “The McCaskills were just leaving. They’ve come to tell me Margaret Ann’s moving to Fort Worth with her cousin.”

He said it as though Margaret Ann’s exile was a special vacation, but the McCaskills all looked as though it were a death sentence. Margaret’s parents led her past me, her bangs straight down covering her eyebrows and the doughy flesh along her jaw jiggling. She looked at me in my thrift store jeans and in her eyes was something I didn’t

understand then but know now to be desperation, the lines of her face all pulled back at the jowl. It made me want to run past her into the A.P.'s office and slam the door. I heard a few years later she'd gone off to the University of Texas and tried to kill herself by hanging herself in the shower with a towel, but the rod broke under her weight and she failed.

"Sit down, JoDell," Mr. Pulczinski said, waving at a vinyl chair in front of his desk. I shook my head. The drumbeat of blood in my temple magnified.

"No, I just – I need to be excused from classes on Wednesday." Wednesday was Lil's day off from the diner. I clasped my hands in front of me. "Mama's not been feeling well and I need to go to the doctor with her. On Wednesday."

A.P. Pulczinski leaned back on his desk and dropped his hands to his lap. "JoDell," he said in a quiet voice. Bile rose up in my throat and into my nose. He knew I was lying. He knew it, I knew he knew it. "I know you've had a hard summer. I saw Miss Aschelmann down at the diner and she told me some about it."

I frowned. What was he talking about? The accident?

"Mr. Pulczinski," I said, but he waved his hand.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "You do what you need to do. You know, your mama was here back when I first started teaching. She was one of my favorite students." His eyes were almost glistening. What did Mama have to do with the accident? But it didn't matter. He was going to let me go. I was going to meet my daddy, and blood and oxygen surged up into my head until I felt dizzy. "You take care of what you need to and just bring me the doctor's note when you get a chance."

I jolted up. The doctor's note? "But Mr. –"

Who knows what story I might've come up with had the phone on his desk not rung? He half-turned and reached for it before I finished my sentence, which was just as well since I had no idea what I was going to say.

"It's okay, JoDell," he said, with one hand cupped over the receiver. "Go on back to lunch."

I backed out of the office, pulling the door behind me until it closed with an ominous click. I was still backing up, a fierceness rising up in my chest when I thought about seeing Mr. Walpole, my daddy, in less than two days, when footsteps clattered down the hall behind me. It was Mr. Hanesford, propelling Homily along with a hand on her elbow.

"What is the A.P. going to say when he hears about this?" he was asking. Homily pushed out her bottom lip.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hanesford," she said. "I didn't know that's what he wanted to do. He said he just wanted to show me his new truck." Her lashes trembled and she pushed her shoulders back so the roundness of her breasts poked through her tank top. "I'm really sorry. I really didn't know."

The skin around Mr. Hanesford's mouth was gray and stippled with whiskers. "Well, we'll see what the A.P. says."

Homily's eyes glistened. Her right hand was fisted so tight I could almost feel the bite of her nails. Mr. Hanesford loomed over me where I was caught between the two of them and the closed door.

“Step aside, please, Ms. Orsak.”

Help, Homily, my sister, mouthed at me. Her eyes were electric green and ringed in purple liner. Steel rose up in me and I swelled up like a superhero.

“Mr. Hanesford, he’s really busy right now,” I said, blocking the closed door.

“The McCaskills are here to see him.”

Mr. Hanesford looked up and down the hallway, as though waiting for someone to explain this. The corner of Homily’s mouth turned up.

“You know,” I said, trying to hold his gaze. “Margaret Ann.” I tapped my temple and a light dawned in Mr. Hanesford’s eyes.

“Oh, the mathlete.”

“Right,” I said, nodding. A mathlete? “Mr. Pulczinski asked me not to let anyone in.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “I think they want some privacy.”

Mr. Hanesford wrinkled his forehead and looked back and forth from Homily to me, his expression teetering between uncertainty and disapproval. Homily smiled with all her teeth. After a moment, he sighed. “You two,” he said. “Homily, if I catch you at it again, you’ll have detention for a week.”

Homily nodded solemnly. “I promise.” We stood side-by-side as he retreated down the hallway.

As soon as he was gone, she dropped her shoulders and blew air over her bottom lip. I smiled at her. My sister, my sister – I wanted to shout the words and throw my arms around her and weep. There was so much I wanted to tell her, how I was going to see our father, how we were going to be a family.

“Homily,” I said, reaching out a hand as though I might hug her.

She stared at my outstretched hand like it was radioactive. My jeans were an inch too short and my hair hadn’t been cut in six months. “Don’t you owe me a new shirt?” she asked.

The excitement in my chest flamed up and died. “Homily,” I said again, the weight of tears pressing against my cheeks and eyelids, but she was already disappearing down the hall.

CHAPTER VII

They called my mama a whore. They: Mrs. Parsons, a few years older than Mama but already married to the mayor's youngest son, Mrs. Ward, overseer of the beauty department at the drug store but who spent more time wiping the soda counter with a bleach towel, the ladies up at the country club and a few at the Christ the Redeemer bake sale. They talked about her under their breath when she dropped off cookies or bought cough medicine or even when she left me at kindergarten in the mornings. I was so young when people were saying it I didn't understand what it meant, just that the older ladies put their hands over their mouths and whispered when she came in the door, and some of the kids pretended I had the chicken pox until their mothers left and no one was watching anymore. I don't know how Mama stood it. She never said a word.

At sixteen I took my first job, making preserves on Saturday afternoons for Mrs. Michelsen while Lil was getting the salon started up and Ramon was working the diner. I was trying to save enough money to go to vocational school after graduation to be a nurse's aide. I'd sit in her kitchen and the Mexicans working the berry patches would dump crates of strawberries on the floor, and we'd spend hours cleaning and chopping and boiling them with sugar and honey. Mrs. Michelsen was a chatty woman who wore her hair in a braided bun at the base of her neck and glasses on a chain so she wouldn't lose them in the five-gallon tubs we used for berry-cleaning. She'd been my kindergarten

teacher, before she married Mr. Michelsen and became maven of the Piggly-Wiggly bakery.

“I remember you in pre-school,” she said to me one Saturday while I was crushing overripe strawberries into a bowl for pie filling. “You were so cute, with your hair going every which way. You were the only girl in class who could name all the plants in your mama’s yard. She was so proud of you.”

“Did you know her very well?” I asked. I pressed my thumb down into a soft berry and wiped it dry on the towel in my lap.

“Did I know her well? Your mama used to spend more time up at the school than all the League of Child Education members combined. She’d bring you up in the morning and come by on her lunch break to eat with you and then pick you up in the afternoon with a mop and a bucket and help me clean up the classroom or pick up trash in the lunchroom. I came out one day to find her sweeping the playground. She said she was afraid you’d cut yourself on something the big kids dropped out there.” She shook her head and stirred the stock pot on the stove. “Don’t you remember that?”

I shook my head. Under the ripe smell of berries, vinegar rose up sharp, like the cleaner used in hospitals. “Not really,” I said, crushing a pile of over-ripe berries in wax paper and dumping them into the bowl. “I don’t remember much from back then.”

Mrs. Michelsen set her spoon down. “It’s okay to be sad,” she said. “Your mama’s not been gone very long. I still miss my own mother and she’s been gone some fifteen years.”

“Did you know Mama back then?” I asked.

Mrs. Michelsen walked to the table and picked up my bowl of crushed berry. “We may have enough to make wine, too,” she said, watching liquid swirl around the pulp.

“Mrs. Michelsen?”

“I knew her well enough,” she said, setting the bowl back down. “Before you were born she used to pick berries out in the backyard. We used to have a lot of kids from the high school up here, picking berries. She’d come up here with Lil or –” She stopped to lick strawberry off her finger. “Well, some other boy or girl.”

“Frank Walpole,” I said, not looking up. “Did she come up here with him?”

“Now,” Mrs. Michelsen said. “That’s old business that don’t need anyone’s help in being brought back up.” She stomped across the kitchen back to the stock pot. “These are about ready.”

I stood up, the towel dropping out of my lap and need rising up in my throat, hard and solid. “Please,” I said. “I miss her so much. Please, Mrs. Michelsen.”

When she met my stare she dropped her shoulders and her voice deepened, the way I heard her talking to the older ladies at the grocery store. “JoDell, your mama was a good person. Don’t you believe what anyone says about her and Frank Walpole or any other man.” She came back to the table and put her hand on my shoulder, just enough pressure so I would sit back down in my chair. “I don’t know everything that happened,” she said. “But I do know your Mama came up here to pick berries, and I don’t know that I ever saw her happier than the day she came up to pick them with Frank Walpole.”

It was the May she was eighteen, Mrs. Michelsen said, the time Mama showed up in Frank Walpole’s cherry convertible. She had her hair tied back in a handkerchief and

she was wearing a peasant dress one of the Mexican ladies at the diner had sewn for her. They came in the door laughing so much Mrs. Michelsen was afraid they were going to wake the neighbors' baby.

“We never had kids, you know,” Mrs. Michelsen said. “We wanted to but there was nothing the doctors could do back then and now – well, now it’s a little late.”

When Mama and Frank came in the kitchen door Mama had a strawberry blossom tucked behind one ear and Frank watched her as she took their baskets like she was the most amazing thing he’d ever seen. Mrs. Michelsen could hear them all the way through the bramble to the back of the patch, and when she walked around to check on the rabbit traps near the back fence, they were sitting in the shade of an overgrown pear tree with half-full buckets. Mama was counting berries. Every once in a while, Mrs. Michelsen said, she’d reach over and pop one in his mouth so he had red on his chin.

“Mrs. Michelsen,” Mama called when she saw her come around the fence. “Frank didn’t believe your berries were sweeter than what his grandmother grows down in Victoria, and I told him they were better than anything. So who was right?” she asked, taking a bite of her own and looking expectantly at Frank.

“Well,” Frank said, clowning with one hand under his chin as though it was a tough decision. “It’s been a difficult judging, but after extensive research –” he wiped berry off his chin with a finger, leaving a stain like old lipstick “– I believe the Michelsens have it by a berry.”

Mama hooted and raised her arms in victory. Her hair was a rusty auburn and had come down loose out of her ponytail and Mrs. Michelsen said when Mama smiled, she thought Frank was going to fall down from happiness on the spot.

“They were back there maybe an hour, picking and eating and even helping me rinse out buckets when I’d come around to the spigot. Your Mama had dirt and grass stains all on the hem of that dress but she looked like she’d died and gone to heaven.” Mrs. Michelsen was smiling down into the stock pot with glazed eyes. Steam rose off the surface of the preserves in waves.

“What happened?” I asked, twirling a berry in my palm like a top.

“Well,” she said slowly. “They’d finally filled those buckets and eaten enough to have a stomach ache when we heard another car pull up, and a whole batch of folks get out. We could hear them from around back – they were whooping and hollering. Your Mama kept laughing but Frank went kind of white and then he ducked his head into the bushes. I went inside to get empty buckets for the carload that’d showed up, and when I came back out, your Mama and Frank were gone.” Her chin flattened out in distaste. “They tore up my strawberry patch that day, the rest of those kids. One of the older Johnson boys and Racine Tuckett and four or five more of them. And little Emeline Ward, too.”

I dropped the berry. “Emeline?” I asked. She nodded.

“She was a terror,” Mrs. Michelsen said. “She had those boys picking berries for her while she sat on a kitchen chair six feet from the patch and made a fuss if any dirt got anywhere near her shoes, much less her hands. I guess some things never do change.”

“Did she see Frank and Mama?” I asked, smashing the berry with my fist.

Mrs. Michelsen looked at me sharply. “How would I know? I was too busy keeping Royce Johnson from tearing my berry bushes flat out of the ground. Well, I think we’re done for the day,” she said, her voice sweetening back to my kindergarten teacher. She took the towel out of my hands and herded me towards the door. “Same time next week, love.”

“But Mrs. Michelsen –” There was so much left to ask.

“That’s all for today, JoDell,” she said, and there was no arguing with her. The berry patch behind the house was overgrown and held back by rows of two-by-four fencing, and I could almost see Mama dancing through the bushes in her bare feet and Emeline propped away from the dirt. From the Michelsen truck’s back window, I watched the patch grow smaller until it was just a speck behind us on the road.

CHAPTER VIII

After Emeline showed up at the house and blew us all out of the water, Homily made herself scarce a while. The same day as Emeline's visit she met up with Randy Whitehouse and got work as a cocktail waitress out at the roadhouse. On account of Larry's schedule and in general how he felt about places like the Rooter Hog, he and I didn't spend much time there.

"I had enough foul air in the army to last a lifetime," he said the few times I suggested we meet Ray or Lil and have a beer. When Homily went to work out there I hadn't been to the roadhouse in more than a year.

For a while it was like nothing had changed and Homily barely even lived with us. I'd come home from the diner and she'd be off at work or in her room with the door pulled to. Lil would pass through and make herself a plastic cup of juice with a liberal helping of gin and head out to the roadhouse herself, or to Ramon's, or sometimes just stay on the couch and stare at the television until she dissolved into choking snores. Between Homily's hiding and Lil's eating and drinking and ignoring us all, it got to where I was living with ghosts. In Lil's case, I was afraid between her alcoholic black-outs and wheezing I would wake up one day and find her a ghost.

"I'm afraid she's going to pass out one night and not wake up," I said to Larry, one evening in early May. We were sitting on the deck, drinking sangria Ray had dropped off from Ramon's. "She won't go to the doctor and she won't lose weight, and

she sure as hell won't stop drinking. When I try to talk to her about it she just turns around and leaves. I don't know what to do."

"There's nothing you can do," Larry said. "She's got to make her own choices."

"I know. But that doesn't make me feel any better."

"You just want to help," he said, low and smooth.

"Don't patronize me." But I reached over and took his hand. We sat in silence for a while, drinking in the honeysuckle. A patch of yucca in the pasture bloomed into white tendrils. Homily's country music drifted through the open upstairs window.

"We should get married."

"What?" I bolted up and dropped his hand. "Why?"

"Why not?" The intensity in the line of his jaw made me tremble. "I love you."

I laughed. It wasn't funny and I didn't want to hurt him, but something in me cracked. "You got the best of me already," I said, leaning back in my chair. "You don't need to marry me for it."

"Maybe I want to marry you for it," he said. The way he looked at me – it was like he thought I was some perfect person who'd never do him any wrong. Like he didn't know me at all. "I've been thinking about it, and I think now is the time. Homily's here. She can help Lil. She's paying rent. She's seen Lil tore up. You and I can get married and get our own place."

"Homily?" I choked on my sangria.

"Yes?" she said, sticking her head out of the upstairs window. "JoDell?" Her voice was dripping with syrup. Larry stared at me with headlight-intensity.

“Yeah,” I said. “We were just talking about you, Homily. Why don’t you come down and have some sangria?”

Larry’s face fell.

“What?” I asked him. “We were talking about her. It’d be rude not to invite her down.”

“Will you at least think about it?”

“I’ll think about it.” Homily’s heavy footsteps rattled down the stairs. Larry stood up as she slid open the glass door. “Where’re you going?” I asked him.

“Home.”

“I love you,” I said. I did. When he stood to leave my whole chest ached. Homily stood in the doorway watching us.

“I know.” He leaned down and kissed me before he circled Homily and went inside. His engine thundered in the driveway and then died off down the street.

“He really doesn’t like me much, does he?” Homily asked.

“He doesn’t like me much either right now,” I said, sighing. “I wouldn’t worry about it.” I hadn’t been sure I’d ever want to talk to Homily again, and yet there she was in front of me, sitting down in Larry’s chair with a glass of wine.

“So,” she said. “How’ve you been?”

I glared at her. “Fine. We’ve already done this, Homily. You want to cut the bullshit?”

“What do you want me to say?” She shrugged back into herself. “I don’t know what to say to you.”

“The truth,” I said. “I know that’s foreign, but – try.”

“You know, that’s funny.” Her eyes burned. “I told you the truth. About Nashville and a lot of other things I haven’t told anyone else. And what happens? You go running around town, talking about me.”

“What?” Guilt darted through me. It was hard not to listen to stories about Homily around town, how Robin Michelsen’s second cousin saw her the year before shacked up with a dishonorably discharged soldier in Killeen, or Susan Parsons at the To Dye For talking about how Homily acted at the roadhouse, how she wrapped around the roughnecks in off the rigs. Even Lil had told me she’d seen Homily accidentally-on purpose drop a stack of cocktail napkins when a big tipper was watching. It got to where I’d ask about her if I saw Robin or Susan and then I was telling stories myself, not meaning to but because talking about someone sometimes comes easy in a small town.

Homily gulped her wine and wiped her mouth with her thumb. “You think you’re the only one talking? I know people are talking,” she said, staring off into the Jorgensons’ yard. “I’m not dumb.”

“No,” I said. The sun was starting to set again. The last time we’d been out on the deck, I’d thought we might be friends. “No, you’re not.”

She picked at the plastic nail on her index finger. “I’ve got to go to work,” she said. “Why don’t you come up to the roadhouse tonight? Maybe we can talk some more.” I didn’t say anything, just stared at the lime stranded at the bottom of my glass. When I looked at her, her eyes were narrowed but she was smiling like she knew what I was thinking. ““For God’s sake, JoDell, come on. I think you need a friend as bad as I do.”

She finished her wine in a final gulp and stood up, patting her chest until she burped like a bull frog. Against my best judgment, I smiled. “Gross,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “I’ll see you tonight.”

The thing was, I’d been thinking about going to the roadhouse anyway. Having Homily to speculate on started as another way to pass the time, but it spiraled into half hour conversations at the salon with Susan or Robin over a pedicure or a polish change. I didn’t exactly mean to talk about Homily, but it just came out easy and then next thing I knew I was eating lunch with Susan every couple of days or chatting with Robin at the grocery store, like I was somebody in town that mattered. Susan and I still eat lunch together, and she and Trevor Gentry, whom she married after he failed out of college and went to work for her daddy pumping leases, come in the diner every Friday and have dinner at the counter after their boys’ football games. When they go off together I watch them, thinking about how different things might’ve been if I’d only had been a different person when I first knew Larry. He comes in, too, after the games, and gives me a little hug across the counter. I know he knows how I feel about it, but some things, I’ve learned, can’t ever quite be forgotten.

It got so there was a nagging feeling in my stomach when I heard people talking about Homily like she was a movie star. If I saw her carrying drinks and looking like a seven-dollar whore in her tight skirts and halter tops, maybe I’d feel better about why she’d rather carry longnecks to drunks instead of bagging groceries at the Pig. I tried a time or two to shake off my curiosity but I won’t lie and say I tried very hard because I wanted to know what stories about her were true, and moreover I wanted a taste of what

it was like to be her, the center of attention. I guess I wanted a lot of things back then and it seems now like not one of them was the right thing.

When I came into the living room that evening with my keys, Lil looked up from her television show and looked me over real good and couldn't seem to decide between laughing and snorting. She compromised on something in between.

“Where do you think you're going?”

I picked up my handbag from the table in the entryway. “I thought I'd go out and see what Homily's doing at the roadhouse.”

“You did, did you?” she asked, and this time she laughed for real, not a nice laugh but one like she'd heard a story about someone getting what they deserved and she was happy about it.

“What?”

“Well,” she said. “I guess it just seems odd, you going off to a bar without your boyfriend. Where is that lay-about good-for-nothing, anyway?” She looked around like he might pop up from behind the television cabinet.

“He doesn't live here,” I said. “And stop calling him my boyfriend.”

“After so many years, you better be calling him your boyfriend. Or I might think of a few ugly names I could call you.” I opened my mouth. She smiled a sideways smile I knew from my childhood. I froze.

“Oh, no,” I said. “No ma'am. You're not tricking me into an argument with you and you're not making me feel guilty. I'm twenty-six years old and I have every right to go to a bar on a Friday night if I want to.” Her arm hung over the back of the couch like

chicken meat. I tilted my head back and opened my mouth and before I knew it, I said, “It’s not like staying home with me was ever enough to stop you and Mama.”

She popped her head back like something smelled bad. “Well, say what you have to say, JoDell Orsak. Don’t hold back.”

“It’s true.” My hands were sweating and I was hot all over but once I’d gotten the words out they wouldn’t stop. “And if you won’t talk to me about your drinking, maybe I should be spending more time out at the roadhouse. That way I can keep an eye on you from the other end of the bar.”

Lil flushed and under the red was guilt along with anger. She was silent for a moment, a great woman on the couch in a pair of big and tall men’s jeans and an old button-down cowboy shirt from Goodwill, even though she could afford to shop at the department stores in San Angelo or even down to Austin. She sat there and I glowered and just when I thought she was going to explode about what an ungrateful bitch I was, she said, “Well, I guess you’re old enough to make your own decisions. You’re right. Your mama did it and so did I and you’ve seen how we ended up. But you make up your own mind.”

She turned around to the television and turned up the volume. Guilt washed over me and put out the fire of indignation. I opened my mouth like a guppy and she flipped a hand at me without even turning. “Go on, now,” she said.

I didn’t know what it was I was going to say anyway. I took my keys and drove the few miles out to the roadhouse.

#

The roadhouse and the diner are two of the only original buildings left in Frankel City from my childhood. We've made it to the big time now, with the bookstore and the mall out on the highway and the downtown revitalization where all the old storefronts got torn down and anonymous brick-and-limestone boutiques were built in their place. I got the diner and the salon when Lil died of a massive coronary seven years ago this September, sitting in my Mama's living room in almost exactly the same place Mrs. Jorgenson found Mama on the day she finally went up to the hospital. Lil died and the diner went to me and Ramon, who's now too old to do anything but sit in the front booth and drink black tea and cuss the fry cooks who can't ever cook anything to his specification, and I have the accountant Larry found for me write him checks once a month or more if he needs it. When Lil died Ramon sat for a long time at her grave with his head in his hands even though they hadn't known each other in what Elaine Tesarik would have called the Biblical sense in twenty years, but he sat out there anyway and smoked a cigarette and clutched a bouquet of purple heather and pansies. Sometimes he leaves the diner and goes out there now, and if I happen by her grave when he's sitting out there I just pass on by.

