Title
The Smell of Rain

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Publication Date
2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
The Smell of Rain

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Nicole Ann Gibbs

December 2015

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Acknowledgements

Very special thanks to Rob Roberge, Mary Otis, Gina Frangello, Elizabeth Crane, Anthony McCann, Emily Rapp, Deanne Stillman, for teaching me everything I know about writing. To Michelle Camacho, Rebecca Gibbs, Gia Burton-Blasingame, Taylor Rubinstein, Jordan Rubinstein, Emily Rubinstein, Carol Gibbs, Greg Rush, Bill Gibbs, Linda Fox, Molly Rubinstein, Cheryl Fort, Sara Gibbs, Aaron Gibbs, Jaysin Graves, Hailey Gibbs, Persephone Gibbs, for giving me the time, space, motivation and encouragement, support and coffee needed to do this. To Stephanie Anne and Jason Metz for sharing your experience. To my chosen family, who loves me and supports me no matter what and to Tod Goldberg and Agam Patel for giving me a chance and for putting up with my craziness.
This work is dedicated to my father, Bill Gibbs, who always encouraged me to use my imagination and follow my dreams. To my mother, Carol Gibbs, who taught me to value creativity and who has always loved me no matter what. To my children who have shared their mom with this work for the past two years and to my Michelle, who has reminded me that I can do anything. Without all of you in my life, it would be meaningless.
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The cool, damp ocean air fell on my arms, my legs. It covered everything in the room, a soft layer of fresh mist, drops tinged with the faint smell of salt and fish and mustiness. Mom was loaded again. That thought kept going off in my brain, bouncing around in there, an unwanted bubble of darkness waiting to burst open and infect everything around it. I thrashed around in my bed; too hot, too cold, the sheets and blankets tangling around my legs. I felt like I’d swallowed a little lump of ice and instead of melting away it was growing in there, long, thin fingers reaching out through my whole body. I couldn’t get enough air in.

I drifted off once, jerking awake, a half dream that I was falling. The neon vacancy sign outside my window flashed and flashed and flashed, lighting up the room in orange and then dark again, on and on like that. I waited to hear her come in. I waited to hear her familiar footsteps, smell her too strong perfume that she sprayed from the dark blue bottle she kept on the sink in the bathroom next to her makeup box.

I slipped from my bed, the carpet rough on my bare feet. In the bathroom I didn’t turn on the bright overhead light, just the heat light over the tub. The bottle still sat there in the same spot she’d left it. I put my hand on it, shiny and cool. I sprayed her smell onto the corner of my nightshirt, a shirt that once belonged to one of her boyfriends.

Back in my bed I waited, eyes closed. I pictured her in my mind, long legs, blonde hair falling over her bare shoulders. I saw her. Sitting in a bar. No, in a car. A man with stubble on his
chin and whiskey on his breath. I saw her naked in a bed somewhere. I reached out to her. Come home! I begged, using all of the energy in my head.

Nothing.

The darkness eased away slowly, the neon light blinked and blinked, and finally blinked off for the last time. The blackness of night faded to a dark blue and the street sounds outside started up, a car, a dog barking, another car starting, a bus. I pushed the thoughts away as I climbed out of bed. She would be home soon and everything would be fine. I got ready for school like it was a normal day, backpack and shoes.

Then the fridge: half a can of beer and some moldy bread. No milk. No cereal. I pushed it away, the icy thing that was taking my breath. I left early to get school breakfast, stale cereal and milk that was too thick, frozen orange juice with a peel back foil lid.

I stumbled through school trying to ignore it. I picked at the corner of my desk where there was a rough edge, little pieces digging into my fingernails. Mr. Schrounder snapped at me to pay attention. It just kept up gathering in my stomach, more solid now, like a rock. I wanted to tell someone about my mom. I wanted to tell someone that she hadn’t come home last night, that I was worried, but there was no one to tell. The other kids who had hated me at the beginning of fourth grade, when I first started here, mostly just ignored me now. I had Dale, but he had a bad mood about him most of the time and I didn’t think it was a good thing to tell him. Not today at least.

At recess I went to the library to read instead of facing the harsh blacktop playground where cruelty was too casual. I preferred the soft quiet of the library. Books always worked when I needed to forget about everything for a bit. The librarian was used to me spending my lunches in there tucked between rows and rows of books. Sometimes I would just run my hands over
them. I loved the way the covers felt, glossy and smooth, wrinkled corners, the smell of old paper. I hid away in the pages of Tiger Eyes, leaving that big rock of bad feelings for a bit to wrap myself up in a different world, a world with people that made sense, people who felt things, who had lives that happened for real reasons. For a precious half an hour I escaped the heavy coat of reality that waited for me just outside the library door.

I walked home with Dale, scraping my sneakers along the sidewalk. Mom would be mad. I didn’t care. I wanted her to see my new sneakers all scuffed up, worn through on the bottom. I wanted her to be upset.

“Did you bring any money?” Dale asked me. Same question, every day.

“No.”

“Well. I’ve got thirty cents. Wanna share a Big Stick?” Dale liked me. He drew me pictures of superhero’s and comic book people, stories where the good guys and the bad guys had their own sides and everything worked out just the way it was supposed to work. He didn’t care if the other kids teased him about me. It made me feel sort of uncomfortable, there was so much responsibility in something as simple as sharing an ice cream. But it made me feel good too, knowing that someone liked me.

We stood outside the 7-11, sticky popsicle juice running between our fingers and down our arms.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“What’s wrong?”

_My mom didn’t come home last night. She’s on drugs again and I’m so scared. I don’t know what to do._
“Nothing.” The words were in there but I couldn’t get them into my mouth. They were stuck in my chest, too heavy to escape up through my throat. I couldn’t bring them out into the world and make them real.

“Want to come over and do homework?” he was worried.

“Not really. I think I just need to go home.”

“Ok. Well, call me, alright? On the phone? Okay?”

Last week everything had been better than ever. My report card had come and I’d rushed home to try to make it before the mailman. I was worried about my science grade. I went straight to the office where our mail went. The office was always dark, with thick curtains over the windows. There was a cheap flakey countertop and a half door that separated the front from the back, and behind the counter area there was a door to the managers unit. Margot and Dave were the managers and they were nice enough, when they were there. Usually they were in the dark back rooms, leaving the office with just the thick incensed air to greet anyone who came in. The carpet was heavy and there were rugs hanging on the walls and little bells on the door that jingled when I went in but their noise was smothered out by all the fabric and smoke. Margot sat at the counter, her red curls rising like flames from her head, her eyes looked wild, like a raccoon or a possum, something not used to interacting with humans.

“Lainey already got the mail,” she whispered, eyes wide.

I bravely made my way to our apartment to face whatever was in store for me.

When I came in she had the radio blaring out some Pearl Jam, who was her favorite group and she picked me up and danced me all around the living room. I couldn’t remember the last time she’d picked me up, I was almost as big as her, she told me that all the time. She spun
me around in crazy circles, her soft skin rubbing light on mine. I could smell the tart scent of wine on her breath. Wine always made her happy.

“*You! You are so smart!*” she told me, waving my report card in my face too fast for me to see it. “*You are the smartest girl in the whole world Penny Pie!*”

I felt happy all through me as she sat me on the counter and scooped me ice cream from sagging cardboard carton.

I thought back on that as my hand bumped along over the chain link fence surrounding the pool and parking lot to the side of our building.

I should have known that wine was no good.

And now here it was.

My whole life.

Waiting for me at the top of the staircase.

I rehearsed lines I wanted to say to her. *How could you do this to me? Why don’t you just love me enough to stop?*

I counted the steps as I climbed. Five, six, seven, eight. My backpack was pulling on my shoulders, dragging me down. I reached back with both hands and lifted up on the worn bottom, easing the weight off my back I continued up. Ten, Eleven, almost there. The corner of my binder poked out of a little hole and I could feel it testing the skin of my hand. I pulled myself up onto the second floor landing, adjusted my backpack, tightened the sweatshirt that was tied around my waist and fingered my key in my pocket. I counted the doors. 203, 205, 207. The building was supposed to be a hotel, but everyone just lived here, like apartments. I tried to ignore the scuff marks on the walls, the places where the green fake-grass was so worn you would see right through it to the wood floor underneath. I tried to ignore the occasional cockroach that scurried away, the sounds of televisions and radios behind closed doors. I always hated this part the worst.
Some days Jason in 211 would leave his door open and be passed out drunk with his junk hanging out all over the place. It was worse when he wasn’t passed out and tried to talk to me in his brown bourbon smoke breath, his words kind at first, like he was petting a kitten, soft and smooth. I knew better though. I ignored him, even though it made him mad, made his soft words turn sharp, the mean edges of them slicing at my skin as I hurried to our door.

Some days Jenny in 303 would sit on the stairs and wait to pull my hair and demand money, her purple pimples accenting her red face, greasy hair smeared across her forehead. Try to be her friend, mom had said. Yeah. Right.

Some days were lucky and it would be all clear. Today would have been a lucky day, except it wasn’t really. I hurried to our door. 213.

I tested the door to see if it was locked. Mom only locked it if she had a friend over. If it was locked I didn’t like to go in, even though I had a key. Once, I came in and this old guy had my mom handcuffed to the bed and they were both passed out naked. And another time I came in and mom wasn’t even home but there were these three girls doing lines in the kitchen. I wasn’t supposed to know about drugs. Dale told me about snorting lines. His older brother was in Jr. High school and knew everything about drugs. Sometimes

I went through my brain trying to figure out what had happened, when it had turned bad. Things had been better since Mom had gotten out of jail. She’d gone to jail for stealing things. I wasn’t supposed to know about that either, but I heard my grandma talk about it when she thought I was asleep. I had to go live with my grandma in her stuffy, dark little house that smelled like cats and mold for almost a year that time. Grandma’s house was like my other house anyways though because I stayed there just as much as I stayed with mom.

Grandma was the biggest woman ever. She filled up the whole room and made me feel like there was no space to move. She tried to do good things, like buy me new school clothes and
show me how to cook easy stuff so that if mom wasn’t home I didn’t have to be hungry. She told me I could stay there with her. And it was okay over there, I mean, she got me Del Taco for dinner and took me shopping for clothes, but she was mean and hit me with a fly swatter when I interrupted her court shows with my questions.

Ever since Mom got out of jail she’d been doing good though. She went to classes to teach her to not use drugs and she was her normal self again, laughing and fun and interested in me. She cooked me dinner most nights, something she never did when she was loaded. Yesterday she seemed weird when I got home from school. She said she was going out to a meeting, but she was still gone when I went to bed. No dinner.

The door was unlocked and I went in soft, gentle, pulling it shut behind me, waiting until it was in place to release the turn out of the doorknob. It was quiet inside. Like I said, it was supposed to be a hotel, but there was a kitchen and a living room and two bedrooms separated by a bathroom. It was old and dirty, but not nearly as bad as some of the places we’d stayed. Plus we’d been here for a couple months now and it was starting to feel normal.

I checked the living room. Empty. I put my backpack down by the scratched up coffee table. Mom’s bedroom was empty too. I went in and opened the drawers of her nightstand. Just the usual kind of stuff in there. Gum wrappers, some prescription bottles for her nerves, tissue, a magazine. *Cosmopolitan.*

I got my homework out and finished it. 4:30. I went in my room and stuck my hand down the crack between my bed and the wall, feeling under the thin, stained mattress. My fingers found the cold edges of the quarters that were down under there. Six of them. I had been saving them up. One I found on the street, two Grandma had given me when we left the store one day. One was from a guy at a meeting who was trying to impress my mom. One was from Mom’s floor
when she hadn’t realized she had dropped it, and one was from Dale because his dad had given him two and he knew I never had any money.

Lunch at school had been some greenish bologna and two pieces of stale bread with a mushy pear. The sandwich had smelled bad and I couldn’t eat more than a couple bites. Sharp little pains were poking around in my stomach. In the past 24 hours all I’d had was that bowl of crumbly cereal. I wriggled the quarters out from under my mattress and stuck them inside my shoes. Three in each, so that I could get past Jenny if she was lurking in the hallway.

Turned out it wasn’t necessary. The hallway was so quiet it gave me the creeps walking down. Stepping outside the lobby door was like walking into another world, the fresh outside air, it was bright and loud and I felt like I was waking up from a dream or something.

I made my way down the street to the liquor store on the corner, stepping over a bum that was passed out on the sticky, beer stained sidewalk. A mom yelled at her kid in Spanish from down the street and I tried to ignore the bubbles of thoughts of my own mom that floated through my mind threatening to burst open at any time.

I found a pack of top ramen on a low shelf in the liquor store. Twenty five cents. I got a can of coke out of the cooler, sixty cents. I had just enough left for some of the sticky Lucas candy Mom likes to share with me. I would save it and share it with her when she got home and we can snuggle up in her bed and I’ll tell her how worried I was, how much I loved her, how much I needed her to stay clean. That was my plan.

When I got back the hallway was still too quiet and the room felt stuffy and strange. I opened the window and let in the street sounds. I started some water on the stove so I could make my ramen. I opened my Coke and took a sip as I watched little bubbles forming on the bottom of the pot. I heard footsteps in the hallway and my heart danced around a little bit because I knew
she was finally home and I knew that if I just told her, if I just asked her hard enough then she would fix whatever was going on.

It was the smell of rain. The sharp tangy scent of wet asphalt that flooded the room when she opened the door. It was all wrong. That smell that I loved so much, that smell was wrong here in the dry California summer. It wasn’t supposed to rain.