The original roadhouse building in all its faded turquoise aluminum glory is still open where the business highway meets state highway 171, although Randy sold it to a couple from Houston sometime in the late nineties. They renamed it the Frankel City Ballroom and then went belly-up and it went to the Johnsons, one of whom added a grease kitchen and rebuilt the bar with reclaimed barn wood and called it the Frankel City Hall. It's become a place for tourists to stop on their way out to the monthly flea market

in New Mexea and eat chicken fried steak and drink Pabst Blue Ribbon from the tap, which any real Texan will tell you isn't beer.

So I drove over to the roadhouse and walked through the white koleche parking lot after double-checking the locks on my Hyundai and parking it as far away from Ray's jacked-up Chevrolet as possible. Inside, the jukebox was jumping and Randy Whitehouse, a burly man with a tattoo stretching up and around his neck, was carrying five beer steins in one hand to the far end of the bar. When I walked in I took a deep breath of smoky air and stopped to take it in and, really, to see if anyone noticed me to say hello. Nobody looked up, and so after a moment of standing like a dumb barber pole I edged my way along the shifting mass of bodies on the dance floor to the bar. Cocktail tables, cedar and polyurethane, gleamed in the overhead lights. Behind the cocktail lounge shadows leaned over one end of a shuffleboard table and pool balls clacked.

"JoDell?" Homily said from behind me. She wasn't smiling. Her left hip was thrust out to one side and on her left arm she balanced a tray full of empty beer bottles. There was a spill of something red down her yellow tank top that smelled of peppermint.

"Hey," I said, feeling nothing short of a fool. I was half-convinced to head to Larry's place and tuck into bed next to him when Homily's forehead cleared and her eyes crinkled up at the corners.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said, and I'll tell you what, I really believe she meant that. She was happy to see me and with her empty right hand she grabbed my arm just above the elbow and shook it hard enough to leave blue marks the next day. "I knew

you'd get over yourself," she said. The good feeling wore off some. "Or, I mean, give it a chance," she said. "What do you want to drink? It's on the house."

"Gin and tonic," I said. Two tables down, a Mexican spun his hat on the cedar tabletop and gulped whiskey. Ray.

"Okay. Where –"

"I'm good," I said. I pointed at Ray's table. She smiled and faded into the crowd.

Ray lurched up when I set my purse on the table. "Hey, mija," he said, whiskey-flushed. "What're you doing here? I haven't seen you here in forever." He swiveled around. "Where's Larry?"

"At home." When he leaned over to talk I could smell whiskey, and underneath it – pine air freshener? "Are you wearing cologne?" I asked.

"No." The flush deepened. "What're you –"

"You're wearing cologne." I punched him in the arm. His bicep was hard like a tree limb. "Who're you trying to pick up?"

Susan Parsons scooted by with Trevor on the dance floor, six inches from my shoulder. She tapped me and waved. Ray cocked his head to the side and looked at me the way Ramon did when he was pretending not to understand English

"You're one to talk," Ray said. "Did someone paint you into those jeans?"

"Alright, alright." I couldn't stop smiling. He tapped his fingers and slid the chew in his mouth from one cheek to the other. I hadn't seen Ray interested in a girl for more than six hours since our brief make-out session in junior high. "Don't tell me. But don't think I won't figure it out."

“How’s Lil?” He looked around again. “Where’s Lil?”

“She’s at home, too,” I said. Lying on the couch, forgetting my name. “I’m worried about her; I think she really needs help. Do you think Ramon could talk her into going to the doctor?”

Ray snorted. “Ramon? If she quit drinking, he’d have to quit, too. Besides, who in this town doesn’t need help?” He sounded like Homily Hope.

“If you don’t like it, why don’t you leave?” I asked. His eyes darkened and I thought he would at least cuss me like he had when we were kids, but he grinned instead.

“You going to poke me in the eye again?” Ray asked. He laughed and it was the sound of my childhood, the diner, saying the Our Father at Christ the Redeemer, muttering red-faced as I leaned against the roller rink wall. Mama had saved three weeks to buy me blue and green jersey shorts. My knees were scarred from the skid I’d taken across the parquet floor. Ray helped me up and we snuck outside, a pre-arranged rendezvous.

“You’re supposed to know what you’re doing,” I’d said to him. The dumpster behind us reeked of rotten pizza and sugar.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “I do.” He pushed his face into mine and put his hand on my chest. I didn’t have much of a chest but it seemed like the right thing to do, so I let him. Heat built up under his hand and my knees and thighs went tingly and loose, but I couldn’t tell if it was because of what we were doing or because he was cutting off my circulation where he leaned against me.

“Hey,” I said, around his mouth, pushing back on his chest. He didn’t move.

“Hey,” I said. I opened my eyes. His face was squinched up like he was thinking hard. I reached up and poked him in the eye, the way Lil had told me to do if a man tried to touch me on the street.

“Chinga, Jo,” he said, stumbling back. “What’d you do that for?” He’d torn the sleeves off his t-shirt and the sides were damp with sweat.

“I don’t know.” I pulled the door open and the blessed cool of air conditioning blasted across my face, but my hand on the door was trembling and my knees still felt like jelly. When I went back in, he was standing like I’d stolen his lollipop. Poor Ray, I’d thought.

Poor Ray, I thought again, looking at him fidgeting with his hat on the table. He’d pinched me on the arm at Mama’s funeral and I’d burst into tears. He took a big swig of whiskey and finished it but for a swallow at the bottom.

“You’re right,” he said. “Nobody would miss me.”

“Oh, poor you,” I said, picking up his glass and taking the last drink. “Ramon would miss you. Paul would miss you at the shop. We’d miss your lawn work.”

On the dance floor, Trevor two-stepped Susan into a pretzel turn. Ray laughed.

“Thanks.”

“Anything to make you feel better.”

He rattled the ice in his glass. As if on cue, Homily reappeared, squeezing between two Harnett County rodeo clowns.

“One gin and tonic,” she said, contorting around me to set it on the table. She had her kilowatt smile turned on again and bumped Ray with her hip. “You want another one?”

Ray reddened and looked at his hands and then at me and finally back to Homily. He was wearing cologne. Of course he was wearing cologne. “Sure, Homily,” he said.

“Well, look who’s dancing with Royce Johnson.” Homily jerked her chin at Royce leading LeeAnne Pulczynski around the floor like a tugboat. “You think she likes him because his daddy willed him the Chevy dealership or just because he said he’d build her a custom home out on the lake if she married him?”

“Homily,” Ray said.

“You know her mama married a developer up in Highland Park,” I said. Susan had mentioned it to me over her last pedicure. Homily leaned an elbow on Ray’s shoulder and watched them appraisingly. “You think she’d stay out here in podunk if he hadn’t promised her half the county and part of the town, too?”

“Podunk?” Ray shot a stream of tobacco juice out the side of his mouth. It landed an inch from the toe of my boot. “You two are going to hell.”

“You want to drive or just ride in the back?” I asked, more harshly than I meant. His shoulders went tense. From the bar, Randy flicked a towel at Homily and mouthed something over the jukebox.

“What?” she yelled, but he was pointing towards the front door. A man with a black pompadour was sweating rings on the collar of his velour coat and glaring at us.

“Do you know him?” I asked Homily, but she just stared.

“Oh. Oh, shit.” He was walking towards our table. She shrank back behind Ray but even with his chest swollen up, he couldn’t hide Homily Hope’s platinum hair. Ray stood just as the man reached the table.

“Homily,” the man said, in a voice so full of sugar Elvis would’ve been jealous. “How’ve you been, love?”

“Eddie,” she stuttered. “Eddie, don’t –”

And then quick as a snake Eddie pulled back and belted Ray in the jaw with a nauseating thunk.

CHAPTER IX

I think Ray was supposed to fall down. But sometimes small minds in small towns are right, and they had one thing right about Ray Martinez – he had a head harder than steel.

“Ray,” I said, stepping forward. Ray rubbed his jaw. I was close enough to see Eddie’s cheek was soft and pale like a woman’s before Ray smashed his nose into a crater of bone and cartilage with a swinging hammer of a fist.

“Son of a bitch,” Randy thundered from the bar. Eddie stumbled back into the rodeo clowns, who took a collective look at his greasy hair and Ray’s murderous face and tossed Eddie against the bar. Glasses crashed. A trucker ended up with beer across his shirt from the clown named Joe Bull and picked him up by the collar and rammed him into Randy, who’d rushed around the bar to break things up. Royce Johnson jumped the trucker from behind. Trevor Gentry shoved Susan under a booth and ran at the melee. I was crouching against the dance floor railing when a hand closed down over my wrist.

“C’mon,” Homily shouted. Someone crashed into the jukebox. Bob Wills stuttered and sang on. She reached up and grabbed my purse off the table.

“What’re you doing?” I yelled, but she was pulling me toward the pool tables. A bar stool flew past my head. We ran down the hall past the bathroom and the walk-in cooler to the broken emergency exit door. The parking lot on the other side was warm and dark and the koleche glimmered through the heat.

“Holy shit,” Homily said, panting and laughing and dragging me along. Her Seville was tucked between the dumpster and Randy’s Corvette. “Holy, holy shit. Did that really just happen?” We were at the fender of the Seville when I finally wrenched my arm away. She opened the driver’s side door and tossed my purse in.

“You’re okay, right?” she asked, when I didn’t move. “Nobody hit you?”

I put my hands on my hips. “What the hell was that? Who the hell is Eddie?”

Homily looked from the car to me to the back door and back to me and dropped her hands. “Look. Eddie’s a guy I knew in Tennessee, and he’s probably not too far off from figuring out I’m gone.” She paused. “If he’s not dead,” she added. She didn’t look too broken up at the idea.

“But what about Ray? And Randy?”

“JoDell, come on.” She waved at the passenger door. “Ray was handling himself fine, and I’ll just give Randy a blow job next time I come in.” My jaw dropped. Part of me wanted to punch the grin off her face. “Seriously,” she said, when I just stood there. “I’m leaving before Eddie figures out where I went. Are you coming or what?”

Sirens bleated in the distance. Voices spilled from around the front of the building. Homily climbed into the cavernous front seat of the Seville.

“Damn it,” I said. “Goddamn it, Homily.” But there was a flare of adrenaline in my chest. I rounded the bumper as she revved the engine.

Frankel City sits on the Colorado River just as it comes south into the hill country out of the north Texas plains, before it turns farther southeast and feeds off down to Victoria and the Gulf of Mexico. Until the state highway came through, the only way to

get to town was to come down off the east-west interstate thirty miles to the north and turn onto River Road, coming down so steep out of the hills that the road was built in a series of switchbacks. The river itself feeds through a system of dams and down into Rock Hammer Lake, the lake that Emeline's house and the uphill neighborhoods overlook, and from the lake the river falls across state dam 451, what we all call City Dam. From City Dam the river runs further down into town, into the bayous and tributaries like the one behind Mama's old house, and then out of town around the abandoned water treatment plant where River Road comes to an end. Out at that end of town, River Road crosses Travis and then rises up over the Colorado in a slow arcing bridge fifty feet above the water and comes down into the heat-cracked asphalt of the plant parking lot.

Homily pulled off to the side of the River Road at the gate near the mouth of the bridge, an old ranch gate bastardized and brought up to the river and padlocked to keep out trespassers. Someone had cut the padlock off the chain. She parked under a stand of heavy oak, and when she turned off her headlights everything in front of us went opposite like a picture negative. The river and the bridge and the gray boxes of buildings beyond were light against the trees and the sky. Homily reached behind my seat and pulled out a bottle of cheap vodka from Lil's stash in the garage.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. I climbed out and slammed the door behind me. Cicadas whined from the trees. "So what's down here?"

“We are.” I couldn’t see the expression on her face, but her voice sounded like I was a little slow. She walked away from me, up the side of the bridge until she was fifty feet out and leaning over the railing, a skeleton out over the water. Something deep in my chest turned over. I followed her out onto the pockmarked pavement.

The lights from town behind me faded out. Moonlight glinted off the liquor in the bottle when Homily tilted it up and took a drink. She was faced north, towards the hills and her mama’s house, and she sat down with her legs dangling off onto the water and her boots kicking. I gripped the railing and walked out until I was standing right behind her. She twisted her head and grinned.

“Sit down.”

“I’m okay.” I sat down anyway, not with my feet hanging off but back on the concrete. There were potholes and cracks in the road. She shrugged at me and turned back around and looked up into the hills, and for a minute I couldn’t breathe.

I knew kids in high school who used to park out in the treatment plant parking lot or build bonfires out in the scrubby woods behind it, but I’d never been out on the bridge myself. From where we were sitting, from where Homily sat, especially, we could see straight up the river to City Dam, and beyond that, the placid mirror face of the lake and a thousand sparkling lights from houses, porch and street lights, gold and white and stretching on so far up I had to crane my neck back to figure out where the hill country ended and the sky began.

“Wow.”

Homily laughed. “Yeah,” she said. “We used to come out here to drink and – well, you know. You know I was just kidding about giving Randy a blow job, right?” It wasn’t really a question.

I shrugged, still staring past her at all that tunnel of river and trees and hillside.

“I’m not like that. Everybody thinks I am, but I’m not,” she said, but her voice sounded off. She was hunched over the railing with her arms hanging like a broken doll and then she laughed and it was a noise like ash, burning leaves, and she said, “Now. Anymore, anyway.”

She had her head down and her chin against her chest and she set the bottle of vodka next to her on the pavement, not far from where the edge of the concrete cut a welt into the back of her thighs. The way I saw it she had six inches of pavement between her and sliding right off the bridge and never being heard from again. Her ponytail draped down one arm, the crimping falling out at the roots where dark was showing behind the platinum. I picked up the bottle of vodka and took a burning drink, and then scooted up next to her near the edge and tucked my legs to the side like a little girl.

“So what was that all about?” I asked.

Homily giggled. “That was amazing, is what that was. Do you think Ray broke Eddie’s nose?”

“You need to be kind to Ray,” I said “He has a crush on you.”

She stopped smiling. “He’s just the lawn boy. Why do you care?” she asked. I didn’t answer. She put her chin on the bottom rung of the railing. “Mama would love that.”

“What happened to your mom?”

She reached over and took the vodka out of my hand, not rough but definitely not asking. “She’s crazy.”

“Homily, I’m sure she’s not crazy.” I didn’t even believe myself when I said it.

“Oh, she is,” Homily said. The moon was shifting in and out behind the clouds and in the shafting light the space beneath her eyes was shrouded. I could smell the vodka on her unsteady breath. “Mama’s the kind of crazy that doesn’t have an off switch.”

“Is that why you wanted to stay with us?” I asked. The pavement pressed hieroglyphs into the skin of my calves. “Is that why you lied to me?”

“I didn’t think you’d believe me,” she said. “She’s done a pretty good job of hiding it all these years.”

“Lil knew.”

“Yeah.” Homily twisted her head to look at me. “I wondered about that. How did she know?”

I shrugged, but I wasn’t ready to let it go. “You didn’t have to lie to me,” I said. “What you said about nobody wanting you –” I trailed off in a wet rush of river breeze. Would there ever be a day when thinking of my father didn’t cut me in two?

“I know,” she said. “But I didn’t think you’d let me stay with you if it was just because I didn’t want to have to wash dishes in Clorox and lye.” She took a drink and handed me the bottle. “Would you?”

“I don’t know.” Above us, the lake was flat and still like glass. “Maybe. But you can’t use stuff like that against people.”

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was saccharine. She must have known it, too, because she said in a huskier voice, “I went to Susan’s and the Huxleys’ and a couple of other people’s, but when they opened the door they all looked at me like they were – I don’t know. Like they were hungry, you know. Like they would help me but only because it would mean they finally had something on me. I couldn’t do it. Susan told me about you. I was desperate.”

I smiled and set the bottle on the pavement. “Thanks.”

“You know what I mean.” She shifted to the side and tilted her head down toward the water and for a minute I thought she was going to just let go and disappear and never be heard from again. “I remembered in school you were nice to me. I know you were trying to help me that day with my dad, too. I just thought – maybe.”

I sat there for a while after she finished, listening to the river under the bridge. The rushing of the water filled me, like someone had turned on the tap and I couldn’t turn it off. Homily’s face was light and shadow and half turned away and the way she was holding her head like she was the only person in the world made me want to put my arms around her and let her cry in the hollow of my chest, and at the same time the world around me was the dome of sky and the river bank opening up in front of us. What could I say that would mean anything in the face of the endlessness of that river and that sky? It felt like what the Catholics talked about when they talked about forgiveness but instead of burning incense and dry words it was warm and solid. Homily stared at me and I had a moment of wondering if it was just me and maybe I was crazy after all and then she pulled her legs up from underneath the bridge and folded them to the side and lay down

on the pavement so her ponytail wound up underneath her and her head was in my lap. I had to fight the physical quickening to cover her over with my own body like a human shell, and instead I leaned back on my palms and she looked upriver at a light that could have been her mother's house and asked, "Do you believe in salvation?"

I leaned to the side she was laying to and propped up on my forearm. The exhaust and asphalt and the fragrant green of wet grass and river melded together and drifted over us. "No," I said. "But I believe in redemption."

"My mom's really crazy," she said. She said something else, but it got carried away in a wet rush. I leaned down over her to hear it again and my hair fell into her face and she blew it away with a puff of air.

"Crazy," she said. "I don't know what to do. It wasn't as bad when I was younger but when my dad left –" Somewhere down Travis, miles away, a police siren howled and just as quickly cut off. "She lost it. She'd spend her time all day cleaning and doing her nails and her hair and putting on makeup. She'd fix her hair and get ready and put on an outfit like she was going somewhere and then walk into the bedroom and lay down on the bed and stare at the ceiling for a while, and then get up and walk into the shower – fully clothed, just like that – and wash it all off and start over. She wouldn't let me leave the house without nails done, hair done, makeup done, skirt and nylons – all of it. Sometimes I'd get ready to leave and she'd look at me and tell me I had to go take a shower and get ready again because I didn't look right the first time. If I didn't do it, she'd take a wet washcloth and wipe my face until it was raw."

Her mouth kept working after the words stopped. I thought about her father, and how much I'd wanted to be her, and without realizing it I'd picked up the vodka bottle and was holding it in my right hand so the veins in my wrist were popping out.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But if you'd told me, I still would've let you stay. You don't have to lie to me."

She rolled onto her back so the back of her head was on my thigh and then reached behind and pulled her ponytail out so it lay like a rope around my knee. "I know."

"Really?" I wanted to believe her.

She was silent for a few minutes, and then she shot up to sitting and took the bottle for a long drink. Her forehead was clenched and her eyes were fierce. "Okay," she said. "Okay, I'm sorry. I won't do it again." And when she said it she hunched her shoulders and I remembered again how being somebody in the seventh grade meant Homily Hope acknowledged your presence and instead of feeling like I might live forever there in the blackness of the river I just felt alone. She patted me on the leg and said, "Let's be friends, okay? I kind of need that right now."

Broken glass sparkled on the lip of the bridge. "Okay," I said.

She rolled her head from side to side until her neck popped, and said in a casual voice, "You know, you never have told me why you came up to my house that day. The day with my dad, I mean."

I frowned.

"What?" she asked. "We're friends."

The nail on my right index finger was ragged. There was a crescent shaped strip of nail hanging from the tip. My hands in dishwater, under dishwater. Emeline in the shower in all her expensive clothes. Homily's face, scrubbed raw. "Your dad knew my mom in high school," I said. "She was sick. I just wanted to talk to someone who knew her."

My head was light from the alcohol. She stared upriver, at the lights near her parents' house, and sadness curved lines around her mouth. "I'm sorry she died."

"Thank you," I said, blinking. "Me, too." We were silent for a few minutes, until it was cry or scream or change the subject. "So what are you going to do about Ray?"

"What can I do?" she asked. "A girl's got to have fans, right?" She stretched like a cat and then raised her arms up at the sky and howled. I couldn't help but laugh to see her like that. The moon shone down on us and the river and all the wide open space in the valley and I howled, too, and we just sat there, passing the bottle and yowling at the drivers out on River Road and scaring the river cats.

When we came home, late in the evening, Lil was still on the couch, her head back in the cushions, snoring to wake the dead and with an empty bottle of gin next to her. I reached down to shake her awake and help her into bed as Homily disappeared up to her room, Homily who had a way of making everyone around her look at her so it was like people were doing things for her instead of her bringing them beers and emptying ashtrays. Lil gaped and shuddered. I watched for a minute, my hand on her shoulder, flicking between Lil and the empty spot on the stairs where Homily had just disappeared, and then shucked off my boots and left her on the couch and followed Homily up the

stairs to bed. Only after I'd washed my face and confronted the dark of my bedroom alone did I realize Homily had never told me about Eddie.

CHAPTER X

When I was very young, Mama would come home from work on payday Fridays and put me in the big front seat of her red Buick Regal and carry me up the highway to the Steak Away in New Mexea, the next town north of Frankel City. She'd strap me in and I'd finger the places where the upholstery was burnt from cigarette ash or worn from me and a hundred other people I may or may not have known. I'd watch the road spool by in ribbons of blacktop and smell the humidity and in general feel the way the world opened out from me there in the car, the fields and flowers and pastures spreading from my chest like great spans of wings. Mama would crank the gears and roll the windows down so the heat would roll in and we'd turn up the radio and listen to Hank Williams or Willie Nelson. We'd sing along to the songs we knew and make up the words to the songs we didn't. On the way home the sun would always be setting out along the horizon, an unbroken stretch of land to the west that seemed to go on and on in my mind and somehow in my body, too, like I might could reach out and hold in all that great unbroken land, the pastures spotted with cattle and mesquite and oak trees curled around themselves like they were hiding from the sun, like somehow I could suck all that in and hold it and carry it with me whenever I went wherever I would go when I grew up, wherever I would go to find the place I would be somebody other than who I was in Frankel City. I thought maybe if I could hold it all in I could keep it with me, so wherever I went I'd always have home with me, too.

Mama would drive for what seemed like miles and when we'd arrive there'd be someone there waiting for us, some fellow she'd been dating, like Wayne, or a friend of hers from the old folks home, or sometimes Lil, and sometimes they'd ask why she thought she had to bring her car all the way out to New Mexea when we could all just ride together out of town. She'd just smile and say, I got to get my time in with my girl. We'd eat steak fingers with ketchup and French fries fried in real grease, none of that polyunsaturated-fat no-taste oil we use at the diner these days, and I'd lick my fingers and watch her there in the booth, her back to the window and her napkin tipping off her lap and her long nails tapping her cigarette into the ashtray as she laughed at whatever Wayne or whoever had to say. When we got done they'd always ask to walk her to the car and if it was one of her boyfriends try to put an arm around her and she'd just laugh and pull me in close to her waist and say, Nope, just me and my girl tonight. We'd be off back down the highway, me trying to swallow up all of Texas and her singing at the top of her lungs to the radio and lighting cigarettes with the lighter in the dash and grinning at me from the side of her mouth.

We'd stop on our way back to town and ride through the Dairy Mart drive-through, ignoring the high school kids ringing the parking lot in Corvairs and hot-shot pickup trucks. I'd get a chocolate dipped cone and she'd get a cherry-limeade with extra ice and we'd ride down along the river, watching how the lights glanced off the water and the wild roses skimmed the surface with their branches every time a car came across an overpass and blew them down. I've never seen anything as beautiful as those nights, the way the sun set across the sky, shooting sparks through the pastures and bathing the cattle

in a haze of red and orange, and the light catching in Mama's hair and her sparkling eyes and when I do think about it now it's all I can do not to put my head in my hands and cry. The hurt is in the deep part of me, down where I keep memories I don't think I could explain to anyone no matter how many words I know.

Mama would take me to the Steak Away those nights and then the next night Mrs. Jorgenson, back before the accident with Sharla and Jené and she had to take care of Jené and the twins, would come over and take care of me, and Wayne or Bobby Johnson, before he died, or Lil, would turn up and pick up Mama and take her down to the Rooter Hog or sometimes the Cotton Club. I'd stand at the window in the living room while Mrs. Jorgenson watched television and worked needlework on her wooden ring and chattered to me in Czech-English, and I'd watch their taillights pull away and worry about Mama coming back in the middle of the night with the stale-sharp smell of liquor and something else, fake pine or fake leather or sometimes just a sickly sweet humidity, and kissing me good night. When she smelled like that I wanted to duck under the covers and hide from her.

I've tried to remember when it was she stopped seeing folks, first the men and then Lil and Mrs. Jorgenson, too, because I think that's when she knew the cancer was taking hold – not all at once, but a little at a time, first the dates spaced out two weeks, a month, two months, and then the days when she started picking up extra shifts and could do nothing when she got home but collapse on the couch, and then weeks she'd not answer Lil's calls, and Lil had to start using her key to get in because Mama wouldn't answer the door. I believe the beginning of her end came in early 1974, and for two years

she retreated from Frankel City and her boyfriends and her friends and eventually even me, so the day I skipped school for the first time she had almost no time left. It's one of the last days I remember from that fall, before the doctors finally got hold of her and put her in the hospital and stuck her full of tubes underneath a plastic tent.

It was a Wednesday, the day I set out to meet Frank Walpole. I told Mama I had detention in the morning and I had to leave extra early and she frowned at me from the table, leaning into her elbows and drinking iced tea. She didn't drink coffee ever, my mama. She said it was bad for her heart.

"You have detention already?" she asked.

My tongue felt too big for my mouth. "I was late to class," I said. "Mr. Hanesford is a stickler for being on time."

The skin around her eyes and along her cheekbones was so thin the blue veins beneath were visible. "Well, I guess I could take you to school, then."

"No, Mama," I said, standing up straight against the counter and turning so she couldn't see my panic. "I mean, nobody's parents take them to school anymore."

My back was hot from her gaze. Part of me wanted her to tell me to turn around and demand an explanation, but she just sighed. "JoDell, is there anything you want to tell me?"

I rotated like a ballerina on a jewelry box. She was sitting up straighter than she had in weeks, watching me with the skin around her eyes creased like wrinkled paper. She'd been so regal in her yearbook picture, not long after her parents died, curled tight around her books with Lil and the Johnson brothers and Frank Walpole, and that morning

her jeans flopped around her hips and her bones poked through her clothes like spikes. She looked like a ghost and I couldn't move or speak or do anything but stand there dumb and think about the difference between the two of them. When I finally got my voice back, I wanted to say things about my father and about how I was getting old enough to know, and how I wanted her to be home more often, too, and paint my nails again. But when I looked down at the table I saw her hands were shaking and I knew she needed a cigarette and then all I wanted to do was run out the door as fast as I could and never, never come back, so I just shook my head and said, "No, Mama. Everything's fine."

She leaned back in her chair and studied me from head to toe like she hadn't seen me in a long time. But in the end she just nodded and said, "Alright, then." I leaned down to hug her and she kissed me on the forehead. She was sitting there when I left, while the blackbirds in the huisatche tree shook the branches so bean pods drooped onto the windowsill and her hands still shaking on the tabletop. She smiled and said, "I love you, Jo."

I showed up at the diner at 6:45 a.m. I'd never come in so early, and the whole way walking up to downtown I ducked my head and stuck to the far side of the sidewalk away from the street, my heart pounding in my chest. There were only a few trucks in the pipe shop when I walked past, and I could hear the murmur of the giant cooling tower and air handlers out back even though the sun wasn't all the way up. Even at that early hour, heat seeped from the doors.

The sun was breaking dawn when I opened the door to the diner and the bell clanked when I walked in. One of the girls Lil's uncle hired part-time to help out during the busy shifts, Peggy, was working behind the counter, filling coffee cups for company men and drillers on their way out to the rigs. The place was half-full and lush with the smell of frying bacon and hash browns and the pastry case was down to the last two kolaches. I sat down in a booth near the front window and waved at Peggy. She was going to Harnett County Community College on her off days and by the time I started working at the diner two years later, had graduated with her associate's degree and gone to work for the new hospital in San Angelo as a nurse's aide.

"Hey, JoDell," Peggy yelled from the counter.

"Hey Peggy," I said, trying to sound like I spent every pre-dawn morning in the diner's front booth. "Busy today?"

She just shook her head as she came around the corner and trotted towards a table of drillers with two platters of biscuits and sausage gravy in her hands. When she came by my table she dropped off a cup and saucer and a few minutes later appeared with a coffee pot and filled it, smiling and pushing at her ponytail with a sweaty hand before rushing off. I stared at the coffee like it was alive, examined the cup from all sides and finally, for the first time in my life, breathed the steam in and took a sip. It burned my tongue and tasted like dirt.

It never occurred to me to put creamer or sugar in the coffee. Maybe I was too busy pulling out my school notebook, the one I'd tucked my notes about Mr. Walpole into, the one I'd worried the edges raw over the last few days waiting for the right time to

go back to the diner and wait for him to show. I pulled the list out, written in perfect rows with numbers and sub-letters underneath a number to add extra detail. I'd copied his name, phone number and address from the phone book under the number one, along with the make, model and color of his car, thanks to Mr. Paul. I'd even made note of the license plate number and how neat the car was, the pine scented air freshener he used, the plastic sack in the back seat for trash. Number two on the list were his particulars: his hair color, how tall I thought he might be, the clothes he wore on different days, the colors of his suits and blazers and bow-ties. I'd even seen him once on a Sunday, in khaki shorts and a sweater vest, running out of his office to his idling car, the nose of a golf club peeking up from his back seat. His socks had been pulled halfway up his calves like he was a basketball player. Under the number three, I'd written what I'd found in Mama's yearbook, all his activities, superlatives, even a careful copy of his cramped note and a tracing of his handwritten signature. I'd made stars next to the items I thought were the same to us both, so I would know what to say to him, about our hair, or the way we both kept things in good order, or even how I could sing just like Homily, if not better. Warmth seeped through my chest as I read numbers one through three again, watching out the diner window as the sun surrounded the courthouse with scorching morning-time heat.

Number four was not nearly as satisfying as the first three items on my list. I'd written four in pencil, and there were rub marks on the paper where I'd erased notes and re-written them. Under four, I'd penciled in what I knew about his family. Of course, I knew Homily Hope – we'd never been friends, but you don't go to grades one through

nine with someone in a town like Frankel City without knowing something about a person. I'd written all her activities by her name, and in small letters hidden in the shadow of words like cheerleader and drama club, I'd written what I knew about her that wasn't in the yearbook – the way I'd seen her with Jimmy Don Huxley in the parking lot of the Dairy Mart, in the back seat of his car, when I knew her Daddy was at work and her mama was selling real estate. In even smaller letters I'd written sister, over and over in a circle in a way that made my heart beat hard under my tank top.

I didn't know much about Mrs. Walpole. She rarely came into town and I'd only seen her once or twice at school with Homily. If she did drive through town and Lil saw her out the window, she'd make an odd gesture almost like the evil eye and then disappear into the kitchen. I found Emeline's picture in Mama's yearbook, a class younger than Mama and Mr. Walpole, and copied out her name. Emeline Ward, I'd written, in a cursive script like southern front porches and the few days in the spring when the honeysuckle bloomed so thick the sweetness made me woozy. I imagined the way Emeline looked on her wedding day, her plain face framed in ivory, her dress all chiffon and lace to cover the roundness of her tummy and the way her hips curved out in a heart to her behind. Homily had been in there and I'd been in my own Mama's womb, and somehow the idea that we were in those wombs, no more than five miles apart, made the word sister stand out sharper on the page. It made me think of Homily in the backseat of Jimmy's car with a sort of love-pity instead of disgust.

I studied my list and the pitiful splotch of information under the number four, and outside the courthouse bell tolled seven and then seven thirty, and the drillers thinned out

until it was only Peggy and me in the diner and her with her nose stuck in a book at the end of the counter. It was time to start looking for Mr. Walpole – I'd never been there early enough to see him get to work, but I figured my father would be punctual. Across Main on Travis, the shades were still drawn at his office. My hands trembled as I left a quarter on the table and went outside into the morning light and sat down on my bench to wait.

I sat and watched while the whole of downtown woke up under the crows and the Indian sun. Royce Johnson, second in charge at the dealership since Bobby died, came idling through town in his silver Chevy pickup on his way to the car lot on the highway. Mr. Jorgenson came around the corner, plucky with his cane, headed to the diner for his morning egg sandwich. The Mexican roughnecks sat in their trucks outside Mr. Paul's Texaco at the corner of Travis and River Road, just barely in my field of vision, with the pimply faced counter clerk staring hard at them until Susan Parsons' daddy pulled into the parking lot and scared them along. The hippie couple who owned the natural health store put their keys in the lock as the courthouse bells rang eight-fifteen; Peggy ran off the last of the drillers at eight-thirty with a swat on the butt with her counter towel and headed outside for a smoke. Where was he? At eight-forty-five, I got a start when Mr. Walpole's clerk, a pretty blond girl who graduated from the University of Texas, showed up at the front door of his office and unlocked the doors and opened all the shades. I leaned forward on my knees and stared hard at the window, trying to penetrate the plate-glass to see inside, but all I could make out was her dim shape moving back and forth, and then – nothing.

Nine. Peggy came back into the diner from her smoke break, patting me on the arm as she walked through the door. Nine-thirty and I glanced behind me through the diner window and saw Mr. Jorgenson wiping his mouth and waving Peggy over for more coffee. The air in the courthouse square was thick and warm and hard to breathe. I sat on my hands as the clock inched its way around to ten and then ten-thirty and still no Mr. Walpole and finally, at ten-forty-five when I thought my bones and muscles might jump straight out of my skin, the office door opened and the blond clerk came out and locked up and shaded her eyes from the sun and made her way up Travis towards my bench.

Her hips were small and round and her hair shimmied in the sunlight under the marled glare of the courthouse. Sweat beaded up on my neck as she made the corner at Travis and came right up by me and then turned into the diner, smiling at me when she passed, not in Homily Hope's snotty Queen of Sheba way but in a way that said, I see you, you don't have to worry about me. I watched her through the door and glanced back at the courthouse clock and then stuffed my notebook into my bag and followed her inside.

"Where's the boss today?" Peggy was asking. I went to slide into my booth by the front door and face away from them but Mr. Walpole's clerk smiled at me again, and the way she did it was so open and full of teeth I sat at the counter a few stools down.

"He's working from home today," the clerk said. I had to close my mouth to keep from crying out my disappointment. Today? He was working from home today?

"So are you taking the day off, then?"

The clerk smiled at Peggy, but her voice was light. "I have to run a few errands but I think I'll make it back this afternoon. We've got a lot of work to do." Her forehead creased. "You wouldn't believe how people keep their taxes in this town. I had no idea how duplicitous people could be."

"Well, people are people," Peggy said, filling a Styrofoam coffee cup and shaking her head as though this meant something. I clutched my hands on the counter, reeling. He wasn't coming. Peggy and the clerk chatted for another minute but I didn't hear any of it. My father wasn't coming. I'd lied to Mama, to Mr. Pulczinski, taken up for Homily, for nothing. The clerk took her coffee and as she passed me on her way out the door, she nodded at me, and even through my fog of disappointment I saw again how pretty and friendly she was. How I wished to be that way if I ever came out of my ugly duckling phase! I wouldn't ignore people and be mean like Homily Hope. No, I would smile and make people feel like the sun was shining down on them.

When the door closed behind the clerk, Peggy hunched down over the counter and sighed. "I guess you want a Coke and a grilled cheese, then, before I get out of here?"

"Sure." I was watching the girl as she disappeared up the street. Mr. Walpole wasn't coming. He was working from home. My sister's home. My future home. I shot up straight, my anguish evaporating.

Peggy didn't move. "It must be something." She threw her towel down on the counter and wiped her hands on her apron. "What're you doing here on a school day, anyway?"

"School project," I said.

“Well.”

But I wasn't really listening to her. An idea was there in my mind, a new plan – a better plan. Peggy went to the back and put together my grilled cheese because Ramon had disappeared again, and the idea grew and bloomed until it was shining over my head and I was afraid when Peggy came back she'd be able to see it. I heard the back door open and another of the part time girls come in and as Peggy came back from the kitchen, untying her apron and carrying my grilled cheese, I heard the clerk say again how Mr. Walpole was working from home and I knew only God could have arranged this golden opportunity. What better place for our meeting to take place than the Walpole house? He wouldn't have to drive me anywhere; I'd already be home. My stomach felt ready to fly out my throat. Peggy rinsed her hands in the sink behind the counter and fluffed her hair. I gulped down my grilled cheese and asked her for a ride.

CHAPTER XI

“He was my agent,” Homily said when I asked her about Eddie the day after the bar fight. “He was in love with me and when I told him it was over he was very upset. But I thought he was over it.” She rubbed her temple. The loose nail on her index finger had broken off.

“One might think he’s not,” Lil said from the table, cupping her coffee. “Over it, I mean,” she added, when I furrowed my brow at her.

“I thought your agent quit calling you back,” I said.

“Different agent,” she said, tossing her hair back. “It’s complicated.”

“I guess.” I watched her for a minute and then shrugged. What did I know about the music business? Homily disappeared out onto the deck with her coffee. Lil told me at the salon later that day that when she went to bail Ray out of jail, Homily had been sitting outside the station in her car, just sitting there behind her big sunglasses and with her hands on the steering wheel and the engine running. Lil walked over to knock on the window, but when she got up close Homily’s shoulders were shaking.

“I thought she wanted some time,” Lil told me over Melanie Parson’s cuticles. “But when I came back out with Ray, she was gone.” When Homily came home that evening, she said Eddie had left town and we wouldn’t have to worry about him anymore, but for weeks our phone rang and when I answered nobody was there.

We got a spate of spring rains after that night. Week by week, the rains came up, so quickly the sun would vanish and the air would be heavy with weather and cut through with lightning and wind, and then just as fast the weather was gone, the sky clear and cloudless and blindingly white. After the rain the flowers came in, bluebonnets and black-eyed Susans and sunflowers and Indian paintbrushes and the heather blooming all around it. Dandelions came up in the playing fields and the city maintenance workers bitched about having to mow twice a week to keep all the green in check. The hawks nettled the crows on top of the county courthouse and the blackbirds in the huisatche tree nested and hatched eggs. The benches outside the diner started to fill up and the courthouse lawn would cover over with blankets during lunch and we'd fill take-out orders by the pad. Mr. Paul hired some high school boys and put up a temporary tent in the empty lot next door and did a brisk business in car detailing.

In early May, the high-brow café out on the state highway trucked in crawfish from Matagorda Bay and caused a food poisoning scare that kept the emergency room packed. One couple even came into the roadhouse after eating there and the wife got sick under a cocktail table and passed out on the floor. Homily told me she had to administer CPR but over Wednesday morning coffee Susan Parsons told me the lady only felt faint and ended up lying in a booth until she felt strong enough to walk out to her car, and on top of it all Susan had personally seen the girl drink at least two whiskey sours. To no one's surprise the café closed up and the Greek folks who owned it moved back to Houston.

I didn't know what to say when Susan told me about Homily telling stories. Homily and I had gotten to be friends by then. We'd go out on the deck with a bottle of wine and she'd talk about country music or who Randy Whitehouse was sleeping with, or every once in a while she'd mention her family, how after her daddy left her mama she hadn't heard from him in ten years or that she'd seen Emeline at the Piggly Wiggly and she'd looked through Homily like she didn't exist. It got so I was comfortable with Homily and I was talking to her about how I was worried about Lil and her drinking and how she would wake up gasping for air but wouldn't go to the doctor, or how when my Mama died of cancer I'd wanted to die, too, and I'd even taken a whole bottle of aspirin one night when Lil was out of town at a hair-do convention but all it did was make me throw up. Homily mentioned Ray every so often, and while she never got specific I figured out enough to know he was up to the roadhouse every night to see her. I never asked him about it. I figured he'd tell me when he was ready.

Mrs. Jorgenson said she thought she'd seen Ray coming out of our garage, too, a few times while I was at work, although her vision was bad enough it could've been the Lord Almighty himself and she couldn't have told the difference. She was forever following after Jené's two white-headed boys, who were forever running through our backyard or down River Road, almost always with a ball of some sort and chucking it at something, a passing car or bicycle, the birds in our huisatche trees, me, and the week before Memorial Day and the forty-fifth annual Frankel City Polka Festival, at Homily, sitting on our back deck with her head back and her legs up on a plastic stool.

I'd woken late that morning to voices outside, a man and a woman, but by the time I sorted what was real and a dream and got to the window all I saw was Homily on the deck and a bob of dark hair disappearing around the huisatche. I was debating asking her about it when I heard the thunk of the Jorgenson boys' ball and a caterwauling howl. It sounded like the boys had finally hit a wildcat, but when I burst through the screen door it was just the twins standing down off our deck and Homily, the back of her neck red and blotchy, towering over them with the ball clutched up in both arms.

"You will not," she was saying. "Or I'll make you both wish you'd never been born, you nosy little shits."

I stood on my tiptoes and pulled the ball out from her fingers. "Homily," I said. "Damn."

The Jorgenson boys laughed. They were just on the verge of thirteen, with fine, baby-white hairs on their faces and shaggy blond hair in their eyes. Homily swung around and it was a good thing I stepped back because she had her hand out flat like she meant to smack me. Ever since I'd seen the accident with Sharla and Jené I'd had a guilty spot in my chest when those boys came around. I remember thinking, she's going to laugh when she sees me, she's going to realize how silly this is, but instead she jerked her chin up and said, "Those two little shits hit me with that ball, JoDell."

"Welcome to the neighborhood," I said. "That's what they do." The Jorgenson twin on the right smiled at me – the one on the left was too busy hanging his mouth open at either Homily in a bathing suit or the way she'd reared up like a titan when they'd smacked her. I tossed the ball back to the smiling one and almost before I could blink

they were gone, loping off across the fence down the bayou and towards the other end of River Road. Homily stared at me. She had that look again like I was a bug on her windshield.

“You’re taking up for them?”

“It’s not a big deal. It’s like a rite of passage for living next door to them.”

“They hit me in the face, JoDell,” she said. “While I was sleeping.” She turned around to where they’d disappeared along the bayou. “They’re spying on me, too.”

“Leave them alone. They didn’t mean any harm; it was a nerf ball, for God’s sake. Their mother’s in a wheelchair.” Anger flashed up in the same spot where the guilt I felt about the Jorgensons lived. Jené rarely left her grandmother’s house other than to pick up her painkillers from Ward’s.

Homily huffed and leaned over the chair she’d been sitting in, real slow, to pick up her tanning lotion and her pack of cigarettes. She was dressed out in full makeup and a slinky two-piece bikini with molded breast cups that made me think of plastic scoops of bubble gum ice cream.

“What was Ray doing here this morning?” I inspected a splinter sticking out of the deck railing.

“Ray wasn’t here this morning.” Her face puckered in bug-on-the-windshield again. “What are you talking about?”

“I heard someone out here talking,” I said, confused. “I thought it was Ray.”

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, yeah. Right. No, he was just here to say hi.” She shrugged and flashed the high-wattage smile she saved for big tippers out at the roadhouse. “What can I say? It’s a hard job being a celebrity.”