She came through the door and I could feel her nerves before I even met her eyes. Her walk was strange, like she might fall over with each step.

“Where were you?” I tried not to yell, or whine. She hated whining.

Her bright eyes fell on me and she gave me a look like I was a bad taste in her mouth.

She didn’t answer me. She held the door open and Bear stood behind her, an open beer clutched in his hand, his curly hair falling on unshaven cheeks. Bear was all right. He could be mean, but he always made sure I had something to eat.

“We have to get out of here Penny,” my mom said. The first words I had heard from her in days. Her voice was wrong. Groggy, like there was too much fluid in her mouth. It didn’t match her eyes that were seeing too much.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, let’s go! Go pack a bag and get your important things. Now.”

“But… where are we going? I don’t want to go anywhere.”

She grabbed my arm, just above my elbow and shoved me towards my bedroom. “I said, get your stuff,” she said through clenched teeth.

Tears rushed to my eyes. My face burned. “Stop it! You’re hurting me!”

“Get your stuff.”
She released my arm and walked to the counter where my bowl of noodles was sitting. She threw it and it shattered against the wall. “Come on!” she screeched.

This was not my mom who had danced with me and spun me around and told me she loved me. This was someone scary. I remembered this woman.

I rushed around my room shoving things into my backpack. Books. That was really all I had. A stuffed bear, a necklace, a little red stone Dale had given me. I could hear her yelling at Mike. My heart was pounding and I wanted to scream.

“I can’t believe this. I can’t fucking believe this!” she was pacing back and forth, a cigarette pressed between two fingers.

I felt under my mattress for the notebook I used as a diary. In the back was a list of phone numbers. Dale’s house, my grandma, a girl named Antoinette who I didn’t really like but who wanted me to come over to play with her cat. The social worker’s number was on there too. It was a secret; Mom didn’t like me talking to her. She said Miss Lopez was out to get her. Mom told me I couldn’t tell Miss Lopez all kinds of things like Bear being her friend. She said they would take me away from her again, that Miss Lopez was just looking for a reason. I know that wasn’t really true, she wanted to help us, but Mom didn’t like her. I shoved the notebook into my bag.

“Are you fucking ready yet?” she screeched from the living room. “I should just leave you here!”

“Hey, chill out Lainey,” Bear’s deep voice was calm.

“Don’t you tell me what to do,” Mom had grocery bags filled with her bathroom things and a backpack in her hands. She looked bad. I hadn’t gotten a good look at her when she first came in, but now that I could see her across the room I could see it for sure. She was loaded. She
had a sore on her chin, her hair looked stringy and dirty, like she hadn’t washed it in a week. She looked sick.

“Come on!” she threw something in my direction and I scampered over towards Bear. I felt like a wild animal.

She rushed us out the door and down the hallway. A little car was parked downstairs. She opened the door and I climbed into the back. There were no seatbelts. Mom dug through her bags while Bear started the car. Everything smelled like rain and I tried to peek up at the sky out of the cold back window.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

No one answered.

“Should we take her to your mom’s?” Bear asked Mom.

“Yes. No. Fuck. I don’t know. She’ll call the cops. Fuck.” She dug through bags as she spoke, her voice coming through muffled and broken.

“What if we let her out down the street? We’ll be gone before they get there anyways.”

“Just go. Just drive. Go to the Locklear’s place.”

“All the way out there? We’re gonna take her with us all the way out there?”

“Will you just shut the fuck up and drive?” She finally sat up and looked at Bear. Then she looked back at me. “We’re just gonna get out of town for a few days Penny. Just be a big girl and don’t give me any trouble. Just for a few days, okay?”

I pressed my forehead to the cold glass again, I closed my eyes and inhaled the smell of rain and waited for the downpour to begin.
Chapter 2

Something to Believe In

Elaine 1983

I watch Marsha push her way through the crowd to the dingy corner booth in the back of the room. I’m sitting on a cracked vinyl seat observing the scene. Punks with safety pins through their ears, green and orange mohawks, sleeves torn from their jean jackets, drenched in sweat and beer and god only knows what else, punching and shoving at each other in primal greetings.

“Where’d Beetle go?” Marsha asks, pulling at a hole in the back of her plaid skirt.

Marsha made the skirt herself, earlier today. On a sewing machine that sat on our dining room table.

“How should I know?”

“You want another beer?” she asks.

“Sure.” I’m on my third tap beer, because that’s what we can afford. My 21st birthday was last weekend. We’re celebrating by doing what we do every Saturday night.

I watch as she makes her way to the counter. Marsha’s always so sure of herself. I envy that. She’s tiny, like an elf, and she has this huge mess of dark brown hair that she dyed red streaks into. I wish I could be as sure of myself as she is. I feel awkward with my hair all teased up the way she did it tonight. I’m wearing my usual jeans and a t-shirt, but she insisted I put on this stiff gold jacket she found in the closet. I feel like an actress dressed up for a part I’m not prepared for.

Marsha and Beetle are my best friends turned roommates. I knew Marsha before she started dating Beetle. I’ve known her since high school actually, but it wasn’t until she and Beetle
became permanently affixed that we all became friends. Not that I was close to Beetle. He lived in the same apartment complex as me when I was still staying with Martin, my ex. We smoked pot together a few times, me and Beetle, and then one night when Martin had come home drunk and beat the shit out of me Beetle, had called the cops and let me sleep on his couch. When he got evicted for not paying his rent, we all moved in with Marsha.

I scan the crowd. It’s mellowing out. The band’s on a break. The guitar player, Randy, is at the bar, in a sea of leather and metal spikes, turning knobs and plucking at the strings of his shiny instrument. His eyes meet mine and I feel it all the way in bottom of my stomach.

I haven’t actually met Randy, but I’ve been watching him for a few weeks. I’ve developed this sort of infatuation with him. I catch myself daydreaming about conversations I might have with him, what it would feel like for those calloused guitar player hands to glide over my skin. It’s pathetic. I still haven’t managed to gather up the courage to talk to him and here I am playing out these steamy romance novel scenes in my mind. I sigh to myself, pissed off at my stupid lack of self-esteem.

Randy is the reason I keep coming back to this shithole, drinking this lousy beer. I don’t even know what it is about him… he isn’t all that attractive. He has great eyes, but acne and scars that he’s trying to hide behind a few days of stubble. He’s all length and angles, and seems a bit awkward off the stage. For all I know he could be married, but in my mind, we have a thing.

He looks away before I do. For the next hour I study him while trying to ignore Marsha and Beetle making out across the table from me. Guys in ripped jeans and shredded homemade band tee’s push and punch and spit all over the dance floor and a few times the crowd spills out across the bar, an occasional drunk guy trying to find the door falls onto the table where Marsha and Beetle are getting hotter and heavier by the second. I watch for a few minutes, their lips teasing each other, tongues licking, bodies moving together. I watch as Beetle squeezes her little
tits, his hands slip inside her bra and pull them out of her tank top and he licks at her nipples. I see her sliding her panties off underneath her skirt, his hand sliding between her legs. I need some air.

I leave the booth as obnoxiously as I can, bumping the table. I cough and sigh loudly to get my point across. They ignore me. I don’t know why but I am suddenly angry with both of them. I want to grab Marsha by her hair and drag her outside with me and punch her right in her cute little face. The noise from the band and cigarette smoke are making my head hurt. I go outside. There’s a picnic bench off to the side of the parking lot and I sit down and take some breaths and feel very alone.

The sound of the band slowly disintegrates into sounds of yelling, fighting. I see the lead singer being drug out by the drummer who’s yelling “you’re drunk man, let’s go!” A group of sweaty guys and high-heeled girls spill out behind them and the jukebox starts up from inside the bar. The crowd pairs up and wanders towards cars and trucks.

“Can I sit here?” Randy asks. I jump and turn to find him standing off in the shadows near a tree. I wonder how long he has been watching me.

“Sure.”

“Your friends are fucking right in the booth in there,” he says.

“Yeah. They do that shit everywhere.”

“Cool.”

“It’s annoying,” I pick at a piece of loose wood on the table.

“It’s kinda hot,” he grins at me and pulls out a cigarette.

We talk. Small talk at first, but then deeper. I tell him about my birthday dinner with my mom and how she had guilt tripped me and compared me to my dad the whole time. It feels good to talk to someone about things I don’t talk about. How my sister had tried to sell me on Jesus. He tells me about his mom dying when he was eleven and his dad trying to raise him and his two
brothers alone. Maybe it’s the alcohol but we seem to be drawing energy off of each other, going
deeper and deeper with each next revelation. I tell him about my ex beating the crap out of me.
He tells me about an ex that cheated on him with his younger brother.

I don’t know how long we sat there talking, but when I look up the bar has cleared out
and the cigarettes are almost gone. My buzz is wearing off. He stands and makes his way to an
old pickup truck. I follow and he asks me if I want a ride home.

“I don’t know,” my mind is flooded with thoughts of my friends fucking all night in the
next room.

He stands there, in the yellow light, looking sexy- even with the acne and lack of muscle.
He takes a deep breath, and so do I and then his hands are on my hips and his lips are touching
my neck.

“Want to come back to my place?” he asks, and even though I know better than to go
home with a dude I had just met, I say yes.

Randy has a studio-flat in the back of a bigger house that’s rented by a bunch of guys in
their early 20’s. Party scene guys that I recognize from various bars and house parties but no one
I know. We go through the main house to get to the back, stepping over half naked chicks passed
out in puddles of puke. I feel like he’s trying to show off, but I’m sure if it was me he’s showing
off, or himself. He introduces me to various people whose names I’ll never remember, guys and
girls who tell me how much they love him, how great a musician he is, like I hadn’t been sitting
in the same bar with them night after night for the past two months listening to him play.

His little flat is more like a cabin, but it has everything: a stove, a bathroom, a futon, a
TV. The bed is made with a wool blanket and there are handcuffs linked to the headboard. My
stomach does a strange little flip when I see them and I feel sweaty all of a sudden. He notices me noticing the handcuffs and shrugs, a half smile dancing on his lips.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

“No.” Scraps of concert tickets are stuck into a mirror, bands like The Circle Jerks and T.S.O.L., the Misfits. He had pulled out a bottle of tequila in the car and I’d had two shots. I’m drunk. He lights a joint and passes it to me.

The walls are all wood and when I got close enough I can see outside into the yard. Even though it’s drafty, it’s summer and we’re near the beach and it’s nice. Through the cracks in the wood I can see out into the back yard. There is a broken lawn chair and two empty beer cans lying on the ground.

“I’ll sleep on the futon,” he says. “You can have the bed.”

“I’m not going to sleep in your bed by myself,” I say, looking back at the handcuffs. He laughs a deep, rough laugh that I feel on my skin.

The days run together. Alcohol and pot and shows at night and parties and soon there are more drugs than alcohol and the shows slow down because the band is all too fucked up.

We don’t have a phone so sometimes I go to the liquor store on the corner and call Marsha. She doesn’t like Randy’s crowd, so she doesn’t come by. I still haven’t been back to the apartment to get my things.

“I worry about you peaches,” she tells me as a bum yells at himself on the street in front of me.

“I’m great Marsha.”

“You say that, but I don’t believe you,” she said.
“I wish you would come to the show tonight. I’m so crazy in love with Randy. I wish you would get to know him a little. I never knew it could be like this.”

“Well, I’m happy for that,” she says. “Just be careful. Some of those guys he hangs out with are into some freaky stuff.” She’s worried about the dope.

“What do you mean?” my voice sounds more defensive than I want it to sound.

“I don’t know Lainey. It’s probably nothing. I just have a bad feeling. I love you.”

When I get back to the house Randy is getting out of the shower. He’s excited about the show. Not a big venue, just another dive bar, but it’s down in San Diego and that’s a big deal to the guys. I have a cordial relationship with the band. It’s mutual toleration. Jules, the bass player, he’s okay. He’s quiet and keeps to himself, but he’s always nice to me. The others are mostly assholes, but I don’t care. I love watching Randy play, so I ignore them. Randy gets this energy to him when he’s on stage, like he’s in a whole different world. It’s so cool to watch him.

Dave, the lead singer, is too high to drive before we even leave. He gets into the truck with us, full beer in one hand and the rest of the six-pack in his other. I sit back, just trying to enjoy it, Randy’s driving and I sit in the middle with the gear shift between my legs so that every time he changes gears his hand brushes the inside of my thighs and I understand how Beetle and Marsha could go at it right there in the dirty booth in the back of the bar, not caring if anyone noticed.

Dave rambles and bitches about the drummer, Vince, and I tune him out as I twirl the soft ends of Randy’s ear length curls in my fingers. I love his hair. It’s brown in until you see it in the light and then it’s a deep cherry wood color that’s absolutely gorgeous.

“You got any pills Dave?” I ask.

“I haven’t had any pills in a long time. I’ve got some smack though” He takes another pull at his beer and the yeasty smell fills up the cab.
I want to tell him to kick down, but I know I shouldn’t. Randy doesn’t like me doing it, he says he doesn’t want me to get hooked. I know he’s just looking out for me, but it annoys me that he doesn’t think I can handle it.

“You need to back off that stuff man,” Randy tells him. “It’s turning you into a prick.”

“Whatever.”

“Can you pass me a beer?” I ask.

When we get there, it’s all off. The vibe is wrong. The owners of the bar are weird, saying things like “well, I’m not sure about this,” and “I really wish you would just get yourself together Dave” because Dave’s the one who set it all up.