I wanted to smile at her and scream at the same time. “You know, it’s okay to like him, Homily. I’ve known him since we were kids.”

She laughed. “He’s not exactly my type, Jo,” she said.

“Because he’s a Mexican?”

“Not exactly.” She pouted with her mouth just turned down at the corners and her lips glossy. “Are you working today?”

“Yeah.”

Her mouth thinned to a sharp edge. “You’re always working,” she said. “I guess we’re not going tubing today.”

“Were we supposed to go tubing?” I asked, but I was talking to the huisatche and the blackbirds. She’d vanished behind the screen door.

Larry was back on full time day shift by then, which meant I’d had to start choosing between spending my nights with him or at the roadhouse with Homily. I tried to convince him there was nothing wrong with going to the bar, but he just frowned and said he didn’t need loud music to make for a good time and wouldn’t I just rather stay home or maybe go watch a movie at the Hollywood Ten? Which always left me in a tight spot between him and what I really wanted to do, which was go out to the bar and chat with Susan and Homily and Ray, now that Randy had forgiven him, and sometimes even Lil, when she was in the mood to talk and not slurring her words. I’d hem and haw and

then Larry would say he understood, but he'd get real quiet after that and finally say he had to go mow the lawn or work on his truck or some equally questionable excuse and hang up the phone or disappear behind the slamming front door. I still hadn't answered his question about getting married and he'd quit asking, and as much as I should have been paying attention when that happened, what I really felt was a thorny sense of relief.

I figured things were coming to a head with us. He came into the Dixie Dog that same day just after I'd gotten off my lunch shift and Homily had stopped by before her evening one.

"Maybe I acted a little rashly this morning," she'd said when she came in. "I guess I had my heart set on tubing today."

When Larry showed up Homily and I were sitting in a booth by the front door and she'd just finished telling me a story about Linda Johnson, the socialite Richard Johnson imported to marry his middle son, the lawyer, and I was trying to figure out if we went tubing the following weekend if I could afford a new bathing suit or if I had to wear the old black one-piece I'd found on fire sale at the discount store a few years before when Larry wanted to take me to Galveston for vacation. We'd ended up not going because of a fire at the gas plant. He'd gone in to work and I sat there in the house, holding my bag while Lil pattered around the kitchen, humming and glancing at me on the couch and him finally calling after I'd already put all my clothes back away and eaten some chicken fried steak. He promised we'd go again, and I'd said, sure we will, but when he came over a few days later and tried to pick a weekend I just smiled at him and went into the kitchen and stayed there.

When the bell clanked behind me, Homily's expression erased like writing on a chalkboard. Larry's head almost touched the top of the door jamb.

"Hey, Larry," Homily said. "We haven't seen much of you lately. What're you up to?"

Larry looked at her and then looked around at the diner like he'd never seen it before. We hadn't been talking much for the last few weeks. I stood up to face him.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi." I rubbed my hands on my apron and straightened my skirt.

"I haven't talked to you in a couple of days."

"Right. I've been working." I heard Homily get up from the booth and thump her knuckles on the table and her smell of baby powder and stale cigarettes wafted towards us. She tucked her chin onto my shoulder and Larry tilted away and I just stood there between them with my stomach twisting up under my ribs.

"Well," Homily said. "I've got to be off. See you tonight, Jo." She slipped one arm around my shoulders and squeezed so hard it felt like a pincher claw and sidled past Larry through the door. The radio came on in the kitchen.

"You're going to the bar tonight?" Larry asked. I reached behind me and untied my apron and set it on the table, slow, like it was breakable.

"I told Homily I would."

"I thought we might get some dinner." His voice was toneless. I felt like I'd swallowed a hornet.

“Okay.” I sat down on the side of the booth facing the door, the seat Homily had left. It was warm and the air between the two of us was vibrating. Blood beat just under the skin in my upper arms and the insides of my wrists. He sat down across from me and set his elbows on the table and his forearms were long and covered with a pale growth of whitish hair.

“I thought we could talk more about –”

“What?”

“Getting married,” he finished. “Have you thought any more about it?”

There was a sharp spot at the base of my throat. When I didn’t say anything he put his palms face down on the table and splayed out his fingers and I thought of Jesus on the crucifix and the nails and the blood. Only I didn’t know if it was him that was Jesus or me. “Not yet, Larry,” I said. “I just need more time.”

“More time,” Larry said flatly. “More time to spend with Homily? That girl’s a liar, JoDell. I don’t know what she’s been telling you, but you should know that.”

“What does Homily have to do with us?” I balled up my hands in my lap.

“Homily doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

“What are you talking about?” Larry said. “Of course she does. She’s got you snookered. You think she’s the greatest thing that ever happened to this town and you’re following her around like a goddamn puppy.” His body was rigid and towering and the muscles in his arms were so taut I could see all his veins. “And don’t think people haven’t noticed, JoDell. People are talking, too, about the way you two spend time

together, drinking out in the dark in the middle of the night and you showing up hung over for work –”

“Who told you that? Did Lil tell you that?”

“No,” he said. “Mr. Jorgenson told me, and then old man Johnson noticed it, too, and yeah, I talked to Lil about it.” He blew a round stream of air out his mouth like gas from a broken pipe.

“Just because I want to do something on my own,” I said. They were talking about me. Mr. Jorgenson was talking about me. The Johnsons and the Michelsens, too. “Just because I have a friend that you and Lil and everyone else in this goddamn town haven’t pre-approved. You and Lil – all you want is for me to be nice and sweet and pour your coffee and your gin and stay home at night and never have anything of my own. Is that what this is?” I was yelling, and Ramon was at the counter and even the dishwasher was standing there with the evening girls and the radio in the back was silent.

“You’ve done your own thing,” Larry said, his voice hard like buckshot. “You went to find your daddy and look how well that turned out.”

He could’ve slapped me across the face. “You son of a bitch,” I said quietly. “You don’t ever say that to me again. You don’t ever say anything about that to me again.”

His eyes were huge and brown and he looked down at his hands and said, “It’s true. You haven’t made the best decisions for yourself, and you’re so goddamned proud you won’t let anyone help you.”

“So I should marry you and then you can tell me what to do?” I asked. “That’s a great compromise. I’m sick of you telling me what to do.”

The diner was silent, the words sitting there between us next to the salt shaker and the sugar packets. I wanted to get up and run away and take it all back and hide in his lap. I wanted him to look at me like he didn't know me and this was news to him, but instead he was sitting there like he knew me inside and out and this wasn't anything he hadn't expected. The waitresses and the dish boys and Ramon all stood watching us, and Lil was standing there, too, leaning on the counter with a forehead that was purple and wet as a storm cloud.

He shook his head. "What are you so goddamned scared of?"

"I'm not scared of anything." The words came out hard and like a threat.

"I'm not your father, JoDell," he said, leaning forward. "I'm not going to leave you."

I half stood up under the table, hitching for breath. "I told you," I said, and then yelled, "I told you, to never say that to me again."

"God," he said, slamming the table back at me and standing up. "What is it with you? It's got be Homily," he said. "She's got Ray with his head up his ass he can't see she's whoring around and now she's got you so you can't see right from wrong."

"She is not a whore," I said.

"Really?" he asked. "Ray? Randy Whitehouse? I heard she hits on Trevor when Susan's not around. And she's got her old friend Eddie stashed up at the California Motel on the highway, too." I winced.

"I thought you didn't believe in gossip," I said, although my stomach felt like it was bleeding.

“What gossip? I’ve seen them.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, shaking my head. “She’s allowed to have her own life. I don’t need to know everything about her. That’s what friends are like. They accept each other.”

Larry laughed, and it was derisive and dangerous. “Friends? She lives in your house, JoDell. She’s using you.”

“She has nothing to do with this,” I said. “This is about me and you. If I’m such a screw-up, why do you want to marry me, anyway? You’re right – look what happened with my father. I couldn’t keep Mama from dying. Lil’s such a drunk she can’t even take care of herself and I can’t do a thing to stop her. You want to lay all that at my feet, too?” I finally got my voice under control. “Why would marrying you be any better decision than all the ones I’ve already messed up?”

“I don’t know what Homily has made you think, JoDell, but it’s wrong,” he said.

“Homily has nothing to do with this, Larry.” I sat back down and put my forehead in my hands. “Why don’t you get that? This is about you telling me what to do. You’re not responsible for me.”

“Yes I am,” he said. “Because that’s what it means when you love someone. You take responsibility and you protect them and you make it okay for them however you can. And I love you, Jo. I would marry you tomorrow. But if you don’t want to marry me, then maybe we shouldn’t be together at all.”

The diner narrowed to a fine point behind my palms. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see. I loved Larry. But I just sat there, hiccupping air and not saying anything until he turned around and walked to the door and stopped with his hand on the knob.

"Homily Hope is a liar, JoDell," Larry said, with his back turned. "I don't think she ever even went to Nashville. I've got a buddy in Killeen said she's been stripping out there for years and her friend Eddie was her bar manager, not her agent. So if you think she's such a good friend, why don't you ask her about that?" And he slammed the door so hard behind him the cowbell Lil's uncle had tied up long before I could remember tipped over and got jammed and bent beyond repair so that Ramon finally went and took it down and threw it away.

CHAPTER XII

In the wake of Larry's leaving the diner was silent. I stared at my hands and thought, I should be crying, but instead I couldn't breathe. After Mama died, I'd felt like that; I'd go into her closet and pull the door to and just sit surrounded by her mess. It'd smelled like a burned up secondhand bookstore, musty and smoky with old paperbacks and photos and cigarettes, but underneath had been something else, the human smell from Mama before she got sick, talcum powder and skin and muscle. The smell would get up in my nose and throat and stop up the pathways there and my abdomen would lock up and all I could do was rock over with my knees in my chest and gasp until red stars blinked behind my eyelids. I didn't cry, either – I cried when she died, I mean, but I didn't cry in those private moments where it was just me and her things and her presence, so real, like something I could reach out and hold onto and yet also so irretrievably gone.

Out the diner window the sun was a sugar shaker above the horizon and the sky was white with heat. Mr. Michelsen came by on the sidewalk, carrying a cardboard box with the top flapping open, heading for the used bookstore catty-corner the diner on the square. There were a line of crows on top of the courthouse, and one sitting like a crown on a gargoyle's head and I couldn't look out anymore but I couldn't look back at the people watching me either. I just sat there in the in-between. I might have stayed there until I passed out, but the door of the diner opened like an electric shock and we all jumped up to see the round face of one of the Jorgenson twins, who looked from me to

Ramon to Lil to the other waitresses like we'd lost our minds. When he started for the counter Ramon finally turned and stomped through the kitchen door. Janice Evans, the night waitress, smiled at the boy. The soles of his Velcro top sneakers were flapping as he walked. I turned back to the square and the dark windows of what used to be Frank Walpole's accounting office.

"Take this down to Mr. Paul, Jo," Lil said. Her bulk cast a shadow across the table. She set a brown to-go bag down, her peach caftan swirling around her, and followed Ramon through the kitchen door. Her footsteps were silent like a geisha.

Outside, the sidewalk was blazing hot, even under the awnings lining the shops down Main. In the summers in Frankel City the heat came up from the river bottom, where the sun hit the water and the air soaked up the humidity and rose off the water like steam. It rolled through the streets like a clear kind of fog, sweeping the sidewalks and seeping around the door jambs of buildings. It mixed with the gasoline on the asphalt at Mr. Paul's Texaco station and came up in a haze, blurring the building behind it until it could have been a mirage, the cars pulling in and out and their owners dancing from air conditioning to gas nozzle to the store and back to the sweet, canned whoosh of cool air from the car vents on their necks. I watched all of it, walking up Main to the auto body shop, and somehow I didn't see any of it, not Wayne in his county sheriff's cruiser or how Mrs. Gentry rolled down her window a crack to chat with him while he pumped his gas or even the dark, shining sedan that rolled to a stop at the stoplight at the corner of River Road and then turned up into the hills seeking cooler elevations.

Mr. Paul was sitting on the metal folding chair his daddy had sat on for years, until old Mr. Nelson had finally dropped dead in the shower of what Dr. Lindeven called a stroke and the Baptist preacher called God's will and everyone else called a miracle. After his daddy's death, Mr. Paul had been diagnosed with a muscle disease, and by the time Homily came to live with us all he could do was sit in the chair in the driveway and shoot bull with folks walking by, while Ray and a high school dropout named Monty Browning worked the cars in the bays behind him. When I walked up, Ray and Monty were underneath a sedan in the second bay, shouting back and forth over the country-western radio station. They all three looked up at me, Mr. Paul smiling from his chair and the Texaco station shimmering like a mirage behind him and the mechanics peering from underneath the car. Monty went back to work, but Ray rolled out on his back.

"Hey JoDell." He waved his lug wrench. "You bring us lunch?"

"She brought me lunch," Mr. Paul called over his shoulder. "You just get on back to doing what you should be doing."

Ray coiled around like a snake, half-smiling. "Whatever you say, old man," he said. He rolled underneath the car with an abrupt rattle.

"Goddamn Mexican," Paul growled. "He's gotten so good-for-nothing lately I've a notion to fire him."

"Mr. Paul," I said. "Ray's a good mechanic. You're not going to fire him."

"Goddamn dealerships," he muttered. "They've taken all the good people and left me with half-breeds and half-brains. But it's a sight to see you, at least. Let me get you a

chair, honey.” When Mr. Paul smiled, his face split from ear to ear. He struggled to get his feet under him.

“Stop. I’m fine.”

He looked to argue with me for a minute and then collapsed. “Goddamn legs.”

“Lil had me bring this down to you.” I handed him the bag.

His smile came back with some of its initial ferocity. “Did she?” He chuckled.

“Still thinking of the men around here, that’s Lil. Even the old ones. Just like your mama did.” When he said Mama, it felt like someone had socked me in the chest. God, I missed her so much.

“I can’t stay long.” I leaned against the ledge of the window to the office. “I’ve got to get home and –” But I didn’t have any reason to get home and I couldn’t think of a good excuse to finish the sentence, so I just trailed off.

“You all right, JoDell?” Mr. Paul asked, but before I had a chance to say so he went right on. “You know, your Mama used to come over and sit not far from where you’re sitting when she was having trouble.”

“Did she?”

“She did. In fact, I remember she came over one morning not too long before the Polka Festival when you were just a sparkle in her eye.” I don’t know if it was his body going or if he just got stuck in the memory, but his face went blank. “She came over and she was fit to be tied because she’d met some boy and he was giving her fits. I remember she didn’t really want to talk about it but the longer she sat there the more it just came out, until she was crying and it was all I could do not to put her in the car and take her

home with me.” He stopped and laughed. “Of course, that was back when Caroline was alive.”

Monty’s feet twitched as he wrenched a valve open on the chassis of the car. Ray’s trolley was empty. The acrid smell of cigarette smoke drifted around the corner. “But you didn’t,” I said. “Take her home.”

“No. I didn’t. But I remember, JoDell, she was so pretty and she had red marks on her face from where she’d been crying so hard and she was all curled up against the curb and it was a hard thing not to do.”

“You loved her,” I said without thinking.

He ducked his head, but when he looked up he met my eyes, and for the first time I knew he was seeing me as an adult. It made me want to reach down and hug him. “I’m falling apart sitting here in this chair,” he said. “What harm can it do? Yeah, I did. She was something else.”

“She was.” I knelt next to him and put my hand on his hand. His fingers lay in his lap like broken sticks. We sat there in silence staring off to the road and me pretending I didn’t hear his uneven breathing, and then when I thought he might have fallen asleep – that’d started happening with Paul, you could be talking to him and in mid-sentence he’d lean his head back in his chair and snore – he lifted up his chin.

“You know, it was Frank Walpole she was so upset over,” he said. “Homily Hope’s daddy.”

I stood up and dropped his hand as though it was burning. In the back of the shop, Monty's wrench clattered to the floor. Ray's shadow crossed the back wall, coming back into the bay from his smoke break. "I thought he was my father," I said suddenly.

"Did you?" Mr. Paul asked, his eye twitching. "I'm sorry to hear that. But I can see where you might've gotten the idea. There were a lot of folks back then telling stories about the two of them." My hands quivered. Mr. Paul started forward in his chair and I opened my mouth to ask more when Paul said, "Well, look at that. Look who's walking up here on her own two feet."

A woman the size of a small bus in a loose peach shirt and white Capri pants was crossing Travis on Main, moving like a barge wading through the few folks out on the sidewalk. With each step, she plunked her old cane down and leaned all her weight on it, urging it along with an open puff from her mouth. It was Lil.

She trundled up Main, maneuvering around benches and young mothers pushing strollers and dragging toddlers to Mother's Day Out at the Presbyterian Church on the corner of Travis and Bowie, navigating each group in a mournful parade until she was standing there in front of us. Mr. Paul and I stared at her in amazement. When she stopped she looked up, reading the sign, squinting, leaning on her cane and cocking her head to one side and then the other. She lumbered around for a moment, and then she was done with the squinting and the harrumphing and the leaning, and something in her face made me think she might be able to see through me and straight into hell.

"Paul," she said, and the word came out in a puff.

“Lil,” he said, with his same Mr. Paul grin. “It’s good to see you out. I’ve got some Cokes in that freezer in the office –” He started to get up again but she waved him down just like I had, with the same tilted hand and splayed fingers.

“I can get it, Paul. You don’t need to get up.” Paul reached to the side of his chair and picked up a Folger’s can lined with paper towels and spat a long stream of tobacco juice into it. I stared down into the muddy puddle.

“You know where they are,” he conceded.

“Why don’t you come get one with me, JoDell?” She was staring at me when I finally managed to raise my head and look at her. I put my hand on Mr. Paul’s shoulder as I went around him and followed Lil through the door.

She puffed her way to the drink cooler and pulled out two Cokes and handed one to me. I took a drink and leaned back on Mr. Paul’s desk, next to his scribbled-up calendar. Melanie Parsons, in the first Monday square, 3:30 (Call for o-sensor). I ran my hand over the indentations Mr. Paul’s shaking handwriting made.

“Mr. Paul told me he loved Mama,” I said, still studying the calendar. Michelsen. Pulczinski. Brakes, spark plugs, valves. In places his handwriting curled up like a hieroglyph.

“He did?” Lil’s voice was even, as though she was holding something underneath she didn’t want me to see.

“It made me happy,” I said. “To know he loved her. Because he’s a good person.”

“He is,” Lil agreed. Her eyes were wide and tilted down at the corners.

“I don’t want to be a bad person, Lil.” I wanted to rush across the room and wrap my arms around her knees but instead I took another drink and stared at my reflection in the window behind her. “I’m not trying to be a bad person.”

“I know.” Her mouth twisted in the puffiness of her cheeks and ended up in the hint of a smile. “You’re not a bad person, Jo.”

“He said she came in crying over Frank Walpole.”

Lil watched me like a feral cat and finally nodded. “He broke her heart when we were kids. But you know that.”

“I know,” I said. “But I can’t help thinking about it. With Homily around I think about it all the time.” When I met her stare I was crying a little. “She deserved better.”

“She did,” Lil said, smiling. “From all of us.”

“I’m sorry if I said hurtful things,” I said. “I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“I know you are,” she said. Her nails were long and perfectly filed and a kind of pale, pearly lavender. “Neither one of us has been particularly good at being good to each other lately. I’m not –I haven’t turned out to be the person I thought I’d be, either. I know you’ve tried hard with me, JoDell, and I never said anything about it and I want you to know that I know. You didn’t screw anything up. You and your mama are some of the best things that ever happened to me.”

“I know,” I said. “Me, too.” Something like hope loosened the space around my heart.

“We’ve just go to keep trying,” she said. Lil leaned on the freezer like she might fall over. Her face was gray and dull, the way it had been when she’d found me walking

down River Road with Homily's taunts ringing in my ears, the day my Mama had gone to the hospital to die.

"Lil?" I asked. Her breath came in gasping snorts.

"I'm okay," she said. "Just need a minute." She wheezed, her breath a hiss and whisper, until she got it under control. But then her forehead folded down over itself and she said, "I guess you don't want to talk about Larry?"

I shook my head.

"Alright," she said. "I'm not trying to tell you what to do. I don't know what you've got going on with Homily Hope, but I hope you're being careful. I don't want to see you get hurt any more than Larry does. I won't say anything about it again."

How could I explain how Homily made me feel, how spending time with her was wide open like the river at night or riding in Mama's car on Friday evenings? Mr. Paul's calendar sat bloated on his desk under my palm. We were all in there, our whole town history on one man's desk. Who would remember us?

"That's fair," I said. I wanted to hug her but she had her arms crossed across her chest. I shrugged and turned around to the steel door and the mesh-glass windowpane.

"That's not all," she said, just as my hand hit the doorknob. There was command in her voice. When I turned around, the hard look on her face had smoothed out and her eyes were lidded and almost closed. "I love you, JoDell," she said.

I might have cried then, finally, but instead I leaned my head back on the door and closed my eyes and breathed in the grease and oil and deterioration and realized Mr.

Paul's office didn't smell too different from how my Mama's closet had smelled after her death.

"I know," I said. "I love you, too."

Outside, the cars on Main trundled back and forth, the glass and the heat distorting their path into an awkward procession of parts, tires and fenders and windows. It was amazing it worked together at all. I half-smiled at her over my shoulder and opened the door back out into the early summer heat.

CHAPTER XIII

1976. The first week of September, the first Wednesday of the month. Peggy's car smelled like vanilla air freshener and starch and the upholstery was worn burgundy leather with nail marks across the seat from where she let her dog ride up front. In most places it would have been one of the last days of summer but in Frankel City our summer lasted through October and sometimes November and most Christmas days I was wearing a t-shirt, too. That Wednesday I was wearing dark jeans out of fashion for five years and a striped button-down tank shirt and Peggy in her uniform looked at me from beady eyes when I asked her to drop me at the end of Homily Hope's street. It was the same way she'd frowned at me in the diner when I asked her for a ride up into the Walpoles' neighborhood to meet a partner for the project I was working on.