Dave is barely able to walk straight. He stumbles down the hallway towards the bathroom and I wait for a chance to follow him when no one is looking. I tell myself I don’t need it. I hate that since he mentioned it I can’t stop thinking about it, though.

I help Randy and the other guys unload equipment. They barely say anything to each other and what they do say comes out snappy and mean.

The room is small and has low ceilings and not enough windows. There aren’t many people there when first arrive, but the crowd builds as we unload. The owners of the bar have been talking up the show for a while I guess and there are more people than I expected. Some of the regulars from up in our area are here too, guys who are at all the shows, girls who take turns fucking the rest of the band members, and give me dirty looks and don’t talk to me.

The guys spend too long plugging things in and moving things around, testing a string or a drum.

“Where the fuck is Dave?” Vince finally asks.

“I think he went to the bathroom. I’ll go check,” I volunteer.
“God-fucking-damnit.” He jumps down a foot or so off the concave wooden stage that looks like it’s going to give out at any second.

I take a step back just before he plows through me. Randy pulls his guitar strap over his head, set the guitar in his guitar stand and follows Vince. I follow Randy.

The hallway is yellow and damp and smells like overflowed toilet. Vince hollers all the way down. He pushes through the door into the bathrooms, Randy’s right behind him. They both go quiet for what feels like a long time but is really only seconds because by the time I get there Vince is yelling again.

“Get up you piece of shit!” he keeps saying over and over and I decide I don’t actually want to be here, but by that time it’s too late. People are filling up the hallway behind us, pressing us forward, wanting to know what’s going on. I try to shut the door behind me, some weird instinct telling me to keep people out. I lean the entire weight of my body into it, but it’s useless, people flood the room with shouts of “what the fuck?” and “holy shit!”

I push my way towards Randy, the crowd is forming a sort of half-circle around the stall where he’s standing and finally I can see what I already know. Dave is slumped there in the dirty little stall, needle in his arm, the side of his face smashed up against the wall.

“Is he breathing?” I yell at Vince who is shaking him, still screaming at him to get up.

“We need an ambulance!” someone shouts.

Then everyone is shouting and pushing. I don’t know what’s going on “We need to clear this all out so the paramedics can get in here!” Someone with a loud deep voice finally yells, and it’s like flipping the lights on cockroaches, people scatter.

Then it’s just Randy, Vince and one of the owners and me left in the room. I sit with my knees to my chest in the corner almost under the sink and the owner is screaming at Randy and Vince is screaming at Dave and I don’t know what to do. So I just sit there, studying the pipes
coming out of the bottom of the sink. Someone has carved “619” and “fuck you” into the bottom of the sink and I wonder what other occasions have brought people to the underside of the sink in the dirty men’s room.

Dave is lying on the floor, unconscious and Vince is sitting on top of him slapping him and grabbing his shirt and shaking him, but it isn’t working, Dave’s head just rolls from side to side.

“Can you stop fucking yelling?” I finally shout over all of them.

They all stop and look at me.

“What the fuck are we supposed to do?” I ask. I feel tears building up. “Is he breathing?”

“I don’t know,” Dave says, tears streaking down his cheeks. “I think so.”

Then the paramedics are there it’s crazy all over again with questions and commotion. They’re shouting things to each other and trying to carry Dave out of there. It’s all nonsense, I mean, I know people overdose all the time, but I’ve never seen it. It feels like a dream. Like it isn’t a real thing that’s happening here.

Half the crowd at the bar had taken off as soon as the ambulance had shown up. The other half is standing around gawking at each other, at us, at the paramedics.

We follow the paramedics as they load him onto the gurney and push him out to the street, his body flopping around limp. A crowd is blocking traffic. The night air feels good on my face and I feel like this is just another layer of unreal. How can something like this happen on such a nice night? I watch Dave on the gurney, waiting for his eyes to open.

“Where are you taking him?” Randy asks.

“Mercy hospital on 8th and L.”

“How… How is he?” Randy asks.
“He’s still got a pulse,” says the medic, squeezing a bag that’s hooked up to a mask over Dave’s face.

They load him into the ambulance and it takes off leaving us standing there, crowd staring at us. The other band members are all there.

“Fuck this!” Vince says and storms off towards the parking lot.

“Wait up Vince. Where are you going?” Randy follows him.

“I’m out of here. I’m done with this shit. Find another drummer. And fuck you all.” He gets into his car and the engine roars up. We back up because we know he’s not above running us over to get us out of his way.

“I’m going to the hospital,” Randy announces. I realize that Jules is still here, he’d somehow blended into the background and I’d forgotten about him.

“Ok man, I’ll go with you. Vince was my ride…” Jules trails off and looks around like he is just waking up.

It’s cold and too quiet in the waiting room. I can hear Randy breathing it’s so quiet. Every noise seems amplified, the nurse’s sneakers on the linoleum, an occasional machine-beep that slips through the doors as they woosh open and closed again. I get a coke from the vending machine and a thin blanket from a nurse. For some reason I want to talk to my mom, I miss her in this sick, nostalgic way. I sit at a payphone on one side of the room and dial the number collect.

“Hello?” She sounds tired. It dawns on me that it’s almost midnight.

“Hi Mom.” I whisper, even though we’re the only ones in the waiting room.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to talk.”

“It’s the middle of the night. Are you on drugs?”
“No. I just had a bad night and I wanted to talk to you. Never mind. Sorry I woke you up.”

“What are you doing Elaine? I haven’t heard from you in months and now you call me in the middle of the night and say nothing?”

“Sorry Mom. I didn’t mean to upset you. Really, I’m okay. I didn’t realize it was so late. I’ll let you go.”

“Where are you?” she asks.

“I’m… I’m downtown. I’m with my boyfriend.”

“What boyfriend? Why are you all the way downtown in the middle of the night?”

“He’s in a band mom. They had a show tonight. One of the band members got sick and we’re at the hospital. I didn’t mean to upset you. Sorry.”

“Wait, what do you mean you’re at the hospital? Elaine? What’s going on? Do I need to come pick you up?”

“No Mom. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

I hang up and tears I hadn’t noticed trickle down my cheeks. I wipe my face. I pick up the phone again and call Marsha.

“Hey.” I say, trying to sound okay.

“What’s wrong?” Of course I’m not going to fool Marsha.

“I don’t know. I’m at the hospital. Dave O.D.’ed.”

“What? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I guess.”

“Do you want me to come down there?”

“No. Well. I mean. If you want to.”

“Where are you? What hospital?”
I give her the details and we hang up.

I sit there next to Randy for the next hour without talking. My brain feels numb and my heart pounds every time a doctor or nurse walks by but they all just keep on going.

Marsha shows up at the same time as a middle-aged woman with a heavy coat and curlers in her hair. The woman speaks to the nurses with hushed urgency.

Marsha puts her arms around me and whispers in my ear “I brought you something.” She drops two pills into my hand. I’m not sure what they are, but I swallow them as the woman with curlers makes her way towards us.

“And I take it you’re his friends,” she sneers at us.

“Yes ma’am,” Randy replies.

“You should all be in jail. You’re a bunch of junkies who’ll never amount to anything. You should be ashamed.” She turns and walks down the hallway towards the nurses again and they let her through the door.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say to Randy.

“I can’t,” he looks at me with a helpless face that I want to kiss and slap all at the same time.

“Fine. Marsha, can I go home with you?”

“Of course. Your couch is still there sweet pea.”

“Don’t be mad Lainey,” Randy holds his arms out to me and I go to him. He pulls me into his lap and squeezed tight.

“I’m not mad babe. I just can’t handle all this hospital shit.”

“I know. Go ahead and go. I’ll call you if we find anything out.”
The rain didn’t come, but the smell lingered. The next days were a blur of nonsense. The grownups talked in whispers and secrets, looking around corners and peeking out windows all the time. I was so tired I just wanted to sleep and sleep. When I was awake I didn’t know what time it was or what was going on. Nothing seemed real.

The Locklear’s place was out on the reservation… “The rez.” Everyone was dark and looked at me like I was in trouble and no one wore shoes and the ground was all dirt everywhere. Chickens and kids ran in and out of the little house that seemed to have no doors and broken out windows. I slept in a camper in the backyard. The camper wasn’t too bad actually, there was a thin mattress and a table and mostly everyone stayed out of there. I’d been here before, slept in the camper with my mom a few times.

The Locklear’s had five kids. Candice was the oldest. She was seventeen and she didn’t talk to anyone except her mom, Lily. There were two boys whose names I couldn’t remember, twins who looked just like their dad, Mr. Locklear. He insisted on being addressed as Mr. Locklear, even by his kids. Olive was my age, and her sister Jasmine was five. Olive hated me. They all hated me, except Jasmine who followed me around wearing just her little girl panties and dirt streaked across her stomach.

Mom and Bear took off on a motorcycle in the middle of the second or third night. Mom woke me up and said they would be back soon and I was too tired to even beg for her to take me with them. All I could do was just fall back asleep. I spent long afternoons with Jasmine. She brought me peanut butter sandwiches without the jelly and we played mom and baby. I practiced
leaving her, walking away after I pretend put her to bed. Jasmine wasn’t bad for a little kid. She
didn’t talk much, but it was better than no one.

Then one morning I woke up angry. I don’t know how long I had been there, maybe a few days, maybe a few weeks. All I know is that I was pissed. I walked into the kitchen where a
crowd of big adults with long black hair and kids with flat mean faces that refused to betray any emotion, stood around a table with no chairs and wrestled food from each other. I asked for a
phone to call my grandma, but no one answered me. They all stared at me like I wasn’t speaking
English. I grabbed a piece of bread and made my way to the bathroom. They muttered things when I left the room. I couldn’t make out their words, but their tones told me.

I felt small without my mom here, I was a bug they didn’t want in their house, so little and inconsequential that they could just step on me if I became too annoying. I locked the door in
the bathroom and climbed into the empty tub with my clothes still on. Yellow stains ran down the
drain and chipped paint decorated the walls. I ate my bread and listened for a phone to ring. I
knew there was a phone here somewhere. I heard kids running through the halls, heavy feet
pounding on the bare floors. Someone tried to come in the bathroom door and when it didn’t open
they began pounding on it. I didn’t answer. I stretched out in the tub, chewing the dry bread and
listened to the sounds of the house around me. I pressed my foot onto the dirty knob that turned
the water on, pressed it up and up until the water started, first a trickle and then faster, soaking my
clothes. Soon it was up to my ears and the pounding on the door just kept on as the water filled
and filled, tickling my face, my shorts soggy and heavy on my legs.

Someone started yelling and the door got louder and louder, banging and cracking. The water filled up around my nose and I wondered what it would be like to just let it creep into my
throat, up my nose, into my mouth, my lungs. What would it be like to just take a big deep breath
full of water? I could hear it sloshing down the side of the tub and onto the floor, I could hear the
frantic banging on the other side of the door and I did it. I tipped my head back and breathed in deep, the water washing deep into me, filling everything up. I sat up choking and coughing at the same time Mr. Locklear got the door open. He yanked me out of the tub by one arm, screaming words that didn’t make sense to me. I thrashed and coughed and clawed at his big paw hands that shook me. I gagged and puked up the bread I had eaten and water and water and more water. How did I get all that water in there with just one breath?

“What’s wrong with you stupid girl!” He shook and shook me until I felt like my head was going to come loose. He threw me down onto the muddy floor.

“You clean this shit up you stupid fuck!”

His voice filled up my whole body. I could see some of the kids in the hallway, big stupid faces staring at me and shaking their heads.

“I want my mom,” I tried to yell but my voice barely scratched out.

“Well your mom don’t want you, retard. Clean up your goddamned mess.” He threw a towel at me and pounded out of the room. I could hear him yelling from somewhere in the house and then… a phone rang. I stood. The kids were still there in the hallway watching me. I took off fast, out the door and away from all of them, as fast as I could, following the ringing. Water trailed behind me, dripping from my clothes, making little puddles of mud through the house. I found the room with the phone at the same time Candice was picking it up. Of course it was in her room. I backed off before she noticed me, turned and came face to face with Olive.

“Get out of here stupid white girl,” she shoved me back the direction of the bathroom.

“I would get out of here if you guys’d let me call my grandma. Idiot.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“You’re so dumb,” she said, getting closer. “You can’t leave. Your mom owes us money. She left you to prove she was coming back, but really,” she pressed up close enough for me to
smell her garbage breath “I don’t think she’s coming back. I think she sold you to us for her drugs.”

“You’re a liar!” I shoved her. Next thing, we were down on the floor punching each other, pulling hair, spitting and rolling around. I’d never been in a real fight, but that didn’t stop me. I slammed my fist into her ugly face, bit her cheek, kicked and kicked and punched until someone was pulling me away, falling on top of me, holding me down.

“Let me call my grandma!” I screamed over and over, thrashing and ripping at anything that I could get ahold of. Someone carried me outside and threw me on the ground. My head hit and I went black.

I woke up in the camper. Everything was grey, getting dark. I was cold, my clothes still wet. My head throbbed when I moved. There was a peanut butter sandwich sitting on a paper towel on the table. I stood and fought off a wave of dizziness that made me want to throw up. My backpack was next to the bed and I found some dry clothes to change into. I felt embarrassed about the bathroom thing now and I was glad no one was around. I could hear them, loud and wild from inside the house. I tore off small pieces of the peanut butter without jelly sandwich. My stomach felt empty.

I could just leave, it wasn’t a far walk to the road. I could hitchhike to my grandmas. I played the idea around in my head. What if a bad guy picked me up? What if someone stole me? What would be the difference? Sold, stolen, what did it matter?

I flipped through the pages of my notebook and found the one where I’d let Dale draw me a story. The superhero was Wolfboy, a big guy with an orange and blue cape and two wolves who helped him fight off the bad guys. In this one Wolfboy saved a little girl from three bad guys who were trying to kidnap her. I hoped Wolfboy was watching out for me right now. I gathered
my things into my backpack trying to keep my wet clothes as far away from my dry clothes as possible.

I laid on the bed listening to the sounds of the people in the house across the yard. Beer bottles and swearing, the smell of cigarette smoke and sad music that got louder and quieter. I must have fallen asleep again because next thing I knew it was dark and quiet. I tiptoed to the door of the camper and listened some before I cracked it open and slipped down the three steps to the ground. The rain smell was back, but it was a different kind of smell tonight, not like a storm was coming, like a storm had just left and everything was clean and fresh.

I ducked into the house, stopping for my eyes to adjust. If I could get to the phone and call my grandma she would come and get me. I tiptoed down the hallway playing it through in my mind. Loud snoring came from one of the rooms and I guessed it was Mr. Locklear. I found my way to the room where I’d seen Candice answer the phone earlier. There was no door on the bedroom, just a curtain that was pulled to one side. I slid in and watched Candice’s body rising and falling in the bed. I stood there for what felt like an hour, trying to figure out how to get to the phone and make a call without waking her up.

Something tugged on my jeans and I almost screamed. My breath caught and I realized it was Jasmine, standing next to me, pulling on my pants like she did when she wanted me to play with her.

“Go back to bed Jazzy,” I whispered in her ear. “We can’t play right now.”

“Come,” she whispered back, still pulling on my leg. My throat was closing up with tears. I was so close!

I did eenie-menie-miney-moe in my head, do I go for the phone and risk Jasmine blowing my cover or do I follow her and try to get her to go back to sleep?

I gave in and followed her.
She took my hand and led me through a hallway towards the front of the house. There was a room like a living room but no furniture in there, just a mattress on the floor, the boys big heads half covered by a blanket, faced away from us. She led me to a room I had never seen, a table and a chair and… a phone! I hugged her quietly and whispered thank you’s.

I dialed my grandma’s number and she picked up on the fifth ring.

“Hello?” Her voice was angry and tired.


“Penny? Is that you Penny? I can’t hardly hear you. What’s wrong?”

The tears were coming back again now.

“I don’t know where Mom is. She left me here, on the rez. They gave her money and she left me. I need you to come get me.” I was trying to whisper but I could hear my voice getting louder, panic creeping into my stomach as I told her.

“Where are you Penny? I’ll come baby, I’ll come. Where are you at?”

“I’m at the Locklear place. On the reservation. I’m going to walk to the street.”

“Penny, honey, I don’t know where that is. Do you know a street name or anything?”

“No Grandma. I don’t know. I have to go. Just come and get me, okay?”

I heard a noise and I dropped the phone into its cradle and took cover under the table. It was Jasmine again. She held out a box of animal crackers and pointed toward the front door.

“You go,” she told me.

The reservation was an open, empty place with a huge sky that stretched out over me, more stars than I thought possible twinkling down on gentle hills. Hard, dusty earth stirred under my feet with each step, and the smell of rain followed me. I took the driveway that the cars used, a dirt path that circled around and down the hill towards a road. I didn’t know the rez. Not like I
knew the streets back home, streets that people lived on, streets that were busy with buildings and bums and sidewalks where people spilled their beer. Out here there was nothing, just hills and dirt and the moon shining down, keeping all of the secrets of the reservation locked up tight. I didn’t know which direction was home. I tried to take deep breaths and not panic. My grandma would come. She would find me.

At the bottom of the hill I did eenie-meenie-miney-moe again to pick which way. The moonlight showed tire marks in the dirt that gave me some hope. I went to the left and walked and walked. I’d never been anywhere so alone. I heard animals in the brush and in the trees. I made out the shape of a wolf a ways up ahead of me. Wolfboy had actually come. I followed that wolf shape for a long time, my heart pounding, my feet hurting.

Finally there was a building. The lights were all off but as I got closer I could see that it was a gas station. And out in front was a pay phone!

I ran, hope giving me energy I thought I’d used all up. As I reached the pay phone I realized that I didn’t have any quarters though and I felt that fear sneaking in again. I tried to make a collect call to my grandma, but I couldn’t figure it out. I sat down on the pavement taking deep breaths, trying not to cry. Then I thought of something.

911.

I’d never called 911 before.

I lifted the receiver and pressed the sticky squares.

“911, what’s your emergency?” A lady answered on the other line.

“I… I think I’m lost.”

“What’s your name honey?”

I told her my name. I told her I didn’t know where my mom was. She talked with me for a long time and then I looked up and a Jeep was pulling up with lights on the top of the car lit up
in red and blue and the raindrops finally began to fall, one at a time as an officer got out and came towards me, easy and calm.
Chapter 4
The Wrong Way
Elaine 1984

Andy stays in apartment nine. He sleeps in a dirty sleeping bag on the stained carpet in the back room, surrounded by trash. A lamp with a bare light bulb sits on the floor next to his sleeping bag, but usually he’s too paranoid to use it, preferring, instead, the bits and pieces of candles, wax melted and picked away, wicks that burned down until they’re completely gone.

We call him Black Andy to distinguish him from White Andy, the owner's son. Black Andy isn’t really black, he’s actually Mexican, but he’s the darkest Mexican I’ve ever seen. Black Andy is small and wiry. He always wears a hoodie sweatshirt. He’s dirty and sometimes he goes to the other apartment’s to take a shower, but mostly he just stays in the apartment. The apartment has electricity, but the water’s off. Andy’s in his late twenties and looks even older. He is the only dude I know who I can get high with and he doesn’t want to try to fuck me. Or if he does then he keeps it to himself. Actually, I think he’s gay.

"I know a way you could make some money fast.” Andy looks at me from his sleeping bag in the corner. I know immediately what he’s referring to.

"No way."

"I know a guy who could get you work right now."

"I have a better idea," I say. "We could steal a car. The homeboys next door know a chop shop. One car would give us more than we need, we could buy some more dope too."

"You don't know how to hotwire a car," Andy says.

"I do too. I've watched it done plenty of times," which is true.
"Well you go right ahead then." He’s irritated with me but I don’t care.

"I’d rather steal a car than sleep with some nasty diseased scumbag who has kids older than my mom."

I stand at the bottom of the stairs shifting my weight from one leg to the other. My heart pounds. The air is cold on my skin and I rub my arms. I feel strange, standing here in the middle of the night in a skirt that barely covers my ass and a shirt that might as well not be there. The too high heels are killing my feet. I look at the man and take another drag off my cigarette.

I’m not sure what I should do. I want to leave. I want to go home and tell Andy what a stupid idea this whole thing is. I’m not sure how much time has passed since we’ve taken up our positions like some strange actors on a stage waiting for the curtain to come up. Muffled country music beats on the walls of the apartment the man came out of, and a baby cries from an upstairs unit. I pretend to study the building for a few minutes, but there isn’t much to it. Two apartments downstairs share a walkway with their doors facing each other. The staircase the man sits on runs up the side of one building and seems to lead to a landing that contains the same layout upstairs. Dogs bark. I shiver. I’m bored. I’m nervous. I’ve never done anything like this before.

The man watches me and I want to ask him his name, but I don’t want to know. He looks like a David, so in my mind that becomes his name. David nurses a beer that has a cheap, dirty smell to it, and he looks me up and down, over and over as if he can’t believe his eyes. As if I’m his dinner. As if he’s trying too hard to send me some message that I’m just not getting.

I fiddle with my purse, acting like I’m looking for something. "So. What are you wanting?" I try to sound in charge. Instead I sounds young, immature, silly. He stares at my small, tight breasts, not even glancing at my face.

"How old are you kid?" His voice is hard and scratchy.
“Old enough,” I reply.

Finally he looks at my face. He gives me a grin that reminds me of a jackal. I saw a jackal at the zoo once and I wonder where that little girl went. The little girl that went on trips to the zoo with school, the little girl who slipped her hand into her teacher's and skipped happily from the jackals to the monkeys with her red lunchbox and a pencil that smelled like wood.

"Turn around, let me get a look at you," the man orders. I turn slowly and stop with my back to him. I run my hands down over my ass.

"Hmmm...." The man makes an approving sound and I bend over a little bit, just enough to give him a little peek at the thong underwear under my short, pleated, schoolgirl skirt.

"Oh yeah." I peek over and see him lean back and rub his crotch a little bit. "How much?"

"One fifty. No anal," I say, just like I’d rehearsed with Andy.

He pulls out cash and counts off the bills. I crumple them into my purse and hand him a condom.

He shoves me up against the wall and lifts my skirt. The stucco digs into my hands as he thrusts into me from behind. The door he came out of cracks open and a little boy, maybe six years old peeks through at me with bangs in his face. His dark eyes meet mine as the man behind me grunts and thrusts.

I recount the story to Marsha over the phone.

"I hate you right now," she says.

"I know. But you love me too."

She does. But the hate is seeping in too. I feel it ruining us, like an acid eating away the good parts of our friendship.
"I'm not going to do it all the time," I tell her, but I know that’s a lie. A hundred and fifty bucks for fifteen minutes of my time? No way was I going to stop now.

I had Andy shoot me up for the first time. I watched in a mixture of fascination and disgust as he tied a rubber strip around my arm, waiting for my veins to appear. I watched as the tip of the needle popped through the tight surface of my pale skin, as he pushed the plunger. I felt the dark warmth spread through my body.
Chapter 5
Tunnels
Penelope 1997

“I’m not going to school!”

“Yes. You are.”

My grandma stood over me, belt in hand.

“What are you going to do? Beat me?” I rolled over in the bed, pulling the comforter around me, just in case.

“If that’s what I have to do. Lord help us both, you’re turning into your mother!” She brought the belt down on the comforter, the majority of the impact was absorbed by the blanket and it didn’t really hurt, but still tears rushed to my eyes.

“That’s it. I’m calling your worker.” She stormed out of the room. I stayed where I was for a few minutes, listening. I wondered if she was really going to call. She had before. They’d come and taken me to the children’s center for a week before grandma had started feeling guilty and come and gotten me.

I heard her talking on the phone. I got out of bed and pulled a sweatshirt over the t-shirt I’d slept in, jumped into a pair of jeans and my grey converse sneakers, no socks, socks bothered my feet. I grabbed my backpack and popped the screen out of the window above my bed. She was still talking on the phone when I climbed through, landing between the bushes and the stucco wall, scraping my arm. I didn’t care. I wrestled my way through the shrub and out into the front yard, taking off at a run as soon as my feet hit the lawn. I heard her come out onto the doorstep and yell for me to stop but I was already down the street.
I dodged around a corner and behind the veterinarian’s office, through a hole in the chain link fence, careful to not scratch up my arms on the sharp pieces of metal that stood out, down the slope of rocky dirt that led to the large square opening to the storm drain.

We called it the tunnels. They ran underneath the entire city, graffitied in colorful block letters in some places and dark threats in others. I’d discovered the tunnels over the summer when my grandma had become too much to take. I don’t know what happened, it was like someone flipped a switch and all of a sudden she was mega bitch. She’d always had a temper, but recently it was like she couldn’t even stand to look at me. Ever since we went shopping for my first bra she’d been treating me like I was doing something bad all the time, even if I was just reading or doing my homework she would come in and find some reason to yell at me. I didn’t understand it. No wonder my mom’s so fucked up.

The tunnel was wet from the recent rain, the smell of damp earth and ozone filled up all the space and I rolled up my jeans where they drug on the ground. It wasn’t a lot of water but I hated when my jeans got wet. I took the flashlight out of my backpack and made my way into the dark. I liked it down here. It was quiet, clam.

I took two forks to the left and shined my light ahead of me onto a platform where the path dead ended. There was a big box filled with rags. A face peeked up.

“Ay, get that light outta my face,” Zep grumbled.

Zep lived in the tunnels.

“What’s up Zep?” I asked, climbing up onto the waist high cement block where he kept his “camp.”

“How’s it going girlfriend?” he asked, rolling out of the box and rags.

“Not so good today,” I handed him a pop tart from a foil packet in my backpack and I broke off a piece of the other.
“It’s early still, why you ain’t at school?”

I let out a deep breath that I hadn’t realized I was holding.

“I hate it.”

“Ah. Yeah.” He got up and began sorting through a bag of cans that sat under a blanket next to his box. Zep had a whole setup down here. He had an old sink on one side and a cooler he referred to as the fridge that he never kept ice in but sometimes he had some crackers or a granola bar or a beer in there. He had his box, the “bedroom,” and he had a couple old sofa cushions on the ground next to it, the “living room.” I stayed off the cushions because one time I sat on one and I got bitten up by some kind of bug.

Zep was seventeen. He was tall and skinny. He had brown hair that sat in clumps on his shoulders and a little bit of a beard that made him look older. He’d never lived in a real house. He had a cat named Porky that lived with him too, but she went off and did cat stuff a lot and I didn’t see her around.

“What happens to Porky when you move your camp?” I’d asked him once.

“She comes with me,” he answered.

“She never runs away or gets lost?”