“And what is your project, JoDell? What are you working on?”

I'd been so busy imagining the rapt look on Mr. Walpole's face when I appeared on his doorstep that I hadn't anticipated her question. “Anthropology,” I said, fast so the syllables fumbled together. She tilted her head and her eyes got smaller and I could tell she didn't know what the word meant, so I plowed on. “We're doing an anthropology study on the working habits of people in a small town. We're going to compare the habits of townspeople to the ancient people of –” I slapped my hands on the counter like I knew what I was talking about. “Sumer.”

“Sumer,” she said. She stared at me and shook her head. Would she call Mama and ask her why I wasn’t in school? My stomach sank as I imagined Mama having to leave work to come pick me up in the Buick, the old folks up at the home with no one to feed them lunch. One or two of them might even die if they didn’t eat or get their medicine and then Mama would get fired and we’d have to live on the street and it would all be because I decided to skip one day of school to track down my daddy. I hung my head.

“I don’t know what they’re teaching you in school these days,” Peggy said. “Sumer. For God’s sake.” I was barely listening, I was so caught up in how Mama and I would fend for food and build fires in a trash can because of my obsession with my daddy. “JoDell.” Peggy shook my arm. “Let’s go if we’re going. I got to get to class.”

My stomach fell from my throat back into place and it was like I’d been dunked in the river by John the Baptist. Peggy was looking at me with a half-smile and I wasn’t sure she believed my story about Sumer – I couldn’t really remember what we’d learned about Sumer but right then I might have been willing to go back and live there, I was so relieved she wasn’t about to call Mama.

“What’s your friend’s name?” Peggy asked as she slowed at the stop sign turning up to the Walpole’s street. We were three miles up into the hills, with the lake and downtown behind us to southwest. Homily Hope’s road rose steeply up after the turn, flanked by brick and stucco homes and Bradford pear trees stretching their branches as high as the rooftops.

“Margaret.” I’d chattered nonstop the few minutes we’d been in the car and clutched my school bag to me like she might be able to see through the canvas and into my notebook. “I’ll be fine from here. She’s expecting me. That’s her house right there.” I pointed in the direction of one of the brick houses to the left. She slowed the car and before it even stopped rolling I opened the door and jumped out. “Thanks!”

I slammed the door before she could say anything and threw my bag over my shoulder and started up the hill in the direction of the house I’d pointed at. I had no idea whose house it was, but there hadn’t been any cars in the driveway and the blinds were closed. When I got to the sidewalk, I turned and waved at Peggy, still parked at the stop sign, and took a few steps toward the door, until I heard her engine rev and she disappeared away back down the hill. As soon as she was gone I crossed the street and walked up under one of the pear trees where it was shady and I’d be harder to spot and studied the numbers on the houses. Homily Hope’s house number was thirty-two and I was at eighteen, so I figured I had a ways to go uphill.

I walked what I think now was probably a half-mile but back then felt like a marathon. The sun ducked back behind the clouds and I stuck close to the curb and wove in and out of the manicured tree beds on the lawns. As I walked I studied each house, the stained glass in the front door windows in the shape of a lone star or a hummingbird, the way the flowerbeds were the perfect mixture of purple and yellow and blue flowers and no weeds to be seen. The houses all felt the same, the same brick and the same blinds and the same carpet of grass cut in perfect rectangles. When I saw Mr. Walpole’s house, my house, it would be different, welcoming, I told myself, like it was calling out to me, but

when I came to thirty and looked next door to thirty-two it felt the same as all the others, flat, with a detached garage and no cars in the driveway and a privacy fence starting in the hedges along the side of the garage. I stood next to a blue sports car in front of thirty, staring at the house, soaking it up, trying to make it feel homey and inviting, but in the end all I felt was scared. I was almost on his doorstep. But what if he didn't want me? The blinds were closed. He would want me. He had to want me. I threw my bag over my shoulder and strode up to the front door.

The house was ghostly silent and there were no cars in the driveway. I brushed my hair behind my ears and clutched my bag to my side and raised my hand and knocked. I wanted to press my ear to the door and listen for his footsteps. I wanted to hug the brick corner of the house, my cheek rubbing against the rough brick of my home. Sweat trickled down my neck behind my earlobe. The sun beat down on the pavement behind me. He'll want me, he'll want me, I chanted under my breath. But no one came to the door.

I knocked again, louder this time, peering in the frosted glass window in the door. I gave up and pressed my ear to the door and – nothing. Not a footstep, not a shadow. He had to be home. She'd said he was home. But no-one came to the door, and it was enough to make me throw my bag down on the concrete in frustration.

I'd sat there long enough to worry if the neighbors would notice me when a breeze came up and rattled the bushes along the privacy fence, and I had another idea. I took a furtive glance down the street and sidled up to the fence and pulled myself over like I'd been a burglar all my natural life. When I came down on the other side I landed

hard, and my ankles shook in my sneakers and for a minute I had my eyes closed. When I opened them, my heart leapt and then sank. If I hadn't felt anything looking at the house, I'd thought for sure once I was inside, in the backyard, even, I'd feel it, something different. Something special. Like maybe the yard would be a kind of wonderland like Homily Hope always made her house out to be, maybe it would have a pool, an in-ground one like Susan Parson's daddy had put in last summer, or if not a pool then a pond, with ferns fawning along the banks and a wrought-iron bench where Mr. Walpole and I might watch the sun go down over the hills. Without ever thinking about it I'd built the house around our relationship in my mind, the way the grass in the backyard would be soft when I lay down to look up at the stars, stars I could reach up and touch, so far uphill from the bayou and Mama's crumbling two-story. In my mind there'd been butterflies and a gazebo and a fuzzy yellow puppy Mr. Walpole bought for me and let me hold and stroke in my lap.

It was the thought of the puppy that brought me back to reality, because once I was in the backyard uninvited, I realized I didn't know if Homily Hope had a dog. Adrenaline raced through my chest and made me stand on the balls of my feet, flexed and ready to leap back over the fence, but after a moment of waiting nothing came running at me. Instead of a pool or a gazebo or even dancing fairies, the backyard seemed – well, like anyone's backyard, with cut grass and more hedges lining the fence and no view to speak of other than the fence and the next neighbor's backyard rising up on the hilltop. When I looked up the sun didn't seem any closer than it had downtown or on our deck. I felt like sitting down and crying, except I hadn't even seen the inside of the house yet and

part of me was insisting it was all there somewhere, everything I'd imagined and all I had to do was keep going to find it.

The backyard was L-shaped, so where I came over the fence was a sort of alley around the side of the house and I crept on my tiptoes toward where the house turned back to the left. When I reached the corner I peered around, thinking of cat burglars and James Bond and how it was silly all the spies in movies were men because I was doing a fine job of sneaking through Homily Hope's backyard. The house turned and there, finally, was a flagstone patio with white wicker chairs and a love seat and a propane grill, and the part of me that had insisted on going forward was smirking about how nice it all was, with peach and green floral cushions like a magazine picture, and not a dog bowl to be seen. I straightened up and walked between the chairs, running my hand over the heavy canvas fabric and stopping at the grill and lifting the lid to peer inside. The dark smell of burnt mesquite sifted out. I put the lid back down and turned to the house.

The back wall of the house was lined with windows, four big picture windows stretching from the glass back door to a bay window. I could see inside, vague shapes of couches and a fireplace, but I was there to see more and I had the right to see more. It was my house, after all, and I was finally there to take it back from the people who'd kept it from me. It was the first time the thought came into my mind so fully formed that if it hadn't been for Mama not telling me about my daddy I could have had all of it. It's the only time I can remember when she was alive I thought I might really hate her.

It was my right to see, so I cupped my hands around my eyes and peered through the living room window. The walls were a dusty peach and the couch was light-blue

polyester floral with a plastic cover over it, a dead whale perched on the rug. Through the back window I could see all the way to the foyer and the stairs that led up to Homily's room. To my room. I clenched a fist against the window. Off to the right was the alcove and the caramel-pine corner of the breakfast room table and I could see the chairs had doily-shaped cushions in the seats. A portrait of Homily Hope standing in her cheerleading uniform and her long hair coiling down her shoulder in a ponytail hung over the fireplace and beyond that, between the fireplace and the stairs, was an opening to a hallway.

Homily, hanging over the fireplace, smirked at me. How I wanted the girl in that picture to be me! But for a flash of a quarter of a second when I studied her picture I saw Homily's jaw-line was square like her father's and her eyes sloped down like her mother's and there was something in the way she smiled and what I saw in the mirror each day that was alien between us, like neither of us shared anything other than the fate of being born in Frankel City and maybe the same fate of dying there. I saw it but I didn't want to see it and with the fire of righteousness still burning inside me I angled for a better view into the house. I was trying to figure out whether or not there I could climb a tree to see into Homily's upstairs bedroom – surely there had to be a tree, if Jimmy Don Huxley snuck in and out all summer like Robin Michelsen had said – when a woman walked out of the hallway next to the fireplace.

I fell to the stone floor beneath the window ledge and half-under the wicker glider and flattened myself against the brick. My heart was beating and fluttering and I thought I might not be able to breathe and all I could think was did she see me? The woman had

been looking off toward the kitchen, not really at me, but I'd seen enough of her to see at least one of her eyes. Was she running for the phone to call the police? I waited for the shouts and the slam of the back door, and when the noises didn't come my heart finally slowed to a rapid drumbeat. I sat there and listened to silence and it could have been hours but it was surely just a few minutes, but either way it was long enough for me to wonder if I should just break for it across the backyard to the fence, and then all at once I realized two things: the woman was naked, and she wasn't Emeline Walpole.

It was like I'd been thrown me in the river with John the Baptist again, clothes and all, and I sat there, shivering, thinking about the woman's face and the way she walked and the way her hips were small and round and her blond hair swung around her shoulders. Mr. Walpole's clerk was maybe twenty-two when she walked out of the hallway, and part of my brain, the part not concerned with how I was going to get out of there without being seen, started turning, trying to figure out how she could have gotten there and why she was naked, and I knew why but I had to hear his voice come into the room to make it real. Frank's voice was far away and blunted through the window and it came through the panes like sonar blips from a submarine movie.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "I thought I heard something, but I guess not." Frank's footsteps crossed the room and then there was a thump and groan from the couch and the clerk squealed. I forgot all about being seen and edged back up over the windowsill to see back in.

I didn't have to look in long and I didn't have to worry about being seen, either, to see Mr. Walpole and his clerk there on the couch, doing things I'd heard about but never seen done in person or even thought about the mechanics of doing. I ducked back down flat and must have laid there for five minutes or more, listening with my head on the hot stone floor to the moans and the thumps and the squeaking of Emeline's beached whale of a couch. Part of me wanted to lie there and cry, part of me wanted to run across the backyard and leap the fence and get as far away as I could, and the worst part of me, the part of me I understand now was just fourteen and naturally curious, wanted to look back in the window and watch. It took the honking of a passing car to wake me up and pick myself up off the floor and sneak a peak back over the ledge to make sure they were facing another way. I scooped on my belly and then my hands and knees along the underside of the window ledge, and when I got to the glass door there was nothing I could do but make a run for it, so I got to my feet and ducked down and took two low sprinting steps to the safety of the corner.

Once I reached the corner I didn't wait to see if anyone was coming after me. I jogged to the fence and boosted myself back up and over and when I came down my jeans caught on a piece of metal and ripped an inch along my thigh. There'd been a gate there the entire time, latched but not locked so I could have easily gotten in and out. I just stood there with my hand on my thigh, half-crying and shaking with fear and guilt and marveling at what I'd seen and burning at Frank Walpole. I wasn't angry with him for cheating on Emeline. I doubt I could have remembered Emeline's name if you'd asked me just then. No, what I was thinking was how could he do this to Mama and, more

importantly, to me. How could he give us up for Emeline and Homily and then throw that away, too, on some stupid blond college girl from Austin who didn't know anything about our town or any of us or what it felt like to be stuck there? I was shaking and crying and trying to stifle it all, for fear of being discovered.

When the shaking died down enough for me to walk, I leaned down to pick up my school bag where I'd dropped it in the dirt. Behind me, an engine idled, close. I peered around the corner of the hedges and the garage just as it cut off and saw Jimmy Don Huxley and Homily Hope getting out of a black Ford pick-up truck in the driveway.

The hedges and the corner of the garage blocked me from view and I was trapped there, between her father and his accounting clerk and Homily and Jimmy Don, and my first instinct was to crawl into the hedges and hide until Homily and Jimmy went inside. In the ensuing ruckus I could book it down the street and make the corner. I slid down the wall and crouched and watched her get out of the truck, sticking her legs out where she knew Jimmy would see and her skirt riding up her thigh just enough so even I couldn't help thinking how pretty it was, and then putting both feet down on the ground and hopping out so her skirt fluffed up and settled into place with just a hint of what was underneath. I watched through the hedge as Jimmy put his hand on Homily's waist with a hungry expression and she put her hand just under his belt buckle and when they started making out right there in the driveway, my whole body went rigid and I thought, well, let her see it. You deserve this, Homily. Down in the dirt next to me, my notebook was face-down in the mud where it had fallen out of my bag when I jumped the fence.

I sat there under the bushes and looked at my notebook like it was a moon rock while Homily and Jimmy made out on his bumper. Inside was a page with notes about Homily, a page on which I'd written sister over and over. Back on the driveway Homily pushed Jimmy away with a teasing flutter of her hand and giggled. I thought of nights sitting on the couch with Mama, her with her arm around me and kissing my forehead goodnight and how her cold cream smelled like talcum powder and lavender. It didn't matter how hard Mama tried to make it okay without my daddy because he was always there on those nights, too, not really him but the ghost of him, the knowing he hadn't wanted me. If I let Homily go into that house she might end up sitting there, too, on the couch with Emeline and the ghost of her father. I hated her that day – I knew it, no matter how hard I tried to like her – and I hated everything she had that I didn't and I wanted to let her go inside and see her father and how life wasn't perfect for anyone no matter how pretty or popular they were. But in the end it was the idea of my father, my real father, not some made-up one like Mr. Walpole, how I hated him even more than I hated Homily, that made me pop up from the bushes and dust off my jeans and shove my notebook into my bag. When I walked up they were standing by his bumper, kissing again.

Homily didn't notice me until I was standing right there at the truck and I cleared my throat like I was the study hall monitor. They jumped apart and Homily's hand went to her throat. Her face was red and she might actually have been embarrassed, and all the hate inside me ran together and came into my stomach like putty and as improbable as it was, I felt sorry for her. I stood there red-faced and with clothes covered in dirt and sweat

and I pulled myself up tall and looked down an inch or so into her face and said, “You should go back to school.”

“What?” Jimmy Don asked. “What the hell are you doing here?” Part of me was shocked and flattered he even knew who I was. I just stared at Homily, whose flush was draining down her cheeks and into her neck against the pale white of her hand, trying to telegraph what I knew. I didn’t want to say it out loud. Not in front of Jimmy Don.

“You should go back to school,” I said, loudly, thinking maybe her daddy would hear and at least get back in the bedroom and put on his clothes before Homily walked in and found him. “You don’t want to be here.”

“Where’d you come from?” Jimmy’s face puckered up. He took a step toward me and tensed his shoulders like he might hit me. The longer I stood there and watched Homily behind him, her face mottled red and her lipstick smeared, the more all the feeling in me ebbed away until all I felt was cold.

“Seriously,” I said. Saying anything was an effort. Jimmy took another step toward me and Homily grabbed his arm. “Go back to school, Homily.”

“Jimmy, stop. Come on.” She got him turned toward the door, never taking her eyes off me. She stared at me, frozen and smelling of dirt and river bottom, and she pursed her lips and shook her head and laughed, high, like a hyena.

“Crazy bitch,” she said. All at once the color and the heat and the emotion came back and I realized I was dripping with sweat and humiliation rose up and it was all I could do not to take a mighty swing at her as she turned away from me. I stood there, hearing her giggle and underneath it imagining I could still hear the distant sounds of the

couch squeaking and if I could have jumped off the River Road Bridge just then I would have gladly done so, instead of watching while she turned around and gave Jimmy a little shove towards the door like I didn't even exist.

CHAPTER XIV

My father came out of a dusty bar into the streets of Sabina, Coahuila, in a weather-beaten hat and jeans with a Skoll circle branded on the pocket. He walked in a straight line with his shoulders back like a soldier in formation. I watched him until he made the corner at Chavez and the dirt road the Mexicans all called *el camino a en ninguna parte*, the road to nowhere, and then tossed a five dollar bill on the table and followed him out into the street.

I wove around the bums in their serapes sweating in lumps outside the bodegas and carnicerías, but my father just kept walking, throwing a coin down here and there and every once in a while greeting someone by name. I'd spent all day in a bar with lazy fans turning overhead, drinking cheap beer and throwing limes at the cockroaches scurrying across the walls, while my father sat across the street from me on a terrace and spat chew into the street. After all those hours, all those years, I still had no idea what to say to him.

He stopped suddenly and whipped around. Three kids were kicking a ball in the street between us. I ducked my head under Ramon's straw hat and kept walking, almost right up to him so if I hadn't turned at the last doorway before I reached him we would have bumped into each other. Inside the doorway, a bar gleamed in the cool dark and the bartender tipped his hat.

"Buenos dias," he said, and then craned his neck at me. "Sit down," he said in perfect English.

The room was empty except for two vaqueros at a table in the corner, one with his feet up on the table. The sole of his boot was almost worn completely through. A television in the corner blared soccer and then quieted to a commercial. Over the bartender, light from a neon beer sign shuddered as I sat down on a bar stool.

“Cerveza, por favor,” I said.

“What kind?” he asked.

I shrugged and waved at the tap. “Whatever.”

He poured the beer until foam ran over the mouth of the mug and smiled at me when he set it down. Overhead, the soccer game came back on and the vaqueros leaned back in their chairs and muttered back and forth. I was halfway through the mug when the door opened and sunlight fell across the counter. My father.

He’d changed his shirt and he sat down a few stools down from me. The bartender greeted him in Spanish like a friend. The words rolled over me, the stretch of bar between us stained with circles of glasses and ashtrays. At the Rooter Hog, years later, I would look at the same stains on Randy Whitehouse’s counter and remember how my father stared at me over the bulge of chew in his mouth with his eyes creased up at the corners and I wanted to throw up, to go back to the hotel and pack my bags, to cry.

“Are you American?” my father asked me, scooting down a stool towards me.

“Yeah,” I said. His right eyebrow was severed by a white scar a third of the way along his brow. “How’d you know?”

“Your shoes,” he said, pointing to my tennis shoes. He had yellow teeth, stained with tobacco. “What’re you doing out here?”

“Vacation.” The word popped out like I meant it. I’d spent hours imagining what to say to him and all I could think about was how his breath smelled like whiskey and peppermint, like Lil after a violent hangover.

My father laughed. “Nobody vacations out here. Cancun. That’s where you go to vacation.” He leaned across the stool. “You’re kind of young to be out here by yourself.”

“I’m nineteen,” I said. “I have family out here.”

“Yeah?” He took a drink of his beer. “You don’t look Mexican.”

“I’m not.”

“Well, there’s not a lot of Americans here. Just me.” Behind the bar, the bartender slammed down his fist as a ball sailed over the net on the television. The vaqueros in the corner booed and cussed. My father raised an eyebrow and it danced in two parts.

“You’re not related to me are you?”

I didn’t say anything, just took another drink of my beer. He sat back on his stool, and then leaned on a hand behind him as if to scoot back away from me. The neon light from the bar sign flickered across the brim of Ramon’s hat. My father stared down into his beer and then leaned under the bar and spat.

“I don’t know you,” he said, in a quieter voice. “But I don’t have any family.”

“No?”

“No.”

His hands on the bar were long and his fingers bulged at the knuckle and tapered at the nail. Just like mine. I tapped a broken nail on my mug. “Everybody has family,” I

said. “Sometimes your family doesn’t want you, but it doesn’t mean you don’t have them.”

“JoDell,” he said, and my name came out of his throat like gravel crunching.

“You don’t need family like me.”

“You know who I am?” I asked. The vaqueros in the back of the bar were shadows in the dim light. It was cool inside, so cool the moisture from my beer was turning my fingers to ice.

“Your mama wrote me a letter, way back when.” He smiled and the grizzle along his jaw curled around the narrow line of his jaw.

“Mama’s dead,” I said.

The television erupted in a fountain of voices. My father’s face darkened and fell along the temples. “I’m sorry.” He leaned his head back and swallowed the rest of his beer in a gulp. “But you don’t got any family out here. You should have gone to Cancun.” He tossed a coin on the bar and waved at the bartender, and before I knew it, he was gone.

CHAPTER XV

The Thursday before the 45th annual Frankel City Polka Festival, I left Homily asleep in the lounge on the deck and Lil at the To Dye For waxing moustaches and putting fake nails on a half dozen Polka Princesses for the festival pageant, and drove twenty miles out the state highway to the California Club motel. In the foyer, Rodney McDowell lay on the moldy settee while Scotty Bergen, the clerk, watched a talk show and spat sunflower seeds at a broken ashtray.

“Hey, JoDell. What are you doing out here?” Scotty asked when I came through the door. He was a few years older than Homily and me, and his face was half-covered in burns from a chemical fire at the gas plant.

“I’m looking for somebody,” I said. “Eddie.”

“Homily Hope’s friend?”

“That’s him. Is he around today?”

Scotty glanced at Rodney on the couch and up to the television. His mouth tightened around the scars on his chin. “Well,” he said. “What do you need him for?”

“Homily asked me to come by, is all.” I leaned over so I could smell his sweat and deodorant and my breasts were shelved on the counter. “Nothing big.”

“Did she leave something?” Scotty asked my breasts.

“That’s right,” I said, standing up straight and shoving back the disappointment in my throat. Eddie was there. Larry had been right. On the couch Rodney snored and sputtered. “What room is it again?”

It took Eddie a few minutes to open the door, and when he did the sickly smell of a joint followed him out. His eyes were pink and his hair slicked back and he was balding along the crown of his head. He swept a Steak Away take-out bag off the dresser into the trash and pulled out a chair from the side table for me.

“Please sit,” he said.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling a pack out of his pocket.

“No.”

“So,” he said. “What can I do for you? JoDell, right?” His hand twitched as though he was going to offer it to me. The drapes were dusty and the room reeked of smoke and marijuana, but otherwise the bed was made and the floor clean and his wallet and keys stacked neatly next to an ashtray on the dresser. Along his jaw and the bridge of his nose, his bruises had yellowed, and his teeth were white and sharp like a dog. Homily had lied to me again. Without thinking, I picked up the ashtray from the dresser and threw it at his head, scattering ash across the carpet. My aim was low. It hit him in the shoulder and he jerked back and then sat up slowly and brushed ash off his thigh.

“Well, I see we got off on the wrong foot,” he said. “Perhaps we should start over. My name is Eddie.”

“I know who you are,” I said. “Homily told me about you.”

“Did she?” Eddie beamed. He picked the ashtray and half a joint up off the floor and set them on the bed next to him. “Only good things, I hope.”

“Why are you here?” I asked. “Why don’t you just leave her alone?”

“Well, that’s a personal question. I don’t know if we know each other that well yet,” he said, grinning. I shook my head, itching for something else to throw.

“Homily doesn’t want you here.”

“Homily bailed me out of jail. Of course she wants me here. Look,” he said. “We got off on the wrong foot, and I’m sorry. You can even tell your wetback friend I’m sorry, although I think we’re pretty even.” He fingered the bandage on his nose.

“Whatever Homily said to you, she asked me to stay out here while she figured things out and that’s all I’m doing. Go ask her if you don’t believe me.”

I didn’t know what to believe. Homily had told so many lies, it was getting hard to keep them straight. But then, every time she told me a story, she’d had a reason. Larry had left and Lil had all but disappeared and Ray wasn’t telling me anything anymore, but Homily was still there, waiting for me to go to the river or to the bar for a beer or just sit and talk out on the deck. “It doesn’t matter, anyway,” I said, thrusting my chin out. “I don’t care.”

“Do you want a joint? You look like you could use a joint.” Eddie took a drag from the cigarette and before I could say no, he started coughing, a hack at first and then shaking spasms. He made for the bathroom, waving at me in apology as he closed the door behind him.

I didn't know what to make of him. I inspected the bed, the ashtray and the joint. I pulled open the bedside drawer and found a Bible and a sealed pack of condoms. The sliding door to the closet was open an inch, and inside were his duffel and two pairs of jeans, starched and hanging like slabs of meat on hangers. Eddie's retching echoed from behind the bathroom door. I glanced towards the bathroom and then knelt and ran my hands through his duffel. Socks, underwear, t-shirts, shaving cream. Halfway down I came across something lacy – a red bra. And at the bottom, a hard box like a stone covered in velvet. Eddie coughed again and the toilet flushed.

Around the corner, the door to the bathroom opened. I shoved the box into my purse and rolled across the bed, sitting up with my knees against the bedside table as he came out to the basin and washed his hands. His back was thin and his neck was nettled with black hairs. The closet door was open wider than it had been when he went into the bathroom, but I didn't have time to fix it. Eddie dried his hands on the towel against the sink and sat down in the chair he'd pulled out for me. If he was surprised I'd moved, he didn't show it.

"I'm sorry," I said, standing up as he sat down. "I shouldn't have bothered you."

"She's said really nice things about you," he said. "She really thinks of you as a friend. I'm not a bad guy, JoDell."

I scuffed my foot on the carpet, clutching the zipper of my purse. "Are you in love with her?" I asked suddenly. Homily had said nothing could take her back to Nashville. I shoved my hands in my pockets to keep them from shaking.

"Of course," he said.

“I need to go,” I said. He caught my arm at the door before I could open it to leave. The box in my purse burned through the leather. My breath caught in my throat.

“She’ll come back with me,” he said. He searched my face when he said it.

“Right? You think she will?”

“Good luck, Eddie,” I said, and opened the door out into the summer evening.

When I came out onto the deck an hour later, Homily rolled her head to the side and smiled up at me. “Where’ve you been?” she asked.

“Nowhere,” I said, sitting down in the chair next to her and patting her on the hand. “Nowhere important, anyway.”

#

The Frankel City Polka Festival is held every year in May, the weekend before Memorial Day. On Polka Festival days the town square fills up with booths and vendors selling Mexican pottery and mesquite wood crosses, and the smell of kolaches and sausage and beer and the fetid undertone of the port-a-potties wafts into the diner every time the door swings open. The city workers string up twinkle lights in the trees and bands on the courthouse steps play all day and most of the night, so at any given time you can look out the diner window and see knots of older folk bouncing on arthritic knees to the bobbling music.

The year Homily was with us, Lil closed the beauty shop early on Friday and came over to help me with the customers overflowing at the Dixie Dog. The line at the counter was half an hour long just to serve sausage on a bun and tea. The two evening girls and I worked until we could barely stand, refilling coffee and running plates and

even bussing tables when the busboy, one of Ramon's second- or third-cousins, went outside for a smoke at the height of the dinner rush. Lil lumbered around behind the counter, taking to go orders and barking at Ramon in Spanglish. Mayor Whitsall came in after his invocation speech, and Larry came in with Ray and ordered a glass of tea to go and said hello to Lil and touched me on the elbow, but I just hurried off into the kitchen. The Johnsons and the Michelsens and the Parsons and Gentrys all came in, too, and I even caught a glimpse of two white-headed boys pushing Jené along the sidewalk in her wheelchair.

Homily came in, too, late in the day. I hadn't said anything to her about Eddie or Ray or anything Larry had told me, and the ring box was buried in my bottom dresser drawer with Mama's picture and my father's dog tags. When Homily walked in, I smiled and she smiled back with her way of making me feel like I was the only person in the room. I found her a place at the end of the counter and she chatted with the tourists sitting next to her, and even Lil half-smiled at her and brought her some coffee and a BLT. It was hard not to feel good with polka music playing in the background. Homily stayed a while but with the crowd in the café I didn't have a chance to see her much before she got on her way to the roadhouse for her evening shift.

We ran tables from the time the sun came up and we were filling orders for biscuits with sausage gravy all the way through the sun setting behind us in a great orange sweeping glow, casting shadows across the festival goers on the courthouse lawn. When the light finally died and the revelers moved off after dinner, when the diner settled down enough for Ramon to go outside for his first and only cigarette of the day, I poured

myself a glass of tea and sat down on a stool. Lil was humming to herself and I thought for a minute she was going to bring me a grilled cheese like I was fourteen again, but instead she wiped the counter and I blinked back a tear. What happened to you? I wanted to ask. The strap of Christmas bells Ramon had put up over the door jingled.

“Can I help you?” Lil asked.

“No,” Eddie said, his voice syrupy as it’d been when he’d tried to break Ray’s jaw. I froze, my glass in midair between the counter and my mouth. He slid onto the stool next to me. “I’m looking for something I lost, and I was wondering if JoDell here has seen it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said. “If you’re looking for Homily, she’s out at the Hog.”

“I know where Homily is.” Eddie’s voice was low and sibilant.

“Then what are you doing here?” I asked, setting my tea on the counter. Through the expo window, Ray was back, gesturing and speaking in lightning Spanish to Ramon.

“Looking for something,” Eddie said again, leaning towards me until his mouth was almost on my ear. “A box that was in my bag at the motel. I thought maybe you’d seen it when you were there yesterday.”

Outside, the polka music slowed to a waltz, a smooth, mournful sound. Mr. and Mrs. Jorgenson swayed on the green and clutched each other. Eddie’s breath was sour on my shoulder and his cologne was overpowering and the bones in my chest felt wrenched together.

“JoDell?” Lil asked loudly, coming out from behind the counter and putting her hand on my shoulder. Ray and Ramon looked up at my name and Ray’s face turned thunder-dark at the site of Eddie.

“Hey,” Ray shouted, and when he did Eddie whirled around and I slid off my stool until I was standing back to back with Lil. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Eddie scowled under his bruises, and then everything happened at once – Ray and Ramon came barging through the swinging kitchen door and Lil bumped me with her hip so I was running towards the door of the diner and Eddie was up off his stool following me and on top of all of it, a familiar scream cut through the heady summer air outside. Eddie juked around Lil like a running back and Ray jumped over the counter, skimming the collar of Eddie’s shirt with his fingertips and I slammed open the door so hard it bounced off the jamb and hit me on the way out.

“You bitch. You leave my boys alone,” Jené Jorgenson was shouting on the sidewalk. I skidded to a stop, but it wasn’t quickly enough; her wheelchair was directly in front of the diner door. I tumbled over her and she crumpled under me and her arms pinwheeled over my head. There was a horrible crunch as her wheelchair rolled back and then tipped over and we hit the pavement in a sickening crash, Jené’s elbow and shoulder and finally my forehead. I barely had time to open my eyes when someone dragged me backwards off her, my scalp ripping and on fire.

“Where is it, you bitch?” Eddie yelled, dragging me along the sidewalk by my hair. I screamed as he yanked and my neck popped back and up. Ahead of me, on the sidewalk, Homily towered over one of the Jorgenson twins, her hand twisting his ear with

unnatural force and him dancing as if she was electrocuting him. Her face was chalk white and Eddie yanked on my hair again and Jené moaned on the pavement. The band, a hundred feet away and oblivious to the commotion, ended the waltz and struck up something Tejano.

“Eddie?” Homily asked, the twin’s ear fire-engine red in her hand. “What the hell?”

“Let me go,” the boy shouted. He reached up and karate chopped her wrist, and she dropped him with a shake of her wrist, like swatting a fly. Tears streamed down my face. Eddie yanked one last time on my hair and then shoved me aside, so I hit the brick wall of the diner and bounced off and crumpled there in a ball.

“What the hell is going on out here?” Lil asked, crowding the diner door with Ramon and Ray. Ray slammed his shoulder into Eddie and I thought he was going to belt him again, but instead he brushed past him and knelt down between Eddie and me, all the muscles in his back and shoulders tensed.

“Mija,” he said. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. The twin Homily had released had his arm under Jené’s shoulder, trying to lift her back into her chair. The other was lying on his side behind them, heaving. The crunch I’d heard was the wheelchair crossing the arch of his foot.

“Eddie, what the hell is wrong with you?” Homily said. “She’s my best friend.”

Despite the throbbing in my temples, my chest warmed.

“She’s a dumb bitch,” Eddie said. “She’s a liar, Homily. She stole –”

“She didn’t even know you were here,” Homily cut him off. She took a step toward him and then another, until she was close enough I could see a raspberry the shape of a heart on her neck just above the line of her t-shirt. I leaned my head back against the wall, tears and sweat and blood crusty along my upper lip.

“Homily,” Eddie said. “I love you.”

Homily’s mouth twisted in a moue of disgust. “You son of a bitch,” she said, and her voice reverberated off the diner and she exploded like a lit stick of dynamite. I saw it coming and I wanted to get up and smother it out but I couldn’t get my feet under me and she raised her closed fists and ran at him like a battering ram. Homily hit Eddie like a ten-ton truck and he went tumbling backwards and to the side, back down on Jené who was half sitting with her son’s arm around her and Homily ghostly silent and swinging the whole way down. The Jorgenson boy with the broken foot howled as his brother crashed onto the pavement on top of him, and Jené, paralyzed, pain-ridden Jené was in a heap underneath them all, not screaming, just leaning her head back and gasping for air.

Ray leapt forward with the second howl of the Jorgenson twin and wrapped his arms around Homily’s waist and carried her backward, her arms and legs flailing. The Jorgenson twin with the broken foot was lying on the sidewalk moaning and Eddie rolled off to the side and Ray whispered to Homily in guttural Spanish and Ramon glared at all of us from the diner door. I crawled toward Lil and she put her arm under my shoulder and helped me to standing.

“Jené,” Lil said. We hobbled to where Jené had fallen out of her chair and Lil eased me down on the sidewalk and I put my hand between Jené’s head and the cement.

“Jené?” I asked. She opened her eyes and blinked. A purple bruise was rising along her cheekbone. “Are you okay?” The Jorgenson twin behind her was wheezing like he was trying not to cry. The one with both feet unbroken helped Lil right Jené’s chair again.

“It’s going to be okay,” Lil said. Jené opened her eyes and they were bloodshot and watery and it struck me how helpless we were, no matter how long or how close together we lived. I couldn’t help Sharla or Jené, and I couldn’t help Mama, and I tried to help Homily Hope all those years before and now Ray was dragging her around the corner of the diner. Sirens blared and Eddie ran down the sidewalk towards the Texaco and Jené and Lil and the boys and I were bruised and on the ground. I wanted to do something but there was nothing I could do, so I laid my head against Lil’s chest while she squeezed Jené’s hand. Jené’s sons and grandmother curled up against her until the paramedics burst through the crowd in a glare of red lights and loaded us up into the ambulance and carried us away down the blacktop highway.

CHAPTER XVI

When I got home from the hospital the living room was dark and the television was off. Lil had stayed at the hospital with Ramon and the Jorgensons. I stood in the living room with my fingers on the back of the couch and running along the throw pillows Mama bought at the dollar store and even on the frame of the photo of Larry and me on the console table. The house smelled like dust and stale cigarettes, the way a woman's house will smell when she gets too old to put on perfume. I stared at the outlines of our furniture and felt the pilled fabric and all I wanted was to lie down on the couch where Mama had laid down all those years ago to die. I'd even taken two steps toward it when music playing from the back deck drifted in through the screen door.

Her bare feet were propped up on a plastic stool and the ember of her cigarette arced and disappeared when she flicked it off the side of the deck. Homily had been crying so hard she looked like she'd been beaten. Her face was puffy and her eyes were dark with purple crescents underneath. She shook her hair off her face and I sat down in my chair and faced her with my knees. The moon was clouded and the pasture behind the house was shrouded in darkness.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.”

“Are you okay?” I asked. There was a bottle of gin on the deck and a two-finger-full glass. She reached down to the other side of the chair and picked up a pack of cigarettes.

“Sure. Are you?”

“Sure,” I said. She lit the cigarette in her hand and tossed the lit match at the corner of the deck. It fizzled out before it hit the floor. She wiped her face with her free hand and cleared away some of the mascara streaks. “I don’t know what to say,” I said.

“I never know what to say.”

“Where’s Ray?”

“I sent him home.” She took a drag on her cigarette. “He wanted – well. He wanted.”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t help it, I laughed even though it wasn’t funny. She sounded like a spoiled child. A breeze came up, too cool to be a part of the humid night, and the laugh died in my mouth. She crossed one ankle over the other and rubbed her shoulder with one hand, the tip of the cigarette waving. I reached down and picked up her glass and took a drink. She’d left lipstick on the rim that tasted like berry, and the gin stung where I’d bit the inside of my mouth when I’d hit the pavement.

“So is everyone okay?” she asked.

“Jené has a concussion. Niels’ foot’s broken.” The bump at my hair line throbbed.

“What about you?”

“Concussion,” I said. She had her chin on her chest. I wanted to take her hand. A car rumbled past on the overpass down the bayou and when the light flashed across the deck her eyes were wet.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she said. “I just thought you wouldn’t understand if I told you about Eddie, after Ray and everything else.”

“Are you in love with him?”

“No,” she said with finality.

“Good.” I laughed again and rubbed my temple. “Because then I might really hate you.”

“Do you think this is funny?” she asked, her cigarette flashing at me in the dark.

“He asked me to marry him.”

“He did?” The ring was still in my bottom drawer. I bit the inside of my gum and blood flowed across my tongue. “When? What did you say?”

“Today. I told him I wouldn’t.” She snorted. “He didn’t even have a ring. Who proposes without a ring?”

I twisted the hem of my t-shirt into a knot and then finally leaned back in my chair and exhaled in one long breath. “Larry,” I said. “Larry did it, too.”

She took a drag on her cigarette and stared down the bayou. “Is that why you and Larry broke up?”

“Sort of,” I said. “Larry wanted, too. Like Ray.” I picked up the bottle and took a drink. The oak tree in the pasture doubled and I blinked at it until it congealed back to

one. Larry, touching my elbow in the diner, like there was something left to say – I didn't want to think about it.

“I'm not a bad person,” she said. “I like Ray. But he's just like all the others. We don't even talk.”

“Do you give him a chance?” I asked.

She smiled, finally. “Well.”

“Okay, then.”

“It just sucks,” she said, but it didn't sound childish. She sounded like a woman who'd found out her dreams weren't going to come true and was faced with the task of figuring out how to go on anyway. It was how I'd woken up every day for the last twelve years. “I should have listened to you that day. I was so dumb. Why didn't I listen to you?”

“I wouldn't have listened to me,” I said.

“He was so mad at me.”

“Your dad?”

She nodded. “I walked in and – I don't know. I don't know what you saw. But it was awful. He was so mad. He was yelling and Jaylene was running around without any clothes on and I don't know. He was just so mad. Jimmy left and I just stood there and my dad was just yelling. And then they left. I thought he would come back.” She took another drag on her cigarette. “But then he didn't and Mama was flipping out and so I told her, and she just lost it. I'd never seen anything like it. She was breaking stuff and screaming and I thought I was going to have to take her to the hospital.

“I just thought he would come back, you know. Like that girl was just nothing. But they have kids now. I have little brothers I’ve never even met.”

“You’ve never seen them?”

She ashed her cigarette on the deck. “No. When I was still in high school he’d call about the divorce and talk to Mom, but she said he never wanted to talk to me. Which I’m sure was bullshit. When I did talk to him it was like I didn’t know what to say. He would try sometimes and say he might come see me and then never do it. I mean, it was like he didn’t want us. You can’t imagine what that feels like.” She stopped. “I mean –”

“I know,” I said. “I know what you mean.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.” I looked down at my hands. “At least you got to know him.”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “Maybe it would have been better not to.”

“No. It wouldn’t have.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “Sometimes I don’t think.”

“I know.” I stretched out my legs. My breath smelled like copper and liquor.

“Why were you up there that day?” she asked.

“At your house?”

“Yeah.”

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes and the sky laid down on me, and it felt too heavy to talk anymore, almost too heavy to breathe. The acrid smell of her cigarette smoke saturated the air. “I thought he was my father.”

I heard her chair creak as she sat up. “What?”

“He and Mama dated in high school,” I said. “I wanted him to be my father. So I convinced myself. It wasn’t that hard, really.”

“You thought we were sisters,” she said, her voice hollow.

I opened my eyes. She was staring at me like she had that day at her house, like she was going to swallow me. I blinked and the white outline of the deck imprinted on my corneas and I closed my eyes and it all went black again.

“Oh, God,” she said. “I was so cruel.”

“Yes. But you didn’t know.” We sat there in silence, and then I opened my mouth and it surprised even me. “What they said about my dad was true,” I said. “He didn’t want me. When I found him he knew about me and didn’t even deny it. He just didn’t want me at all.”

“Who was he?” she asked. There was something new in her voice, almost maternal.

“You don’t know the story?” I asked.

“The outline,” she said. “Not the details.”

“He was a soldier. Mama met him at the roadhouse. Right after your daddy got Emeline pregnant.”

“God,” she said. “Did my father cheat on your mother?”

“I don’t know. I still don’t know the whole story. It was big gossip but nobody will tell me about it now. For all I know she cheated on him, or maybe they never had sex at all. I never know what to believe in this town.”

Homily was quiet and then she asked. “How did you find your father?”

“Lil told me his name. And his rank. Name and rank.” I smiled like it was funny. The cold feeling swept across me again and I reached up and my cheeks were damp. It could’ve been sweat. “It wasn’t that hard.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

When we’d sat there too long, I asked, “Did you go to Nashville, Homily?”

She didn’t say anything, but it felt like she was smiling and then she laughed and it was a dry and made me think of fall. “You don’t believe me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I did some bad things,” she said. “I told you that.”

“So you didn’t go.”

Down the river, another car screamed past on the Travis overpass, and a dog barked, and the screaming tree frogs and cicadas joined in. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry that you’re hurt.”

“Thank you.” I opened my eyes.

“You know what?” she asked, touching the side of my face where the welt from the concrete had raised on my temple.

“What?”

“I’m glad you wanted to be my sister.” Homily slid her chair over so she was sitting close to me and then reached down and propped my legs up across her lap. She put her arms around me and pulled until I laid my head on her chest. The muscles and tendons in her arms stood out and her heartbeat was quick and solid under the bird-like

bones of her sternum. Her voice was thick and she touched my neck and said, “I wish you didn’t hurt.”

I lifted my head and her eyes were lidded and half-closed and she kissed me on the forehead like a mother and then lower, on my eyelids and cheek and then with a nudge of chin she kissed me on the mouth. I just sat there, letting her and not knowing what to do and then the night darkened and my body warmed up. I’d never kissed anyone like it before and it’s never happened to me since and it’s something that stays close to my heart and sometimes covers over me when I’m alone.