“Naw. Me and Porky’s family. We’s the only family we got. She knows that. She rather be with me than stuck here on her own.”

“What happened to your family?” I asked.

“Eh…” He shrugged. “I only ever had Ma. She went crazy though and they picked her up one day and took her to the hospital and I guess she’s still there. They tried to get me too, but I run too fast for them to catch me.”

“And you’ve been alone ever since?” I asked.
“Nope. I got Porky. I gots Shirley and Hammel up the stream, they look out for me. And Jerry and Martian. Those guys don’t let me alone ever.” He chuckled. But I knew that just like me, even though he had people, he was more alone than anything else.

That was when I first met Zep back over the summer. Now it was fall and I was worried about winter.

“It don’t get that cold here,” he told me when I asked about his plans.

“But it rains. Don’t you worry that you’ll get flooded out down here?” He lit an old lantern and sat down on one of the cushions, smoke curling away from his cigarette while he sorted through his bags. Zep got money from recycling, but they wouldn’t take everything. He had to take out the trash and put the different types of recycling in different bags. I’ve offered to help him lots of times, but he says it messes up his system.

“Naw. We never get that much rain. And if it gets heavy I’ll just head up the hill to Juniper’s little squat up there for a few days.”

“What about Porky?”

“She don’t go nowhere in the rain. Cats don’t like water. She stays with me where it’s dry.”

He turned back to his sorting signaling that he was done talking for the moment. I took out my notebook and started to write a letter to my mom. I felt a familiar anger bubbling up and I stopped. I wanted to tell her so many things. But I also wanted to keep them all for myself, all the little bits she didn’t know anymore, she hadn’t earned them. I’d started lots of letters to my mom. Hundreds maybe. I’d never finished them though, never sent any of them. She sent me letters all the time, but I didn’t read them.

Mom,
I think Grandma is tired of taking care of me. I really wish you were here. I don’t know what to do, she is mad at me all the time, even when I don’t do anything bad. I can’t talk to her about anything without it being a fight. And the kids at school hate me and someone always wants to fight and I just want to read my books and be left alone and I don’t get why they always want to mess with me and I don’t know what to do to make them stop because I’m not a fighter and so I don’t want to go, but Grandma doesn’t even care if I get beat up every day, she just wants me to leave her alone.

So I’ve been hangin out with my friend Zep. I might go live with him. I don’t know. I don’t know why things have to be like this. I don’t understand anything and I get mad because you should be here. This is your job, isn’t it? Why did you even have me if you didn’t want me?

I shut my notebook before I got too upset.

“Could I come and stay with you?” I asked him after a while.

“Well… I mean, there’s nothin’ stoppin’ you. But you’ll have to come up with some way of gettin’ your own money and food and stuff.”

I thought about it some.

“Do you ever go places?” I asked him.

“Of course I go places. I go places all day long.”

“No, I mean, do you like, go to other states or cities?”

“Well, I haven’t in a long time. Not since they picked up my Ma. I want to be here if they let her out.”

“Do you ever see her?”

“No. If I go, they’ll take me too. I’m too old for all that Children’s Center bullshit”

“I haven’t seen my mom in two years. She sold me for drug money.” I hadn’t talked about her with anyone other than my social worker either.
“Sometimes it’s good for them to go away for a bit.” He was tying up a bag.

“I miss her.”

“Yup. That’s the way of it.”

“My social worker was gonna take me to visit her, but I was too mad.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m still too mad.”

“I bet you are. You can’t stay mad forever though. They’re human, you know? Moms? They fuck up just like anyone. That anger ain’t doing you no good.”

“Yeah… I guess.”

“I gotta go turn these cans in. You can stay here if you want.”

He hopped down off the ledge and grabbed a bike that was propped up against the side.

“I think I’m going to have to go get some stuff if I’m going to stay here,” I’m thinking of my sleeping bag and the box of cookies grandma bought me from the store the other day.

“Yeah, well watch it with stuff. The less stuff you have out here the better. Not everyone you meet’s gonna be a good guy.”

On the way back home I made a mental list of the things I wanted and the things that would be bad for me to bring. I wanted my blanket, but the golden cross necklace some1’d gotten last Christmas could stay. I didn’t even like that thing anyway. But maybe I could take it to a pawn shop…

I rounded the corner to the house where I’d lived with my grandma for the past two years. It was the only real home I’d ever had and seeing it standing there with its barred windows and gray stucco walls made me feel sad. There was a car parked in front that I didn’t recognize. It looked all official like and I wondered if it was my social worker. The car out front was shiny silver and my social workers car was old and brown though. I stopped a few houses down and
across the street to think about what to do. It felt like a trap. I headed back the way I’d come. I’d circle the block and check things out from the back.

I turned two corners and passed set after set of duplex houses with chain link fences and gravel yards. Grandma liked having a yard with grass, she said it looked classier. I knew the house that was in the same spot as ours on the other side. It was empty, had been for a long time. I liked to jump the back fence and climb up in the tree to write sometimes, or to read a book. I liked the emptiness, everyone else’s houses were so full all the time, like all the space was taken up with day to day life there was nowhere to relax. I liked places that were uncluttered by all the normal life stuff.

I made my around to the side gate where I’d left the latch undone the last time I was here. The gate opened easily and I slipped into the little yard. All the houses in this neighborhood were the same. Duplexes with the same layout in all of them, a little living room, an even smaller kitchen, two bedrooms, a bathroom with just a shower. Some of the houses were in better condition than others. This one had been empty for so long that there were plants growing through the concrete patio in the back and up into the stucco walls. There was a window broken out and I’d been inside. It was dusty and there were little things in the carpet like when you move the bed to clean behind it and there’s all the tops to the markers and jacks and pennies and stuff that has been forgotten. Well, it was like someone had done that in this house with all the furniture, there were little mess outlines of where the sofa and chairs had been and where beds used to be. It felt familiar in an achy way, seeing all those little forgotten things. I knew how that felt, to be meaningless and left behind and forgotten. I didn’t go in there much.

Instead I climbed up into the tree. It was the best tree in the whole neighborhood, scratchy and scraggly with strong arms that didn’t even budge under my weight. I could see all
over from the middle branches, like when the house three doors down from us got raided or when Litzy next door called the cops on her alcoholic boyfriend.

The curtains at our house were open. Grandma liked to let the light and fresh air in during the day. I saw her sitting at the kitchen table with a man who looked like a cop only no uniform. I wasn’t close enough to see her expression but her body looked sad and I wondered if it was something about my mom. That’s usually what the cops came for. I wanted to get closer to hear what they were saying, but there was no way I could get into our yard without being seen. I was going to have to go back around the front.

Ten minutes later I was in front of the house again. My bedroom window was still open. My window and the kitchen window were the only ones in the front with no bars on them. Grandma had been threatening to put them on there since last summer when I’d first taken off during one of her rages, but she couldn’t afford it right now.

I squeezed between the bush and the stucco again, little white lines springing up on my arm where it dragged across the wall. I tried to be quiet but there’s no real way to keep a bush quiet. I hoped that they were out of hearing range as I lifted myself up in the windowsill, my hands pressing hard on the metal window frame.

I fell onto my bed and froze, slowing my breath, listening to the sounds of the house. I didn’t hear anything. I waited for what seemed like an hour but was probably only five minutes. Wondering if they’d heard me, I climbed slowly off the bed and stepped across the room. I pressed my ear to the door and stood there waiting, breathing.

Still nothing.

I waited some more.

Sweat trickled down the side of my face. I placed my hand on the doorknob and turned it as slowly and quietly as I could. As I started to pull the door open something slammed against it
and I fell back into the wall behind the door. My head hit the wall with a loud crack and darkness danced at the edges of my eyesight. Pinpricks of light swam in front of my eyes and as I tried to make my way to my feet a man shoved his way into my room, handcuffs drawn.

“No! Wait!” I heard my grandma yell, but it was no use. Before I even knew what was happening I was on my stomach, rough brown carpet digging onto my cheek, hands bound behind my back with sharp metal that threatened to cut into the bones in my wrists.

“What the fuck?” I screamed. “What the fuck is this?”

“Penelope calm down,” my grandmother said from the hallway.

“Penelope Breen, you are under arrest,” the man said behind me.

It was like time stopped. It was silent and no one moved. I laid there, face smashed into the carpet, looking sideways at my bedroom, my pink comforter bunched up on my bed, a pile of my laundry on the floor in front of the closet, drawers hanging open with jeans and sweatshirts spilling out, my Nine Inch Nails poster above my bed. This is my life. That thought stayed with me as I was yanked up and shoved out the front door. I kept having to remind myself that it was real.

My grandma was saying something to the man, and he was saying things back and it was like they were speaking a different language. He shoved me ahead of him towards the car and I wondered what this scene would look like to the neighbors. Me, a skinny twelve year old girl being restrained and escorted towards a shiny vehicle by two adults twice my size, grandma in her muumuu and curlers, this man, my father’s age, heading the show with his hard arms and his button down shirt. But there was no one to see, the streets were empty, as they always were when the cops showed up. I could sense people peeking from behind blinds and curtains, but when I looked the windows were all blank, no movement showed anywhere.
This is my life. I thought from the backseat as the man started up the car, handcuffs slicing into my wrists, I squirmed trying to get comfortable but it was useless. The neighborhood passed by and the streets got wider, then we were on the freeway. The man said some things to me but I didn’t hear him. I just watched out the window as things changed and changed again as we got closer to the city.

“I have a spelling test tomorrow,” I told the cop.

“I guess you’ll have to make it up,” he laughed and I wondered why that was funny.

“Why am I arrested?” I asked as we pulled into a parking structure. The man guided the car up and around, up and around looking for a spot.

“For running away,” he said.

“But I didn’t even run away yet. I wasn’t even gone that long.”

“Not what your guardian said. Said you been giving her all kinds of trouble and running off whenever you had any consequences. Said this is the third time this week you took off.”

“But…”

“Nope. No buts kid. This is the way it is. You don’t do what you’re supposed to do, you go to juvie. You’re a foster kid, you don’t get all those chances a normal kid gets.”

“But she’s my grandma, not a foster mom. I don’t understand.”

“You’re still in the foster system. You fuck up, it’s straight to juvie. The judge’ll decide if you stay here or if you go to the children’s center or a different placement or what. For now, this is it.”

“She’s gonna come get me. Just watch.”

“Nope. She can’t this time. You belong to the courts now. She can’t come get you til the judge says.”

This is my life.
The baby’s crying again. I can hear it, but I can’t seem to find my eyes to open them. Maybe it will stop. Just go back to sleep. It does that sometimes.

I just put her down! She shouldn’t need anything yet.

The baby’s screams keep on though, louder. I feel them drilling into my forehead, digging deeper and deeper until finally a crack of light shines through and I start to see the room.

I’m in the living room, which is strange. I don’t remember coming to the living room. The cheap polyester fibers of the sofa are digging into my face and, combined with a puddle of drool, my skin feels like I’ve been sleeping on a scouring pad. The baby’s screams are building up, red and dangerous. I bring myself up on wobbly legs and place my hand on the grubby, stringy arm of the sofa. I start to take a few steps towards the bedroom, but I stumble over the coffee table. Empty cans, paper plates, a take out carton from the Chinese restaurant down the street lay strewn across its surface.

When was that?

Randy brought Chinese home. It must have been yesterday.

I steady myself again and start carefully towards the bedroom.

A sudden banging on the front door scares me so bad I almost piss my pants. Holy fuck, who bangs like that? I notice the phone, the answering machine blinking frantically.

The baby screams, and the door thunders again and I’m paralyzed by the realization that something bad is happening.
I reach for the phone.

Sixteen messages. Fear pounds through my chest. Sixteen calls. How could I have missed sixteen calls? I just want to sit and play the messages and try to figure out what's going on before I open the door, but the baby's screaming and I can't think.

Fuck.

"Open up!" Yells a voice from the door. I can't breathe. In the next room the baby screams and screams, constant now. I feel dizzy, foggy, numb. I turn and run down the hallway. I'm through the bathroom door and heading for the slightly crooked window near the toilet when I hear a crack and a bang from the front door. My heart jumps. I throw the bathroom door shut. I hear voices, someone's calling my name. I fumble with the window and pound on the screen, ripping it as the bathroom door crashes open.

"Freeze! Hands in the air!"

The baby screams and screams and everything else stands still. I feel my life crashing down around me, shattering like glass on the bathroom floor as I raise my hands, white flags surrendering. I turn to face two cops standing in my tiny doorway. Grubby fingerprints on the doorframe near their heads catch my attention. God, this place is a pigsty. How did it get this bad? Soothing sound float down the hallway from my room where a third officer is trying to calm my baby.

The baby. Fuck.

How long was I passed out?

When did she get a bottle last?

My brain is all fogged up and the answers aren't there. The last thing I remember is Chinese food with Randy. Was that last night?
The cops hustle me into the living room and shove me down onto the sofa. Shame burns on my face as they poke around the filthy room. The smell of the leftover Chinese food makes my stomach uneasy. I am terrified by the thought that it might’ve been sitting there for more than just one night. The baby finally stops screaming and I hear officers talking in clipped nonsense sentences on their radios. I peek over the sofa to the bedroom where I see an officer holding my baby, cuddling her, soothing her. Her diaper droops heavily and I can see one skinny leg sticking out around the officer’s arm, a little tuft of dark hair. I have this feeling, like I’m watching another mother with her own child. Nothing feels real.