We kissed and I thought about how sometimes how you can’t choose the people you love. I loved her even though she lied to me and maybe I loved her because she lied to me, because she wanted what she wanted and she took it when she could and when she couldn’t she smiled and made do without. I loved her because sometimes when I looked at her I would feel the same way I feel when I see Texas open up in front of me and I’m part of the land and there’s no separation between who I am and where I’m from and where I’ve grown. I loved her and I loved Larry, too, and between loving them both I thought I might be able to piece together something of who I was, and it made me feel what I think now was hope but back then I just classified as good. When she finished kissing me she leaned her head back on the chair and I lay my head down on her chest and we listened to the country radio playing in the background and the tree frogs screaming from the oak trees along the bayou. We lay there in the dark and watched the clouds drift across the horizon in waves of moisture and then all at once as though God had blown a great breath across the land the cloud cover dissipated and over us the

moonlight and the clear, kind light of the stars broke through and lit up the hill country
sky.

CHAPTER XVII

I hate Wednesdays. I was born on a Wednesday: Wednesday's child, full of woe. Mama used to tease me about being full of woe when I was little, when I would get in trouble and sit on my bed and act moody. I got my first period on a Wednesday. I went to Homily Hope's house on a Wednesday. Mama died on a Wednesday too.

I was walking down from Homily Hope's neighborhood, maybe a mile from the Walpole house, when Lil pulled up in her grimy Cadillac. Dirt ran in tracks up and down my tank top and there were tear streaks on my face and God only knows what Lil thought when she saw me, but she pulled up next to me and slammed the car into park and jumped out. She grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me to her and then pushed me away and looked me over, sweeping across the rip in my jeans and the dirt and sweat on my cheeks. I stood there feeling alien and looking at her like I might know her but I couldn't really remember.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," I said. She looked me over again and her face went from panic to frown.

"Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you. I had to track down Peggy to find you and she said you had her drop you off for a school project." Peggy might have been too distracted or naïve to know I was lying, but Lil couldn't be fooled. I hung my head and the tears started coming, good timing but even if it weren't

for the timing I think I would have cried anyway. I'd lost everything in one fell swoop. Lil's expression teetered between two things I couldn't locate, and then she put an arm around me and asked, "JoDell, what are you doing up here?"

"I came to see Mr. Walpole."

"You what?"

"Mr. Walpole. I came to see him." I didn't see any need to tell her I'd climbed over his fence and looked in the windows of his house.

Questions clouded Lil's forehead but I was still crying pretty hard and instead of asking she just wiped my cheeks with her thumbs and led me around the car to the passenger side. I held her hand like a toddler and let her help me in and then she reached across the seat and buckled my seatbelt. When she got in the driver's door, I had my head down and I was sobbing, and I mean tears and mucus down my face and everywhere in between and it was all I could do to breathe. Lil reached up on the steering column and shifted the car into drive. The engine had started to lift and hum when she slammed on her brakes and I flew forward so the seatbelt caught me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a dark sedan speed by us. I heard the horn but I didn't look up and if I had I think now I would have seen Frank and his clerk in the passenger seat and his Oldsmobile flying down the hillside like an escaped convict. Lil must have seen them, though, both Frank and the clerk, because she eased back onto the gas and asked quietly, "JoDell, what happened?"

I hunched over in the seat and put my face down on the upholstery. She stroked my hair and murmured but her voice was low like a lullaby and I couldn't hear the words.

It all came out, the crying and the fear I'd never know who I really was and nobody would ever remember me or think about me or love me because I'd never have a real family to speak of without a father. I cried until my chest was hitching and I was dry-heaving, and then it was just hard breathing and the car wheels underneath rolling on what sounded like highway and I was just laying there on the gold upholstery of Lil's front seat. Lil rubbed the back of my neck while she drove.

Eventually the car slowed and turned off the highway. I had no idea how far we'd come or where we were but when we stopped I had an image of our front door and the covers on my bed tucked in and all I wanted to do was get under my quilt. She shifted the car up into park and turned the key in the ignition and the engine whimpered to rest. I peeked up just enough to see her forehead and a corner of one eye, the color of steel and wet and bloodshot. "JoDell," she said. "Did you think Frank was your daddy? Is that what happened?"

It was almost enough to make me lose control again. I hadn't said it in so many words but it had been there the whole time, walking downhill, Homily's picture up over the mantle and how we didn't look anything alike. I didn't have any tears left but my abdomen clenched like I might throw up.

"Oh honey," she said. There were tears in her voice and it didn't make sense to me she would be crying. "Frank's not your daddy, Jo. Your daddy was a soldier your mama met out at the roadhouse. She was very young and she got caught up in the moment. When she found out she was pregnant, he left and she figured it was just better to let it go." She put her hand under my chin and tugged on it. Her face was red and puffy

and her shirt was on backwards. “Your mama knew she could love you enough for two people. And she has, JoDell. Hasn’t she?”

The dust on my shirt mixed with tears and mucus and turned to mud and my throat was raw and sore. I sat up in the seat to where I was sitting on my knees but still hunched over the console and she tugged on my chin again, still gentle but so I would face her. “Hasn’t she?”

I nodded.

She dropped her chin to where her face was close to mine and her eyes were fierce and slit. “She loves you, Jo. And whether or not Frank Walpole cares about us or anyone else, it doesn’t matter. All that matters is how much your Mama loves you. And I love you, too. You need to remember that. I love you. Okay?”

I didn’t feel better. But I didn’t have any tears left and the pain had drawn back behind my lungs, so I nodded again with my head hanging down and my hair in my face. I pushed up on my elbows so my hands were between us on the console and she took both my hands in one of hers.

She watched me for a minute and then in a choking voice she said, “It’s time for you to sit up, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, and when I did I saw we were in the parking lot of the Frankel City emergent care clinic. Lil’s shirt was on backwards and her hand that wasn’t holding mine was gripping the bottom of the steering wheel. All at once the knowledge of why we were there came, fully formed and unannounced, and I wanted to beat on the windows until the glass broke and dug into my arms and elbows. Lil let go of the steering wheel

and put her hands on my shoulders, and it seemed like she was straightening me out to look in her face but I think now she was just trying to hold me up.

“JoDell, your Mama’s sick,” she said. I was shaking my head and she was nodding. It might have been funny, me shaking and her nodding, except for where we were. “Mrs. Jorgenson called me this morning. She’d gone over to the house to check on Marie. When she knocked your mama didn’t answer, and she opened the door and Marie was on the couch.” Not moving? Not breathing? I still wonder what Mrs. Jorgenson found that day, but the time to ask has passed what with Mrs. Jorgenson dead twenty years and Lil gone, too. I went somewhere deep inside myself, in a box like glass so I could see out and hear but everything was far away.

“I called the ambulance and they brought her here. Your Mama’s sick,” Lil said. Her face got round and red and there were tears in her eyes and the pain behind my rib cage from Mr. Walpole and Homily Hope and everything that had happened that horrible day blossomed into something worse.

“Well, let’s go get her,” I said.

“JoDell.” Lil’s hands fell to her sides and her face lost color and it was all she had to say but I didn’t want to hear it. I untied the loose knot in my sneaker lace and retied it in a double, thinking, I should get new sneakers. Could Mama get me new sneakers? My soles were peeling along the bottom. I put my hand on the door latch but didn’t pull it.

“Let’s go,” I said, still not opening the door. “We’ll get the medicine from Mr. Ward and I’ll listen to the doctor and then we can take her home and we’ll do what they say and she’ll be fine.” The metal door pull was cold under my fingers from the air

conditioner. I gripped the door handle and didn't pull it and she just sat there and her eyes went from gray to violet, and then she reached over and put her hand on my temple and brushed back a hair. It was the softest anyone had ever touched me until the night Homily Hope kissed me in the backyard.

“No, love. She has to stay here.”

I was pushing on the door handle, not pulling, pushing until the metal bored into my skin. The silver coating was peeling off the handle in sharp strips and a welt rose along my palm. In the week Mama was in the hospital, Lil never said the word dying – she'd start to say it and her voice would go hoarse and she'd croak something and then disappear down the hall towards the Coke machine. Her hand fell from my forehead to the console between us.

“She's not going to get better,” Lil said. “Your Mama's got emphysema and lung cancer and its gone into the rest of her body. She's not going to get better.”

The car was claustrophobic. I pulled on the door handle, the right way, the blood in my hand rushing to where I'd made the welt and the door didn't open and I sat up straight and couldn't see and the box I was in deep down shattered and I screamed. Lil shuddered back an inch and the whole summer came rushing at me, the way I'd stayed at Mr. Paul's or the diner and looked at anything I could besides Mama, the way I told myself when I could feel her ribs or saw her not eating she was just trying to stay trim for when she met a new boyfriend, the blood on the Kleenex in the trash can from her coughing and the cloud of smoke always circling her. The hours she worked and the way she was hoarding money and making ground beef last an extra day and the way she

wouldn't open the door anymore when Wayne or Mrs. Jorgenson came by. The rivers of lines around her eyes and her hair falling out in her brush and the fact that at thirty-four she weighed less than me and had started looking like my grandmother instead of my mother and the smell, oh God the way she smelled like she was on fire and I just told myself it was the goddamn cigarette smoke. I screamed and it was all there around me in the car and I just lost it, like Emeline would when she heard about Frank, flailing my arms and beating on the door and rocking back and forth with my head hitting the dash. I threw myself around the car and Lil braced her feet against the floorboards and covered me with her body. I screamed and swung and I could hear the puffs of breath where I'd catch her with my fist or the top of my head or my chin, and then she picked me up until her arms were wrapped around me and I couldn't do anything but throw feeble punches at her back and bang my head against her chest.

It was listening to her breathing that helped me stop, little by little, one blow to her back, one more push on her sternum. I left my head there, at an unnatural angle just under her chin and my arms out like a rag doll and she hugged me and cooed in Spanish and English. She smelled like lavender and flesh. I didn't have any tears left but they came anyway, no sobbing or heaving, just running down my face. We sat there and she rocked me back and forth and said, I know, I know.

I was shaking when she let me go. She ran her hand over my forehead and inspected the bruises from where I'd banged my head on the dash. She took my knuckles in her hands where I'd split them on the door and put them to her cheek and then kissed them. We sat there and she held my hands in my lap and I put my head on her shoulder

and after who knows how long, long enough for the car to heat up in the afternoon sun and the blood on my knuckles to congeal to hard bubbles, she reached over my shoulder and unlocked the door and laid me back in the seat like I was a baby. Lil got out of the car into the hospital parking lot and came around to my side and opened the door. I stared at her and she held out her hand and I sat up and wiped my face and put my feet on the ground outside the car to go see Mama before she died.

CHAPTER XVIII

“JoDell, what’s this?”

Homily came into the bathroom a week after the Polka Festival, carrying something small and velvety. Steam from the shower misted over the mirror, so when she tapped me on the shoulder I jumped. She held out the ring box.

“Where’d you find that?” I asked, grabbing it out of her hand. My heart raced under my towel.

“I thought you said Larry didn’t give you a ring,” Homily said.

“What were you doing going through my stuff?”

“I was borrowing a t-shirt,” she said, staring over my shoulder into the steamed-up mirror. She tossed her hair and smiled coyly. “What? It’s not a big deal. We share everything now.”

“Right,” I tightened my towel around my chest. “We do. But –”

“So what is it?” She was still smiling but the lines around her mouth were deep and tight. “Did you change your mind about Larry? Did he give you that?”

“No,” I said. “No, of course not.”

“Good,” she said, running her hand up my bicep. “Because you know you’d break my heart if you changed your mind. You know that, right?”

“Of course.” She turned to go and I asked, “Homily, what are we doing? What are we going to tell people?”

“We’re sisters,” she said. “I love you.” She touched my arm again, and then my cheek. But as she walked away, in her blurry reflection in the mirror, her mouth was still thin and she wasn’t smiling anymore.

The week after the Polka Festival was like living in a dream. Homily and I spent hours together, talking on the deck or on my bed while she brushed and braided my hair. She came in the diner every morning and ordered coffee and I heckled Ramon into making her scrambled egg whites with Tabasco. Every time she smiled at me warmth welled up in my stomach. I don’t know how to explain it other than to say like a fool I loved her and thought I’d never feel the same way about anyone again.

I told her about the summer I was fourteen and how much I’d wanted to be her sister. I told her about Lil and how she’d taken me to the hospital when Mama got sick and everything I knew about Mama and Frank, and how every year since Mama died I’d felt more and more alone. I told her about the few times I’d been sitting at the house thinking about Mama until I felt like I had thorns in my head and I couldn’t breathe, and I’d go out and pick up a stranger at the Cotton Club and take him to the motel and wake up in the dark of the morning alone. I told her all of it and about Larry and how when I first met him he hadn’t wanted anything but to hold me and the way he put his arms around me and the length of his body made me feel peaceful. I saw Larry, too, walking by the diner or pumping gas at the Texaco or driving his pickup west on Travis towards the gas plant. When I saw him my heart would drop until Homily would call to me and then when I looked at her it was like he hadn’t ever existed.

I told Homily everything and she told me a few things, too, about Frank and Emeline (she called them by their names, Frank and Emeline) and the roadhouse and how she wanted to own a place like that someday and Randy really liked her and maybe one day she could buy it from him. She told me about getting her fortune read in Nashville and how the palmist said she was destined to be a legend. I asked her again about some of the rumors I'd heard and she just shook her head and said, Some other time, and I smiled and said, Okay, sometime soon. The last week Homily was with us I talked and talked and she listened and didn't say much, and like with Mama I was too busy to notice. It's all I can do now not to curl up and hold my head thinking about how foolish I was. I guess maybe I've never learned to forgive myself.

Homily and I spent the week after the festival together and the town went on, the city workers cleaning up the square and the morning shift at the diner back to roughnecks and truckers and Mr. Paul asking Ray to take down the Welcome to Frankel City sign he hung along the light pole outside the Texaco station. The Friday after the festival Homily came in the diner in the morning and it was busy, with Mr. Johnson in with a couple of salesman and Mr. Jorgenson eating his egg sandwich and Mrs. Michelsen picking up Ramon's pastries to take back to the Piggly Wiggly for a staff meeting. Homily sat in her favorite booth in the back where she could see people come and go and I brought her a morning coffee. I stopped to visit when I had the chance but what with everybody in the diner it was all I could do to keep up with the ringing of the expo bell and chasing coffee cups. I was so busy I didn't even notice when the bells over the door rang and the heat of the day swept in and behind the heat, Emeline.

I was shouting at Ramon over a table of Mr. Parsons' rig hands, miming with my hands how they wanted their eggs scrambled and not over easy. It wasn't the bells ringing or the heat or the slam of the door or even the way everyone looked up when she came in that finally caught my attention. What finally made me look up from where I was standing between the counter and the table of roughnecks was the way the diner went quiet and I was still shouting, and then I was the only one talking at all.

Emeline wore a navy linen jacket and a gold and green scarf knotted around her neck. All eyes turned to her and I did, too, and she raised her chin so I could see the red marks where her scarf was knotted too tight. Underneath her stare, we wilted. Ramon was the first to move, slamming his plates down on the ledge and waving his right hand at me in a semi-obscene gesture. Emeline saw me, finally, after staring down the table of Parsons' Well Service workers so they were all studying forks and saucers and the dirt under the fingernails. When I looked at her I saw Homily's hair hanging down her back in a frizzy ponytail and the way she must've looked after having her face scrubbed with a Brillo pad. A wellspring of hatred rose up in me so that I had to turn towards the counter to keep it inside. Before I turned away, though, Emeline's mouth turned up in a knowing sort of sneer.

So I went back to the counter with the coffee pot and Ramon grumbling in the kitchen and when I glanced over my shoulder she was weaving around tables toward the booth where Homily sipped her coffee. Homily sat there so calmly I thought maybe she hadn't seen Emeline, but when Emeline finally made the last booth and parked herself at the corner of Homily's table, Homily looked up and said, "Hello, Mama."

“Hello, love,” Emeline said. The diner was muttering with the clank and scrape of silverware again but when they spoke we all heard it. Mrs. Michelsen took the box the counter girl offered her and half-turned to go, but then paused with her head cocked. The Johnson salesman who had been telling jokes about golfing with the Pope stopped tapping his shiny loafer on the rung of his chair. I studied the two plates in the window like I might do something with them, but I was listening, too.

“Why don’t you sit down, Mama?” Homily asked.

“Thanks, love.” Emeline pulled a baby wipe from her purse and wiped down the bench, rubbing it in circles like she was buffing a car.

“So,” Homily said.

“So,” Emeline said. “I hear you’ve made a spectacle of yourself in public again.”

Anyone still pretending not to listen dropped their pretense – egg sandwich, morning paper, coffee. Even Mr. Jorgenson leaned out of the booth to hear better.

“Did you?” Homily said. Her hands were on the table, curled up in a shaft of sunshine.

“And I hear you haven’t been behaving well in private, either,” Emeline continued.

Homily smiled. “Define well.”

Behind me, Ramon snickered. Richard Johnson leaned forward on his elbows and asked his best salesman if he thought recent rains had affected sales of the new model Camaro. The Parsons’ rig hands were still studying the dirt in their nails.

“I hear you lost your temper.”

“You heard that, did you?” Homily raised her voice an octave, and it was saccharine again. Like Eddie. “I wonder where you might have heard that.”

“Don’t be smart, Homily,” Emeline hissed. “I have had enough of your being smart to last a lifetime.”

“Why are you here, Mama?” Homily asked. Her smile had faded to a ghost along the lines of her jaw. “You’ve wanted nothing to do with me for the last two months. Something must have really gotten your panties in a twist.”

One of the rig hands smiled. Mr. Jorgenson’s shirt sleeve was dangling in a pool of Tabasco on his plate. My hands were shaking just enough to make rills in the coffee in the pot I was holding.

“Do you hate us so much, Homily?” Emeline asked smoothly. “Do you hate us so much that you would show your parents so little respect in so public a place?” She glanced around at the way we all had our heads turned, pretending to be busy or eating, all except Mr. Jorgenson who was leaning on his elbow all the way to the edge of his booth. She smirked. “Do you hate us so much? Or do you just hate yourself so much you’ll do whatever it takes to hurt the people who love you?”

Homily lost her grin completely. “Don’t start with that bullshit,” she said flatly.

“I love you, Homily,” Emeline said. “Maybe that’s what it is. You don’t think you deserve to be loved. Is that why you push us away, Homily? You don’t think you deserve to be loved? To have a family?”

“What family?” Homily’s paled and the rage in her voice filled the space between the tables in the diner. It echoed around all of us, waiting to ignite. “You? My crazy mother? My father who hasn’t spoken to me in ten years? You’re not my family.”

Emeline sat back in the booth. “We’re the only family you’ve got. And we were never good enough for you.” Her voice rose at the end of the sentence and her collarbone stood up out of her skin, but then she sucked in a great gasp of air and when she blew it out all her bones and muscles settled back into place. When she spoke, it was coy, like she was telling her daughter something Homily knew and refused to acknowledge. “If it weren’t for you, your daddy wouldn’t have left,” Emeline said. “You’re the one who ruined things, Hope. You’re the one that made your family the way it is. The only person you have to blame is yourself.”

Any leftover noise in the diner died, the rumble of dishes in the dishwasher in the back and the popping of eggs in the skillet and the percolation of the coffee brewing on the counter. The whole town, all of us and the buildings and the oak trees and the gargoyles, took a collective breath. Emeline might’ve heard it but I guess by then she was beyond caring. Or maybe she wanted us all to hear. She stared around with a withering glare and turned back to Homily and said, “You’re an embarrassment to your father’s name and to my daddy’s name, too.”

“I was never good enough for you, Mama,” Homily said. Her hair fell over her face. “I was never good enough for you or anyone else in this town. So why not, right? Why not?”

I took a jerking step forward and the coffee in my pot sloshed up and sprinkled my wrist with bee stings of pain. Homily glanced my way and her eyes were sunken and her cheekbones hard underneath her skin and her lips thin and cold. Her mouth pursed and she said, "But there is someone I'm good enough for, Mama. There's one person I'm good enough for."

"White trash. Mexicans. That's your idea of family now?" Emeline asked the question in a slow arc of words, like she was speaking to a three year old. My coffee pot trembled again.

Homily laid her hands flat on the table. "I'm in love," she said.

Emeline scoffed and leaned forward, her voice soft like she might not want us to hear any more, but her words carried in the stillness of the diner. "You don't know what love is, Homily. You don't know anything about it."

"I do. I'm in love and you can't do anything about it." Richard Johnson drummed a finger on his plate. Mrs. Michelsen stroked the top of her pastry box, her expression caught half in longing. Mr. Jorgenson's chest was so still, I thought he might've had a stroke. I waited for the way my name would sound, my heart pounding, my whole life about to change, to become something. My chest locked up and the entire diner, the sidewalk, the whole of Frankel City held its breath.

"I'm in love with Ray Martinez," Homily said.

Emeline's skin went the color of her scarf and she may very well have said something but I didn't hear it, because when Homily said Ray's name I dropped the coffee pot in a smashing black puddle on the floor. The liquid and glass flew up and cut

my bare legs above the cotton of my socks and one of the Parsons' rig hands jumped back with a pant leg wet with steaming liquid. Ramon rushed out of the kitchen and pulled me back from the mess on the floor and Mrs. Michelsen dropped her package of pastries on the counter and hurried to the cussing rig hand. The town rushed back to life. Mr. Jorgenson wrestled his way out of the booth and fumbled with the handkerchief in his pocket and Mr. Johnson and his salesman grabbed the napkin dispenser off their table and then just sat at the edge of their chairs. Ramon knelt on the floor below me, holding a kitchen towel to where I was bleeding from the shattered glass.

“JoDell?” Ramon asked. “Are you okay? JoDell?”

I heard him but all I could do was watch Homily Hope as she stared fixedly at the floor. She put her forehead in her hands and dropped her head toward her coffee. Her hair puffed at the crown of her head where I'd back-combed it for her before I'd left for work. “I'm okay,” I said.