And then, like a dam holding back a whole ocean, something inside me breaks wide open. I’m rocked to my core by this deep, aching need for my daughter. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. What was I thinking? Oh man. I need her, my sweet girl, I need to hold her and feel her soft in my arms. Her screams are whimpers now and I see the officer holding her bottle. That was my job. I fucked up so bad.

I start to get up but the officer standing near me snaps at me to sit back down.

“But… my baby…” It sounds like I’m offering up a lie I don’t even believe myself.

“Just shut the fuck up lady,” the officer tells me.

“What is this anyway? Why are you here?” I try to muster up some rebellion but my words are flat.

The officer doesn’t answer. A woman walks in the front door, bringing my attention to the fact that it’s standing open. I can see three of my neighbors gawking at me from the hallway. The woman’s tall and thin, with long brown hair and high heels. Her nails are fresh and her light pink lipstick looks out of place. Too sweet and innocent here. She walks in like she owns the place and I finally feel that little spark of rebellion ignite. She walks straight to the back of the apartment and takes the baby from the officer. I watch from my awkward angle as she changes
the baby’s diaper and finds a clean sleeper for her. I watch her use a baby wipe to clean the baby’s little arms and legs, another for her face. I sit in the trash in my living room watching helplessly as this woman picks up my baby, snuggles her and sifts through the heaps of baby stuff that are piled around the room, locating things that go into a bag. I feel utterly helpless.

The woman walks back down the hall, her perfect heels falling on the stains in the carpet as if they aren’t even there. She walks toward the living room and I start to stand again. This time the police officer uses the end of his rifle to force me to sit back down. I hadn’t realized that the rifle was in the room until that moment. And that’s when it hits me.

She’s taking my baby. My baby.

“Wait!” I cry, but no one listens. The woman with the lipstick and the heels and the perfect nails walks out the door with my baby and there’s nothing I can do to stop them. I try to chase after them, pushing the rifle aside as if it were nothing more than a stick; I dive for the front door. The officer lands on top of me and I can’t breathe. I don’t want to breathe though, I want my baby.

I want to die.

I stop fighting, hoping he will just kill me, just sit on top of me until all of my insides squeeze out and my corpse lays there empty and ugly.

Of course he stands up and pulls me up too, this time pulling my arms behind me and forcing handcuffs onto my wrists so tight they felt like they’re trying to squeeze my hands off.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” A cop asks from the kitchen.

I don’t answer.

He walks closer. He’s holding a plastic bag.

“Or am I to assume this is all yours?” He holds it up.

Coke.
Shit. A lot of Coke. Where the hell did that come from? I still don’t respond. My head’s spinning, my heart’s pounding and I think I’m going to throw up.

“Well you can think about it in a cell for a couple nights, how ‘bout that?”

They walk me out the front door and down the stairs. Faces flash through the hallway, anonymous faces of people I should know but don’t.

The back of the police car is hard and cold on my legs. The woman with my baby is talking to police officers twenty feet away. I yell for her, for my baby. No one pays attention. I sit back in the seat, wanting to cry, but the tears won’t come. A Styrofoam coffee cup sits on the dash in the front, sticky brown coffee streaks mark the outside of the cup and I suddenly feel desperate for a cup of coffee.

I’m in deep shit.

I want to disappear.

Turn to dust.
The officer pulled me out of the car. Our footsteps echoed through the cold concrete building. We passed row after row of cars and entered an elevator. The ride down was so silent I could hear the cables pulling us as we dropped.

The elevator opened facing a large square building. There was a fence with barbed wire at the top coming out of both sides of the building and heading off behind. There was a canopy over the sidewalk leading up to the doors, some sort of attempt to make the place look fancier or something. It wasn’t working.

We walked inside and the man (he’d told me his name but I hadn’t really heard) escorted me through a heavy door that he used a plastic card to get into and through a metal detector. The hallway was painted up to look like a nice place for kids, trees and animals on the walls. The shiny beige flooring gave it way though. Cafeteria flooring, like at school, only shined better. He pushed me ahead of him and into a room with a bench, a toilet, and a window instead of a wall. He entered with me and removed the handcuffs finally. My hands tingled and he directed me to sit. I sat. He left the room and I was finally alone.

There was a desk directly across from the room where I sat, facing the window-wall. A man and a woman in brown uniforms sat at the desk and stared at me. The man who had brought me in was talking. They were saying things back between staring at me. I couldn’t hear them through the glass. I eyed the toilet. It sat in full view. Metal. A sink was attached on one side with a little push spout. I was thirsty, but not that thirsty. An almost empty toilet paper roll sat on the
ground beside the toilet. I shivered. It was cold in the room, even beneath my sweatshirt my arms were covered in goose bumps. My stomach growled.

I stretched out across the bench, wrapping my arms around myself. Maybe if I went to sleep I would wake up in my own bed and I could start all over. Maybe this was all a bad dream.

I must have slept because next thing I knew something landed on top of me and when I opened my eyes the woman from the desk was standing over me.

“Time to get you dressed out” she told me.

“Right here?” I asked sitting up.

“No. Follow me.”

I took the clothing she’d tossed on top of me and followed her out of the room, down the tree painted hallway some more and into another room. This one had a shower with no curtain, another metal toilet, and a shelf full of clothing folded in neat piles, boxes full of shoes on the bottom and tiny bottles of shampoo and bars of soap above.

“You’ll need to shower. And lice shampoo. Set your clothes over there on the bench, and take everything off.”

“What do you mean everything?”

“All of your clothes sweetheart,” she grinned, but it was not a nice grin. “Put everything you brought with you in here.” She handed me a clear plastic bag. And stepped back a few feet to watch me.

My insides felt shaky. I didn’t know what to do. No one had watched me undress since I was just a little kid. I took my sweatshirt off and put it in the bag. Then I sat down and undid my shoes.

“Come on. We don’t got all day,” the woman said, her large chest heaving around impatiently.
I took off my pants and folded them into a perfect little square. Then my shirt. The air was cold on my skin and my heart was pounding.

“Jesus Christ girl, let’s go.” She said.

I stood there in my panties and bra, shame burning through my body.

“Everything,” she said slowly, like she was trying to figure out how to spell it.

I felt her eyes all over my body as I took off my underwear.

“Squat and cough,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Turn around, squat down all the way and cough,” she said all slow like again.

I did what she said, grateful to not have to look at her.

“That’s good. Now come over here and get in the shower,” she turned the knob and the water began spraying out. I was horrified by the thought of having to take a shower in front of this woman. I hesitated.

“I said come on. Quit dragging your feet or you’re gonna miss dinner.”

She stood to the side as I stepped into the water. It was lukewarm but I didn’t ask her to turn it hotter.

“Give me your hands,” she said and she squirted a thick, clear gel into my hands. “Lice shampoo.”

I washed my hair with chemicals that smelled like the flea shampoo we used on grandma’s dogs, only worse. I could feel it making my hair clump together in too-clean stickiness.

I kept my back to her as much as possible. Finally she shut off the water and handed me a towel. I dried and dressed in the blue pants and white t-shirt, plastic orange sandals she’d given me earlier.
She led me down a hallway to another room where a man asked me questions about my health and weighed me. He had me stand against a wall and took my picture and gave me a plastic bracelet with a number, like a hospital bracelet only tougher.

“Don’t take that off, you’ll get charged.” I didn’t know what that meant, but it didn’t sound good.

The female guard was back to walk me down more hallways. She gave me a blanket and sheets, a tiny bottle of shampoo, a little square of soap, a toothbrush and a comb.

“Follow me,” she said, and I did.

All the doors were metal now and we were buzzed in one after another. We walked through a large empty room that had tables mounted to the floor, checkerboards painted onto the tabletops and benches around them. There were two levels of rooms ahead of us and I realized that we must be getting to the cells. She went up the stairs on the side of the room and I followed. We paused in front of a door and waited for a moment before it buzzed and opened.

There was a girl on the bottom bunk. That was the first thing I noticed. She was not much bigger than me with dark hair and a tattoo on her arm. She gave me a look that made me want to turn and run away.

“Kimmie, this is Penelope. You be nice to her.”

“Yes ma’am.” Kimmie said and laid back onto her bunk, ignoring me.

“Get your bed made up. Dinner’s in ten minutes.”

The guard left the room and I stood there, unsure.

“What?” Kimmie said.

“Nothing.” I said, moving toward the bunk.

“Don’t step on my bed,” she said rolled over to face the wall.
It was awkward, trying to get on the top bunk without stepping on her bed. I used the toilet that sat next to the beds and climbed up. I made the bed as well as I could while sitting on it. The mattress was thin, more like a mat. I sat back and took in the room. Concrete floor, concrete walls, grey, grey, grey. There was a strip of window at the top of the wall by the head of the bed. I tried to look out but it was too opaque and I could only make out blurry shapes. The room was small. I could probably touch both sides if I stood in the middle and stretched out my arms.

The doors buzzed open and Kimmie got up and left the room. I jumped down from my bunk and stood in the doorway, checking it all out. It felt unreal. I wondered what Zep would think when I didn’t come back today. Probably he wouldn’t notice much.

Girls were coming out of all of the rooms. They all wore the same clothing I wore. They all seemed to be close to my age, some younger, some older but none of the girls looked more than thirteen or so.

There were 8 rooms upstairs and I assumed there were that many downstairs. Enough space for thirty-two girls. Same as my classes in school. I could see the girls arranging themselves at tables downstairs. There was a weird pod thing in the corner near the door that went out. The glass was dark, but there was a light on inside and I could see a few guards in there watching us. It gave me the creeps.

“Move off of the walkway,” a voice said over an intercom and everyone turned to look at me.

I took a deep breath and walked towards the stairs. I could feel them all watching. I made my way down the stairs and I was greeted by a crowd of girls with varying levels of interest in me. Some gave me dismissive looks, some glared. A girl with greasy blonde hair grinned at me with bad teeth. I saw Kimmie sitting at a table with three other Mexican girls. She looked me up
and down. There didn’t seem to be anywhere to sit. I walked around the tables looking for a space.

“You can sit here,” a chubby girl with light brown hair and freckles said. Relieved, I sat.

“I’m Jessica,” she said. “But everyone here calls me Sweets.” She smiled.

“Darby,” a girl with curly blonde hair to my left said.

The other girl, dyed black hair and scars on her arms, didn’t say anything, just looked at me and then away.

A guard entered the room and the girls got up and started lining up in two lines. I followed.

“Where are we going?” I asked quietly.

“Dinner,” said Darby. “Shh, no talking.”

We walked in two straight lines down a hallway with heavy doors on the sides and into a large room that looked like a school cafeteria only cleaner, quieter and somehow sadder. There were posters on the wall, things designed to cheer us up, but they weren’t working. The room was painted in that same green cartoon trees and silly looking monkeys that were years behind us. I followed the other girls as they got trays and held them out to overweight women with hair nets and gloves who dished out grey looking noodles and peas. We were handed plastic spoons with milk cartons. No one said a word or even made eye contact with me.

The middle of the room was filled with more bolted down tables, these ones did not feature game boards on them, instead they had initials and curse words scratched into them. I sat by the same girls I’d sat by in the first room. I was still struggling to grasp what was going on. Just hours earlier I’d been sitting in the tunnels with Zep. It seemed like time had gone on fast forward or something, like I had jumped into someone else’s life, beamed up by aliens and dropped somewhere I didn’t belong.
As we sat, the girls began to talk and the noise level went from zero to crazy in a matter of seconds.

“So what did you do?” Jessica asked me.

“I don’t really know,” I said.

“Bullshit.”

“No really. I mean, I didn’t go to school and I was thinking about running away, but I didn’t yet, but my grandma said I did even though I wasn’t even gone long enough to go to school. I was only gone like two hours, maybe three.”

“And they brought you here for that?” The other girls at our table had crowded in to hear the story.

“Yeah.”

“Well you probably won’t stay long then. The first time I ran away they let me out after two days,” Darby said. I wanted to ask them what they were all in here for, but I wasn’t sure I really wanted to know. They mostly looked like regular kids, like kids I would go to school with. And they even seemed nicer so far.

“The guy who arrested me said it was a big deal because I’m a foster kid I guess,” I told them.

“Oh. Yeah, that makes a difference,” Jessica said. “Foster’s are always supposed to be grateful for anything, no matter how bad it is. And if you aren’t then they figure they need to punish you for being entitled, like it’s your fault your parents are all fucked up and can’t take care of you. So they lock you up. They’re gonna to have to find you a new placement,”

“My grandma’ll take me back. She was just mad at me.” I hoped.

“They might not let her. My mom would have taken me back even after the third time but they said she couldn’t because she couldn’t control me,” Jessica said.
“I didn’t even know I was still a foster kid. I thought since my grandma took me that she was just my guardian or whatever now.” The whole situation was so confusing.

“Sometimes they let grandparents be fosters so they can get more money for you,” Said Darby. “That’s what my aunt did. She said that if they let her adopt me then she wouldn’t get as much money anymore.”

“So none of you live with your parents?” I asked. This was like gold for me. I had met lots of kids who didn’t have dads, and I even knew a boy who didn’t have a mom because she died, but I’d never been around other kids who didn’t have any parents. Well, maybe that one time I had been at the Children’s Center, but I wasn’t there long enough to even notice.

“I do,” the girl with the dyed black hair finally spoke up. We all looked at her, but she didn’t say anything else.

“How long have you guys been here?” I asked.

“Two months,” said Darby.

“Five,” said Jessica.