“Stupid girl,” Ramon said under his breath, standing up. “JoDell, don't –”

“I'm fine,” I said. Emeline's mouth was moving furiously and her face had gone from pale green to brick red. Homily still wouldn't look at me. I'd told her everything, about Mama and Frank and Lil and Larry and even Ray, and when it was her turn to tell the truth, she wouldn't even admit she loved me. Even Ray was preferable to me. My hands were cold and the cuts on my legs smarted and my shoes were soaking with hot liquid, but I didn't move.

“What do I care?” I asked suddenly. Nobody heard me. Why was I surprised, really? She'd lied and cheated and whored around. After everything I knew about

Homily, I'd been stupid enough to believe her and I had nobody to blame but myself. Hatred leapt up in my throat and it wasn't just for Homily or Emeline. It was for everything in my life that had been lost or disappointed and I wanted to spit and scream and claw at her eyes.

"I don't care if she's dating the king of England." My voice carried over the din of the diner, but still, nobody noticed. Homily dropped her head further. Ramon was patting my arm and Richard Johnson was waving his wallet to pay and Mr. Jorgenson was shaking his head and speaking very fast in Czech.

"She don't know –" Ramon started. I pulled my arm away.

"I don't care," I yelled, and finally they all looked up, Johnson and Jorgenson and Michelson and Parsons. Ramon flinched back and Emeline scowled and Homily just buried her forehead deeper into her hands. "She can screw whoever she wants," I said. I threw the towel on the counter and reached behind it for my keys and then walked out of the diner with Ramon's bells ringing behind me.

CHAPTER XIX

When I got in my car I didn't know where I was going. I couldn't see and I didn't want to see and I sure as hell didn't want to think, not about Homily or what she'd done. I started my car and gave it too much gas so the engine roared and sputtered and then finally caught. The front seat was hot like an oven and I pulled out the diner parking lot and turned left on Main across Travis and even though the heat was making me sweaty and dizzy, I didn't turn on the air conditioner. I wanted to hurt myself, everything, everyone I knew. I wanted to scream and pound my head against the steering wheel and instead I pulled up to the light at River Road and like a beacon parked in the corner of Mr. Paul's back lot, peeking out from between the shop and the red and black of the Texaco station, was the elevated chrome bumper of Ray's pickup truck.

I didn't think. I didn't think and if it happened to me again I think it's possible, likely, even, I would do the same thing. I cut across the two lanes of traffic between me and the body shop and screeched into the parking lot and jerked the key out of the ignition without taking the car out of gear, so the engine cranked and died. Mr. Paul wasn't in his chair and both bays had cars in them, but I didn't see Ray or Monty or any of the mechanics in the shop. I slammed my shoulder into my car door and it flew open and I burst out and went running at Ray's truck like Homily had run at Eddie, with both fists up. When I hit the hood my left wrist popped and twisted but I couldn't feel it and I

pounded on the truck, with my fists and knees and entire body, on the door and the windshield. A headlight shattered under my foot.

The breaking glass brought Ray out of the office. I backed up, breathing hard and rearing back with a rock to throw through his front windshield and he grabbed me from behind, the same way he picked Homily up off Eddie and Jené at the festival.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he yelled, and I swung back with my feet in the air so we both lost our balance and I fell on top of him on the asphalt, releasing the rock in a high arc over the two of us.

“I hate you,” I yelled. His hands were rough and flat and his fingers dug into my waistband.

“What the fuck?” he asked again, and heaved me to the side so I crumpled in a heap on the pavement and pain shot through my head where I’d hit my temple the night of the festival. The Texaco station next door was quiet, the stoplight at River and Main hidden behind the gas station and body shop buildings. It was just the two of us, chests hitching, Ray rubbing his back and sitting up and me crouching.

“You,” I said. “I hate you.” He had on a ripped t-shirt and gray mechanic pants and there was grease on his wrist and his bicep. He shone like a pecan in the sun. Could she love him? I had my fists up but he was ready for me the second time and he latched his arms around my shoulders and I couldn’t move or for a minute even breathe.

“You said that already,” he said. I struggled against him but my lungs were exploding and I finally went limp. He let me go and took a cautious step back. Behind me a car idled at the station next door. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He was standing there in his t-shirt and his jaw was shadowed from where he hadn't shaved and his hands were a darker brownish gray than the rest of his body. I wanted to jump at him again and swing and even bite and I could taste him, dirt and oil the way sweat tastes on a hot day when you lick your lips. I opened my mouth but all I could think to say was I hate you, and so I just stood there with my mouth open until he relaxed his arms and smiled, an overgrown shadow of the tall, gangly boy he'd been.

The sun beat down on us through a merciless, cloudless sky and instead of seeing him murderous and swarthy I saw the way his arms were still too long for his body like they'd been at sixteen; instead of seeing the grease and calluses on his hands I saw the way they'd been bony and dark on my skin when he'd put his hand on my stomach and slid it up my shirt. The strength slumped out of my shoulders and I was about to fall when he caught me around the waist. He half-carried me around the side of the truck and opened the door and helped me in and then went around the other side and sat behind the wheel without turning the ignition. The cab of the truck was hot from sitting in the sun and he left the door cracked. A German car idled near the door of the Texaco station.

“You're going to have to pay for my headlight,” he said finally.

“Yeah,” I said. My temple ached. Sweat dripped down his jaw.

“What happened?” he asked.

“She makes fun of you,” I said. My voice plinked into the cab like rocks into a pond. “She laughs at you. She says you follow her around like a puppy.”

The words came out before I really thought about what I was saying. I wasn't angry, just flat and hard. He was someone I'd known like a brother most of my life and I

could lie and say I told him because I thought it was for his benefit or because I was in love with him or even because I wanted to have sex with him, but none of that was true. I told him because when I saw him in the parking lot of Mr. Paul's shop, he was just an extension of the boy I'd known at thirteen. I didn't tell him because I hated Homily. I told him because I couldn't stand the thought of anyone taking something else away from me.

He sat there for awhile, and then he pushed the driver's side door open an inch with the toe of his work boot. A breath of air swept in and died in the heat between us. The cloth against his chest was speckled with sweat. "She doesn't know what she wants," he said. His stare was pitiless. "When do women ever know what they want?"

I clasped my hands, thinking about the day at the roller rink. He grabbed my wrists and pulled me towards him. "Why do you think I care?" he asked. His fingers around my wrists were viselike. I shrank back and opened my mouth to call out to whoever was in the Volkswagen across the parking lot, but nothing came out.

"Do you love her?" I asked instead.

Ray studied me for a minute and then dropped my hands and rammed the flat of his hand against the steering wheel. The horn gave a feeble beep. "Maybe," he said. "I don't know. Am I stupid, JoDell? Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No." I sat up, rubbing my wrists.

"We've known each other a long time," he said. "I'm not stupid. I know enough to know that woman doesn't love me. So why do you think you have to come here and beat up on my truck and then tell me she makes fun of me. Is this fun for you?" His voice was rising.

“No.”

“Then what the hell are you doing here?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Broken glass glinted up off the pavement. He’d been an awkward kid, bussing tables at the diner or following Mr. Paul at the mechanics shop. He only had Ramon and all he and Ramon ever did was argue and when he walked around town people looked at him as if he were in a cage. I’d come there to hurt someone and I’d succeeded. I put my hand on his cheek and he shrugged away.

“I’ll pay for your headlight,” I said. The door handle was hot like gunmetal under my hand. I opened the door and jumped to the ground and walked back to my car, slow steps at first and then striding ones until I was running.

I went home as the sun was setting and the world was cooling off enough that I could get out of the car without covering over in a film of sweat. I’d driven for a while, towards New Mexea and then back along the bypass until I came into town, winding through the hills until I came to the bridge and the water treatment plant. I stayed out there for a while, sitting on the edge and even draping my legs out across the curb to where they dangled over the water. I put my hands heel down behind me. The river came down out of the mountains and even in early June when the rest of town had filled up with heat the Colorado was icy, churning across the few rocks beneath the bridge. I hung my feet over and straightened my arms and rocked back and forth but when the time came for me to push off I leaned back on my elbows instead, the pavement carving marks into the skin on the inside of my forearm. The sun stippled through the canopy of trees

overhead and lit the grime of my diner uniform. I might've stayed there all night if I hadn't heard the rumbling engine of Homily's Cadillac pull up to the gate of the bridge. She had the radio on and the song playing was an old Dolly Patron song. I didn't open my eyes when she walked up.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Again?" I asked. I opened my eyes and squinted up at her. "I'm not."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I'm not sorry," I said. The sun haloed the back of her head. "So go on and do whatever you want to do, but go do it somewhere else."

"You know I'm not really in love with him," she said flatly.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "That's not what this is about. You don't know how to care about anyone's feelings but your own, Homily." I closed my eyes again and leaned all the way back, so my shoulders and back touched the asphalt and where the sun had heated the road it burned through my uniform.

"You all think you're so high and mighty," Homily said. "Everyone in this goddamn town. It's like you're so much better than everyone else." She kept going but all I heard was the tinkling of her voice and the way the river rushed underneath us. The more she talked the more I relaxed and the river swallowed me and I even smiled when she made a virulent point about being nothing more than a show pony for everyone in town to put out to pasture when her usefulness was over.

Her voice rode up and down with the rhythm of the river, and as she talked I replayed scenes from my life, Mr. Walpole's affair and Ray at the roller rink and Mama

at the Steak Away and the accident, the glint of sun on the motorcycle, the driver kneeling in the ditch, Jené in her wheelchair and Homily, too, in her cheerleading uniform and in her faded shorts at the Dixie Dog. Homily raged and her voice coarsened and I thought about the calendar on Mr. Paul's desk and how Dr. Lindeven had a calendar of births and illnesses and Mr. Tuckett at the mortuary had one, too. It was the story of it, the way our actions turned into stories told over tea at the Dixie Dog or a beer at the roadhouse – that was how we were remembered. She was my story now. A tear slid out from under my eyelid. I opened my eyes and she took a breath and puffed out again as though she might keep going, and then put her head down in her hands.

“Eddie had a ring, Homily,” I said. I didn't wipe the tear from my face. “I stole it when I went out to see him. It's in my purse in the car. You should take it with you when you go.”

“I don't care,” she said. She took a step toward me.

“Don't,” I said. “Just go away.”

“Please, JoDell.” I might've hated her for pleading with me, but in the end I just felt sorry for her. I laid there under the Texas sun on the road over the river and closed my eyes again.

She hovered over me long enough for the sun to stretch farther along the bridge and cast me in shade. I almost wanted her to make another plea, to say my name again; I almost changed my mind. When the shadow of the plant started working its way up my arm, I heard her turn and shuffle across the pavement, steps slow and then quicker and her sandals snapping against the pavement until the car door opened and the rumble of

engine came on again. When I opened my eyes she had the car pointing uphill to downtown and she was hanging a hand out the window with a cigarette trailing smoke. The car pulled away from the bridge and I lay there for a while longer, until the black of her exhaust and the bitter smoke of her cigarette faded back into the sweetness of river water, and then I stood up and dusted myself and went home.

CHAPTER XX

The hospital was cold and smelled like disinfectant and sickness and canned food on plastic trays. Mama's room was at the end of a hall near an exit door where the hospital staff and the people who came to visit her went outside to smoke. Ramon came, and Ray, stoop-shouldered, with him. He punched me in the arm when he walked by. The girls from the diner came and the staff from the old folks' home and Randy Whitehouse and Richard Johnson and his youngest two sons. Wayne came and brought a dozen roses every day, yellow one day and red the next and pink and then over the weekend roses white at the base and red at the tip, and when the smell of the hospital or Mama's room was too much for me, I'd lean over and put my nose in one of the bouquets and smell the way growing things smell and remember it wasn't me dying. The Jorgensons came, walking down the hall from Mama's room to Jené's, back in the hospital for another surgery and old Mrs. Jorgenson bringing in the baby boys to see Mama and cheer her up. It felt like the whole town came through the hallway and in and out of Mama's room, and the whole time me I slept there on a cot the nurses brought in and Lil brought me clean clothes and bags of fast-food from the Dairy Mart.

Mama wanted to go home and the doctors hemmed and hawed but in the end Lil convinced her to stay in the hospital and let them make her comfortable. I never asked Lil what she said but I think it must have had something to do with memories and me living in the house and having nowhere else to go. It's the only thing I can think of that would

have made her stay. I sat there by her bed, with Lil in the chair in the corner of the room or sometimes standing in the doorway with her shadow cast over us. I held Mama's hand while she lay there with tubes in her nose and the insides of her arms and the nurses in and out to check the morphine levels and the IV.

Her room was dark when I walked in the first day, after my fit in the parking lot. Lil came in with me, guiding me with her hand on my elbow like a blind woman, and even in the hospital with all that sickness and Lysol I could still smell the cigarette smoke. Mama was asleep in the bed and the blinds were pulled to and even though it was hot outside the day was cloudy and full with rain. The shadows in the room stretched across Mama's bed and when I sat down and picked up her hand, she opened one eye and then the other.

"Hey, love bug," she said, and even those two words seemed to cause her pain. I was afraid to hold her hand too tightly but she squeezed my fingers and pulled my hand onto her stomach so I was leaning over the bed. Even through the sheets and her nightgown, it felt like something was eating her alive. "Your Mama's sick."

"I know." I was trying to keep my voice straight but I couldn't hide my fear. "Lil told me."

Mama smiled and through all the medicine and the tubes and the lines on her face I could see the mama I knew there, the one from the yearbook photo. She smiled and then she coughed and the cough turned into a hack and she let go of my hand and curled away from me and hacked in her hand for so long I got up to call the nurses, but Lil came over to hold her shoulders and Mama got it under control one breath at a time. When she'd

gotten her breath back, Lil handed her a glass of water from the side table. She took a sip and said, "I've made some bad decisions, Jo."

I thought about what Lil had told me in the car about my father and I thought maybe that's what she was talking about, or maybe she meant the smoking and not getting help when she needed it. Later on I would be so mad about that I would lie awake at night and watch the lights from the Travis overpass cross my ceiling and smolder. "Mama," I said, but I didn't get very far because at fourteen the truth is I didn't know what to say and I was so scared to be sitting there and seeing her looking already like she'd died and it was just a matter of time until her breathing stopped. I put my head down on her bed and felt the coolness of the sheets under my forehead. She put her hand on the back of my neck and I heard the creak of Lil as she knelt on the other side of the bed, and I wondered if she had Mama's other hand in hers. When I looked up, Lil's face was in the shadows and Mama was curled on her side towards me, around where I was lying.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I know, Mama," I said. I crawled up on the bed and lay down next to her so I was snuggled up in the bony curve of her body and we laid there until the room was dark and the doctors came and shooed Lil and me out so Mama could get some rest.

She died the following Wednesday, in the morning, and although I sometimes wish I'd been there neither Lil nor I were in the room when it happened. When she woke up that morning I saw she was bad off but she smiled and said, Could you find me some breakfast, love bug? When I came back she was gone and the nurses had laid the sheets

up around her neck in a collar of blue and I wondered if she'd known she was about to die and if so, why she hadn't said she loved me? I wondered that for a long time. I think now she knew I already knew it.

Lil came in not long after Mama died, smelling of lavender soap again. The doctors met her in the hall and by then it'd hit me that Mama was gone and I was alone. She put her head in my lap and wept but I didn't move. When she stood up I said, "Can we go somewhere, Lil? Will you take me somewhere?" And still without saying anything, she leaned over and picked me up like a baby and I wrapped my legs around her waist and my arms around her shoulders and she carried me to the car. She turned on the engine and I looked out the window and watched the blacktop spooling behind us, down Travis and across River Road and then across the Colorado, going south. We drove for hours, past cornfields and through little towns with one or two stoplights and a Dairy Mart and a Piggly Wiggly or a Brookshire Brothers and some even with a downtown courthouse and eventually we hit an interstate with cars rushing past in black clouds of exhaust. Lil pulled over to the side of the road just before the entrance ramp and we were both crying and neither of us said anything. She looked at the green signs pointing east and west and I looked out the window at the way the land flattened out into salt plains and even though we were a hundred miles inland I could smell it, the ocean and the salt, and so I said, Let's go to the ocean and Lil said, Okay, and turned east on the interstate towards Houston and Galveston. I reached down and turned the radio on and it was a country station and loud. After a few minutes a song came on we both knew and I started singing, a word or two at a time, and then a line and then the chorus. I was singing and

we were driving east with the sun in the windshield behind us, pale- yellow and fading to orange, and I looked to the south and watched the way the oak trees turned to palms and the mesquite flattened into sand and eventually the earth curved out to the sea.

CHAPTER XXI

The shadows are getting long this evening, and there's not much left to tell, I guess. Most of what happened after Mama died wasn't very exciting, anyway.

When I came home after Homily left me on the bridge, Larry was waiting on the couch. I don't know what I would have said to him if I'd had to speak first but when I came in he stood up and before I was all the way in the door said, "I'm going back to the service." He started to walk out.

"Wait," I said. I grabbed him in the crook of his arm, hard enough for my fingernails to dig into his skin. He tensed up like I was a stranger and it broke my heart.

"No," he said.

"I love you," I said. He shook his head. I didn't mean for it to stop him from leaving but it was true and I wanted him to know it.

"I love you, too," he said. I dropped my hand from his elbow. The saying hadn't solved anything. "I know about Ray," he said. "Mrs. Michelsen saw you in his truck today."

He wasn't facing me and that saved me, because my jaw dropped and I almost laughed when I realized what he meant. The German car at the Texaco had been Mr. Michelsen's new sedan. I opened my mouth to correct him, but we'd hurt each other so much already, my chest ached. What did it matter, who he thought it was? Did it matter if

he thought I'd had sex with Ray or Homily or some stranger in a bar? Wasn't it all equally hurtful? He believed what he wanted to believe about me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He shook his head. "Will you ever want to get married, JoDell?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. He had on starched jeans and his black army boots underneath and the toes were spit-shined. Just then all I wanted was to lie down and stare out my window at the remnants of the wildflowers in the pasture out past the bayou.

"Maybe," I said, as honestly as I could.

He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. His face was smooth and he smelled of soap. When he kissed me it felt like a stain. He smiled at me and I smiled back at him and he turned and left through the door I hadn't closed.

I never told him about Homily or the others. We didn't talk for a year, and then after the first year I started getting letters, short descriptions of Saudi Arabia and then Georgia when he came back to Fort Stewart, and then a year or so later, Bosnia. The more time passed, the longer his letters got, the more detailed the descriptions of the land and the food and the people. I wrote back some, sending brownies and chatty letters about what was going on in the diner and who'd had a baby and who died. Mrs. Jorgenson died and then Mr. Paul and Ray got the auto shop and then I got a fat envelope from Larry, the longest letter he'd ever written, saying he was coming home and Ray had told him nothing had happened between us, and did I still want to see him? But when he came home, I couldn't stop thinking about our history and I could never quite get out the story about Homily and so five years later we still live streets apart and wave at each

other in the grocery store. I think if I told him the whole story now he'd forgive me but it doesn't seem right to hurt him for no reason, and like I said, some things can't ever be forgotten.

When the door closed behind Larry I sagged against the couch and put a hand over my mouth and the smell of cigarette smoke was so strong I thought it must be Homily and she was out on the deck, listening to country radio and flicking beer caps at the bayou. I strode past the kitchen and through the back hallway and out the screen door and found Lil there instead, no Homily, just Lil leaning over the edge of the deck and talking to old Mrs. Jorgenson with her clippers and her garden hat.

"I was wondering where you were. I didn't think Larry was going to wait much longer," Lil said. She shifted to the side and the deck creaked under her weight. Disappointment and relief rushed through me when I saw it was the two of them. "Is he gone?"

I nodded. The smell of cigarette smoke dissipated beyond the screen door. "Hey, Mrs. Jorgenson," I said. "How's Jené feeling?"

She tilted her head back and I could just see the gray of her hair and the blue straw of her hat through the slats of the deck. "She's well. Niels' foot is healing nicely." She shifted her garden shears to her other hand and said, "I'm sorry to hear about Larry." Out past the deck, the sun shot across the sky in sticky streaks and cast the pasture and bayou in a hazy glow of red.

"Homily's gone?" I asked.

My godmother nodded. "Mrs. Jorgenson was just telling me why Homily was so upset with the boys. I guess they saw her friend Eddie coming and going at the house and they were going to tell you." Mrs. Jorgenson made a disapproving gurgle in the back of her throat.

"Homily never did learn secrets are hard to keep in a town like this," I said.

"Funny," Lil said. Her eyes drilled into my chest but I just turned toward the sunset across the pasture. After a moment Mrs. Jorgenson said she thought she'd better get dinner on and disappeared across the grass to the driveway. I'd stopped paying attention. The deck creaked and Lil held a piece of paper out to me.

"She said to give this to you," Lil said. She handed it to me and touched the bruise on my temple and then went through the door on nimble feet. The screen door cracked behind her.

The paper was stiff and I turned it over and it was a photo of Dolly Parton, and written on it in scrawling loop handwriting was, To Homily, I wish you all the best in Nashville, With Love, Dolly Parton. I stood there on the deck with the picture in my hand and remembered the way Homily looked with her hair fanned out behind her or wrapped in a ponytail and draped down her arm, with porcelain skin and green eyes, and how she made me feel like the only person in the room. Years later, after I heard from Susan she was back with Eddie and off to Dallas or New Orleans or she'd gotten married and settled down in Albuquerque, I would still think about those moments, on the bridge and the weight of her head on my knee and how we howled at the moon over the river. The pasture beyond the bayou stretched as far as I could see and I knew she was out there

somewhere, the Cadillac belching exhaust and the country radio turned up loud and cigarette smoke trailing her window. The last of the bluebonnets were waving in the pasture when I walked down off the deck and at the edge of the bayou I found a thatch of flowers and knelt down in it, burying my face in the disintegrating blossoms and filling myself with the smell of the dirt and the sunset and the growing things around me, and after a while I forgot the difference between where the earth ended and I began.