“Heather’s only been here a few days,” Darby nodded towards the black haired girl who was staring at her food.

“This is my third time,” said Jessica. “They said next time I could go to CYA.”

“What’s CYA?” I asked.

“It’s like kiddie prison. It’s where they send all the really bad kids.”

“What did you do?”

“This time? I stabbed a janitor at my school with a pen.” She seemed proud. “He was trying to cop a feel, but nobody would listen to me. He said that I just attacked him for no reason. Bastard. I guess since I have a history that means they think everything I say is a lie. Welcome to suck world.”
The rules of Juvenile Hall were simple: Nothing was allowed. We could only talk at certain times, and never in line. We were allowed to watch TV for an hour every day on the set that sat built into the wall, behind a Plexiglas screen where we couldn’t actually touch it, but only if we didn’t fight over what to watch, which never happened, so there was mostly no TV.

We weren’t allowed to have anything other than “basic necessities.” They gave us crappy shampoo that made out hair stringy and little bars of soap that made our skin peel off. They gave us toothpaste that dissolved in our mouths and men’s deodorant that left us sweaty and stinky. They did let us check out crayons during free time. And there were lots of books, even a library that we got to go to every day if we wanted.

We did school during the day, all of us crammed into a small classroom where desks sat in single file lines. We did gym in a room with a basketball hoop where we walked laps for half an hour.

I waited. I waited for my grandma to come, or my social worker or a lawyer (I never knew that kids could have their own lawyers, but that’s what the other girls told me). I followed suit with the others and took my cues from them as to what to do and I couldn’t ever get that thought to go away.

I lay on my bed at night and tried to not make any noise as tears slid down my face. I wanted to just stay in bed and feel sorry for myself and cry for days, but that wasn’t allowed either. Plus my bunkie was scary. She didn’t do anything, but I could tell she wasn’t someone I wanted on my bad side. I didn’t want to give her any reason to think I was weak. It was like with dogs when one is hurt or scared and the others will gang up on it and attack it. I knew that if I let my guard down it would be all over.

Kimmi wasn’t that bad I guess, she didn’t really talk to me much, just gave me orders, where I could put my things, my duties for cleaning. She didn’t mess with me or try to make me
do things she was supposed to do though; I heard some of the other girls did that. But she wasn’t very friendly either. She hung out with the “cholas” which were the Mexican girls. They acted tough all the time and sometimes some of her friends would start fights with the other girls, but mostly things were just boring, boring, boring.

I tried to call my grandma collect at phone time. I heard her pick up and then the recording played. It went to the dial tone so I guess she’d hung up.

It was day after day of the same thing and after about two weeks I was starting to feel forgotten about again. I started having these thoughts, like maybe if I hurt myself they would take me to the hospital and then my grandma would come and she would feel bad. I started to look for things that I could cut myself with, daydreaming of throwing myself off of my bed and breaking my arm. I didn’t want to die really, I just wanted to get out of there.

The other girls were feeling it too, it was like the temperature was getting turned up and things that had been simmering were starting to boil. There was a real fight one day at dinner, one of Kimmi’s chola friends stabbed another girl with a broken piece of a plastic spoon. She didn’t hurt her bad, it was just a stick in her arm, but everyone got put on lockdown and the girl who started it was taken to solitary. Then a girl attacked a guard at count time, just jumped at her and started swinging her arms. It felt like things were building up and I was afraid of what would happen when it all exploded, but it was also exciting, seeing these things, waiting for something big to happen, it was a relief from the boredom.

Finally someone came.

She wasn’t my usual social worker. She was younger with short hair and earrings all around one ear.

“Penelope Breen?” she asked, reading my name off of a paper like maybe they had brought her the wrong girl.
“Yes?” I sat across from her at another bolted down table in a room that was so small I wouldn’t have been able to lie on the floor. Not that I would have wanted to lay on the dirty concrete floor.

“I’m Janine. I’m your new social worker.”

“Okay.”

“How’s it going?” she asked, finally looking up at me. Her eyes were green with flecks of gold in them and she had a good feel about her.

“Bad.”

“Yeah. I hear this place is crap.”

“You hear right.” I sat back and crossed my arms. It was cold in the room.

“So, what happened with your grandma?” She asked.

“I don’t know. She just freaked out.”

“The report I’ve got is that you were the one who freaked out.”

“That’s not true. I just didn’t want to go to school.”

“Well you have to go to school,” she said.

“I know I have to go to school. That doesn’t mean I want to do it all the time.”

“Well you have to go to school,” she said.

“I know I have to go to school. That doesn’t mean I want to do it all the time.”

“Okay. So then what happened?”

“She started screaming and I took off for a bit.”

“How long is a bit?”

“I don’t know. Like a couple hours.”

“Where did you go?”

“What does that matter? I came back.”

“Did you use any drugs?” she was looking at me like I was a liar and I could feel myself getting mad.
“I don’t do that stuff.”

“So where did you go then?”

“I just went for a walk to cool down.”

“And then what?”

“When I came back there was some dude there and he shoved me down and arrested me and brought me here. She won’t answer my calls.” I felt tears coming on so I stopped and took some breaths and blinked my eyes a lot to keep them away.

“Says here that she reported you as a runaway. She said you’ve started running away a lot… sometimes three or four times a week…”

“It’s not running away if I just take a bit to cool off and then come back! Running away is gone for good! And why am I even the one in here, why aren’t you all getting all over her shit for hitting me with a belt and screaming at me all the time?”

Somewhere in there I’d stood up. I wanted to hit something. I wanted to yell and scream and throw myself on the floor like I’d seen one of the girls do a few days before. Have a nice big tantrum. I stood there though, shaking, feeling like I couldn’t get any air in my lungs.

“Calm down sweetheart. I’m on your side here, ok? We’re going to get it all sorted out.”

“It’s so unfair!” I couldn’t get myself to calm down. “How can she do this to me? How can she just call up and get rid of me anytime she wants? How come nobody wants me?” I couldn’t hold the tears back anymore.

“Oh dear.” She looked at me with such a sad face. I sat down on the floor and pulled my knees up to my face and let the tears come and come.

“Penelope, I know you’re upset. I really want to help you.”

“So help me then.”
“I don’t think going back to your grandma’s is a good idea right now. I think we should look at some of our other options, would that be okay with you?”

“Does she even miss me at all?” I was still feeling sorry for myself.

“Your Grandma? I’m sure she does sweetie. I haven’t spoken with her, but I will if you want me to.”

“No.”

“Okay.”

We sat there without talking.

“We’re going to go to court tomorrow. She might be there. I’m going to ask the judge to send you to the Children’s Center for now, until we can find you a foster home.”

My stomach felt wobbly, like I might throw up. I still wanted to yell and scream and hit things but I didn’t, I just sat there on the floor.
Chapter 8

On the Streets

Lainey. 1986

I focus all my energy on placing one foot in front of the next. I’m cold and it’s dark and I need to get inside somewhere. I wish I could just go home. I can see the house. My mom’s house. It’s less than a block away on the other side of the street, its ugly grey blue muted by the oppressive yellow street light. I stopped and stared at it, my warm breath steaming the air in front of me. I could just sneak in, like I used to do. They’re all asleep now and I could easily slip in the back window to where my bedroom used to be, my lumpy bed and dirty carpet. No one would even know I was there.

I want to do it more than I’ve wanted to do anything recently. But I can’t. It’s not like I was kicked out or anything, I can’t go there like this though. Not with my daughter there… my mom. No.

I tear my eyes away from the house and put them back on the sidewalk in front of me, forcing my legs to follow. I am so tired and cold and I just want somewhere to lie down. Randy was supposed to have somewhere for us to sleep tonight, but I’d gotten mad at him and left. I can’t remember why I was mad even, I’m just tired of him and his stupid schizo paranoid thinking. He’s always talking about someone following them, someone killing someone else… things that never really happened. I’m tired of trying to keep him sane when I’m losing my own grip on reality. Really, I’m just so tired.

My breath comes quick and shallow as I pass the house. It’s just across the street from me and she offer a silent plea for forgiveness to my family fast asleep inside. I’m not sure where I should go. I don’t want to go to Mikey’s, he won’t let me sleep. He would just want to fuck.
I feel exhaustion creeping on. When was the last time I slept? Or ate for that matter? I can’t remember. I search my memory and come up blank. How long has it been? Days? Weeks? I have a blanket at the empty house down the street. That’s where I stashed my bag of clothes too, but someone had taken the bag and taken a dump in the corner of the room and I don’t want to go in there ever again.

I need to get somewhere where I can sleep. I can feel the darkness creeping into the edges of my consciousness, overtaking me. I’ve been walking for as long as I can remember, first with Randy, then after our argument by myself. I’m not going to be able to go on much further. Last time I’d passed out on the side of the street. I didn’t even know that was possible, to just pass out while walking down the street. When I woke up, someone had taken my purse.

I tried to remember how long ago that was. A week? A month? Time didn’t make any sense anymore. My feet scrape along the soda and gum stained sidewalk. A car drives by and I wonder if it’s the same car that passed me ten minutes ago. Or was it an hour. I don’t know. I feel so heavy. My brain’s foggy and it takes so much effort to move, like I’m under water. I wish I’d stayed with Randy, he would’ve at least had some shit and I’d be able to stay up. I walk. Walk, walk walk. That’s all I do anymore. Down the street, past the house now. The street’s silent. That’s not normal, usually there are cars and men on bikes riding to the 7-11 for a beer. I wonder what time it is, what day it is. I have to pee.

There’s a bathroom in the apartments at the end of the block. It’s supposed to be just for the people who live there who are using the pool, but they leave it open. I cross the empty street and I’m the only person on the planet. Like that Twilight Zone episode I saw once, where the whole world was empty except for that one guy. Was that the Twilight Zone?

I stop in the middle of the street. The traffic light changes from green to yellow to red, directing invisible cars, ghost cars. I wonder if maybe it’s a sign, maybe it’s telling me to stop. I
stand there staring around me at the too perfect stillness. Everything looks fake, like a movie set. Like it’s all props and there are secret people behind the façade of buildings and trees, watching, waiting for me to say the right lines or move to my place. I hold my arms out and spin in a circle, the way I did when I was a kid. I look up at the stars making a complete 360 degree turn. The streetlight turns to green and I cross.

A car turns onto the street and I recognize it as the same car that just passed. Was that ten minutes ago? An hour. I feel trapped here, walking through these empty streets, this car following her. I try to see who the driver is, but the windows are too glossy, only reflecting the blurred street lights back at me. I feel so strange. My body didn’t seem to be cooperating very well and I wish I could move faster but my legs feel like they’re filled with sand.

I follow the small stone walkway into the apartment complex. It’s a decent place and I feel little pangs of envy. I should have a cute little apartment like this with my daughter. The thought of little Penny brings a tidal wave of guilt that threatens to drown me. Right now I have to think, right now I have to find somewhere safe to go. Right now I can’t have a meltdown.

I find my way to the bathroom and locked herself inside. I don’t turn on the lights so that I can watch the shadows under the door, just in case someone is following me. I don’t know what I would do if they really were following me, but at least I would see them coming.

The darkness and the confinement are comforting. I feel the weariness in my body taking over. I take off my sweatshirt and lay it on the cold tile. I’ll just rest here for a few minutes, get my thoughts together. I feel the cold tile beneath me.

Something is banging. The sun is fully up and the bathroom is hot and sticky. I don’t remember where I am at first and I don’t understand the banging until the door swings open, the
bright sun blinding me. I grab her sweatshirt and run. I see a flash of a shocked face, a middle aged Mexican man. I run. It’s bright out and I’m not sure where I’m going.

I’m at the empty house again. It’s too bright outside. Randy’s asleep on the floor in the bedroom. It smells like shit in the room. I shake Randy to try to wake him.

“Come on man, where is it?” I melt to the floor next to him. I’m hungry. So hungry I feel empty, like I might float away, like I might fall right through the floor when I pour my body down beside him.

Randy grunts and rolls over and I try to feel his pockets. I know he has some. We just re-upped last night. I found the rig in his pocket, but there was nothing with it. I shake him again.

“Randy! Wake up man! I need some shit!” My voice sounds desperate and hollow. He finally sits up and takes a little baggie out of his sock. I hold it up to examine it.

“This is it? Are you for real man? Where’s the rest of it?!” I feel anger flooding my body.

“Shut the fuck up,” He says and lays back down.

“Dude, wait, help me with this,” I hand him the needle and the baggie. “Here, do it in my foot, my arms are trashed.” I thrust my bare foot towards him and watch as he pours a couple of shards from the bag into a spoon.

“Go get me some water,” he says, nodding to an empty coke can lying on the floor. I grab the can and hurry to the bathroom. The tiny room is filthy. There’s pee all over the floor and shit spilling out of the toilet. I turn the handle for the cold water and nothing happens. I try the hot and still nothing. I look to the stinking toilet and gag. I shut the lid and open the back of the tank. Relieved to find some water in there I push the can into it. It seems to take forever for the little bubbles to stop rushing to escape the can and I know I should probably just go back to sleep, but I want to get high more than I want to sleep.
I make my way down the stuffy hallway to the bedroom again and Randy is up and ready for me. I handed him the water and tell him about my night as he sticks my foot with the needle. I flinch a little but I’m careful to keep my foot perfectly still. I don’t have good veins and usually it takes a few tries before we get a hit, but today he gets it on the first try. I relax as I feel the tingling creeping up my legs. Pretty soon my whole body is tingling and I prop myself up to stare at the pile of shit that sits in the corner where my bag of clothes used to be.
“You’re aunt has agreed to take you for now,” Stephanie, my social worker told me.

“My aunt?” I asked

“Your mom’s sister Jenna,” she looked through some papers. We were in one of the offices at the Center for Children.

“I’ve never actually met her, you know?” I didn’t know what to make of this news. Grandma had talked about my aunt Jenna a lot, and none of it was good. It was always about how she thought she was too good for the family and how she had forgotten where she had come from as soon as she’d gotten married to a man with a nice paycheck. I didn’t like this news that I was going to go live with some lady I didn’t even know.

“I know. She said that she had a falling out with the family years ago.”

“Well then why does she want me now?”

“She’s your family Penelope.”

“Then where’s she been all this time? Can’t I just stay here until my grandma is ready to take me back?”

“Your grandma isn’t going to take you back this time.”

“I keep telling you. We’ve done this before. She will, she just needs some time.”

“Penelope, honey, listen. It’s been six weeks. Your grandma’s going to come and visit you this weekend and talk with you about what’s going on, but you can’t stay here. We need to either move you to a group home or a foster home. Your aunt is willing to take you. You have
two cousins that you’ve never even met. You’ll have your own bedroom. She has money you
know.”

“So.” I picked at a scab on my arm. I was ready to be done with this meeting. I wanted to
ask her about my mom, about when she was going to get out, if I was ever going to see her again.
If she even missed me. But I was afraid to hear the answers. I didn’t want to go live with some
aunt that was too good for the rest of the family. I wanted to stay here, or go back to my
grandma’s.

“Come on. Give it a shot. For me. If it doesn’t’ work out, we’ll do something different.”

“Whatever.” It wasn’t like I had any choice.

“Great. I’ll be taking you over there on Tuesday. Your grandma is going to come visit
you this weekend.” It was Thursday.

I was sure that as soon as my grandma saw me she would change her mind.

The Children’s Center had turned out to be not nearly as bad as I’d heard. It was better
than Juvie, for sure. I had a room I shared with three other girls. They gave us regular clothes to
wear and real sheets and blankets and books and even stuffed animals. We did school in a normal
classroom. Over the six weeks that I’d been there I’d started to get attached to the place. I
wondered about Zep. What he was up to, if he missed me. I daydreamed about kissing him, which
was weird because I’d never thought about kissing him when I was around him. I felt like I was
just passing time until I could go back home.

My grandma did come. It was a bright, sunny Saturday with too many birds and too much
laughing. She took me to Del Taco and we sat on plastic benches in the grimy dining room with
boogers smeared on the bottom of the table, watching cars pull through the drive through. I
worked at an order of gloppy, gooey chili cheese fries and felt strange. I had so much I wanted to
say, so many questions I wanted to ask. Why had she called the police on me? And why didn’t she want me anymore? And was my mom ever getting out of jail? It was like all the things I wanted to say were burning a hole inside of me and instead of trying to fix it, I was trying to fill it up with gobs of chili cheese fries.

“Slow down before you choke,” Grandma said.

All the things I wanted to say stuck in my chest. Why was she doing this to me? Why was she making me stay at the children’s center? What did I do that was so bad? I wanted to beg her for another chance, I would do anything she wanted. I would do extra chores and I would even go to school every day and do my homework and everything. I didn’t say anything though.

“I wish it didn’t have to be this way,” she finally said.

“It doesn’t,” I said, anger heating me up.

“Penny…”

We were both quiet some more.

“I’m sick,” she finally said, looking down at her burrito wrapper.

“What do you mean?” She looked fine.

“The doctors. They found something. A lump. I have to do some treatments. I’m not going to be able to do it and take care of you.”

“What?”

“It’s just a lump in my breast. Your Aunt Jenna is going to help me, but you’re going to have to go stay with her while I’m doing my treatments and all.”

“But I could help you. I meant it Grandma, I’m sorry I was so bad. I’ll be good if you let me come back, I promise.” There were tears building up behind my eyes, clogging my throat.

“Clam down Penny, you’re making a scene.”
I took some deep breaths and tried to force the tears back down. Deep breaths. That was my therapist’s cure for everything. It wasn’t working.

“Penny, look at me.”

I stared at my chili fries. Tears dripped into the cheese.

“Here, wipe your face and look at me.” She handed me a tissue.

I swiped at my eyes and took more breaths and finally the choking feeling started to go away. “I don’t get any say?”

“Knock it off with that tone right now. You know I’ve done everything I can to take care of you, even when your own mother hasn’t so don’t get sassy with me. You are going to stay with your Aunt for a while and she is going to help me with getting to my treatments and surgery and that’s just how it has to be right now.”

“Surgery?” I asked.

“They have to take the lump out.”

“But…”

“No more Penny. I’m tired.”

I ate the rest of my fries. I thought angry words and questions at her, but kept my mouth shut.

The car ride back to the center was thick with unsaid words floating between us. I felt desperate, like my chance was slipping away and if I didn’t say the right thing I was going to lose my chance. I didn’t know what to say though. I had so many different feelings happening all at once and I didn’t know how to tell her any of what I was thinking. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her and how much I had missed her and how much I just wanted to come home, but every time I started to open my mouth I got that choking feeling like tears were flooding my throat and I couldn’t talk.
When we pulled into the parking lot she sighed and sighed like she was going to start talking again, but as soon as the car was in park I was out of it, running and running. I ran past the walkway that led to the front doors and down around the corner, through more parking lot and out to the sidewalk on the street. My grandma called and called from behind me but I kept going, running off all of the bad feelings until they were just an ache in my chest where my lungs burned, and then I ran some more, until my whole body hurt and I couldn’t breathe.

I met my aunt on a rainy Tuesday morning. She opened the door of a big pink stucco house. She wore a gold cross on a chain around her neck and an ugly flowered dress with thick ugly shoes and my same chestnut colored hair. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to scream and kick and throw a fit, but my therapist had told me to do the breathing instead and I tried but I felt like I couldn’t get enough air.

“Well,” my aunt said.

I didn’t respond. I just stood there giving her the same disgusted look she was giving me.

“Well,” she said again.

“Would you like me to give you two some time to get acquainted?” Stephanie asked.

“No,” I said, at the same time my aunt said yes.

“What would you like to happen right now Penelope?” Stephanie asked me.

“I’d like to go to my grandma’s.”

“That’s not an option. Maybe you can go visit this weekend though.” I could feel her willing me to just shut up and act right. She’d told me on the car ride over that this was my best chance, that my aunt was stable, she had money, all those things she had already told me. She had thrown in there a lecture about how I needed to be grateful, about how generous it was for my aunt to offer to take me and how I needed to stop acting like a spoiled brat. I wanted to scream at
her that none of this was my choice. I didn’t ask to be here, I didn’t ask to be born, to have a fuck up mom and a sick grandma. I kept my mouth shut though. I was learning to keep it in.

“Come inside,” my aunt finally said, and we followed her from the cold, rainy doorstep into the nicest house I had ever been in.

“Stop breathing like that,” Stephanie whispered angrily at me as we followed Aunt Jenna through the entry way.

Tile streaked with peach and gold gave way to a cream colored carpet that ran all over the house, even on the stairs. Everything was clean, not a speck of dirt or a stain from a spilled drink anywhere. There were flowers in the living room, on a real wood table that sat in the corner of two sofas that made an L-shape. The sofas were pink and white striped with flower prints, like something out of a catalogue.

“Have a seat,” Aunt Jenna said, motioning towards the sofas. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thank you,” Stephanie said. I shook my head.

“So, it’s my understanding that you two have never actually met,” Stephanie said, like she was reading lines from a script.

“Not properly,” my aunt said, looking at my dirty sneakers on her pristine carpet. “I cared for you some when you were a baby. You probably don’t remember though.”

I shook my head again.

We sat there for a few minutes.

“Well, um, do you want to show her to her room? She can unpack while we go over some things.” Stephanie looked as uncomfortable as I felt.

“Yes, of course.”
I followed her up the stairs and down a hallway lined with pictures of a family. I picked out a younger version of my aunt Jenna in a wedding dress. Then came baby pictures. A boy and then a girl. As we went further down the hall, the children, the children, got older. They posed in school pictures and family pictures all the way down the hall. Aunt Jenna pointed out a bathroom and her own bedroom, a bedroom for each of the children and finally, at the end, we stopped.

“This was an office. Then we turned it into a guest room... It’s where you will stay.” She opened the door. The room was small but it held a bed with a flowered comforter. The woman had a thing for flowers. There was a cross on the wall over the bed, a white dresser and a matching desk.

“There’s a closet.” She pointed to a door. “And you have your own bathroom.” She pointed toward another door next to the closet. I stood between the bed and a wall, unsure what to do.

“Why don’t you go get your things out of the car?” Stephanie said.

I carried in the trash bag filled with my clothing. I wondered if I would be able to get my things from my grandma’s house. I sat the bag down and peeked into the bathroom. Flowers on the towels, shower stall, toilet, Kleenex in a covered box, wallpaper with more flowers.

I unpacked my clothing, halfway filling three of the five drawers. I had a notebook, a ratty copy of Stephen King’s *Pet Cemetery* that was missing the cover, and *Dragon Tears* by Dean Koontz that had a green and blue cover and a teardrop with a dragon on it. I loved to run my hand over it, smooth and shiny, the letters raised in soft lumps. Grandma had mailed it to me a few weeks back and it had been so long since I had a new book that I almost cried.

I checked out the desk, there was a paper tablet and a bible in one drawer and pens in another, a wooden chair. I put the books in a stack on top of the desk, then I thought about how one of the counselors at the children’s center had fussed about my reading “inappropriate
material” and Stephanie had told me to keep my books stashed away if I didn’t want to have to get rid of them, so I moved them to the dresser drawer, under my socks and underwear.

The house was quiet and smelled like soap and potpourri. I didn’t have to tiptoe since the carpet was super thick and absorbed all the sound of my feet on the floor. I made my way back down the hallway and stopped to sit on the stairs. I heard Stephanie’s voice.

“She’s not going to be easy. But I think this will be a good place for her once she adjusts.”

“Yes. I’ve always felt so bad about her circumstances…”

I couldn’t hear after that. I didn’t really care either. I stood up and stomped down the rest of the stairs, trying to make noise to let them know I was coming.

“And here she is now,” Stephanie said sweetly, as if she’d been bragging about what a good kid I was.

“Can I look around the house?” I asked.

“For what?” Aunt Jenna asked.

“I just want to know where things are.”

“Why don’t I show you?” She stood up and I felt like I was being tested somehow. I didn’t like it. Stephanie stood too.

Aunt Jenna showed me the kitchen, the formal dining room, the casual dining room, (who needs two dining rooms?) the den and the yard. There was a swimming pool in the back yard, and a grapefruit tree. I didn’t like grapefruit, but I’d never had fruit right off a tree.

I walked around in the back yard for a while, looking at the different flowers and plants. It was a nice yard. Stephanie came out after a few minutes. She pressed a card with her phone number into my hand and gave me a hug like she didn’t really want to touch me.

“Be good Penelope,” she said.
“I’ll try,” I said.

“Call me if you need me.”

“I will. When will I see you again?”

“I’ll come back next week and check in on you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” She squeezed my hand, this time touching me like she meant it. Then she was gone and my aunt was staring at me across the table in the casual dining room.

She didn’t seem to know what to say. I waited.

“What do you think of your room?” she asked.

“It’s good.” I wasn’t sure what to say. My hands were sweaty and my stomach felt all nervous.

“Adam and Ava will be home from school at three. We’ll take you and get you registered tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said.

“It’s not going to be like Mom’s house here,” she said and it took me a minute to understand that she was referring to Grandma. “There are rules. You can’t just run wild and do whatever you want.”

I didn’t say anything.

“And I expect you to earn your keep here. This isn’t a free ride. You’re going to have to work for it.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You’ll be in charge of keeping the house clean. And your grades. I expect you will get B’s or better.”

“But…” I stopped myself.
“If you can’t do what is required to stay here you will go to a group home.”

I’d heard rumors of the group homes. Some were okay, some were awful. I nodded.

“When can I see Grandma?” I asked.

She gave me a weird half smile. “She goes for her surgery next week. We’ll see how she does. Maybe you can come to the hospital to see her then.”

“Thanks.” We were both quiet again for a few minutes. I didn’t know what to say.

“I’m not that bad,” she said finally. “I’m sorry I didn’t step in sooner. To help. Your mom, my mom… they were… well, I had to get away from them. I didn’t expect it to go on so long. If I had known about Elaine I would have set things straight sooner. Such a shame.”

Her words were kind, but the way she said them made my head feel like there was too much pressure in it.

“Can I be excused?” I asked finally.

“Of course. I’m sure you want to get settled in. There’s shampoo and soap and everything in your bathroom. You should clean yourself up.” She looked at me with that slight look of disgust again and I noticed for the first time that my jeans were stained and my shirt had soda spilled on it.
I pry at the loose corner of the crumbling linoleum floor with the toe of my sneaker. A piece chips off and I glance around to see if anyone notices. The room is crammed with haggard looking people. Cigarette smoke fills the empty spaces and, combined with the yellow light, makes everything appeared dirty, like a picture from the 70’s.

“I’m Dan and I’m an addict.” A man with a hairy face and tattoos covering his arms begins to preach. I’ve heard him before. Dan the man. The NA guru. I don’t mind the meetings so much, but there are some people who, when they share, make me want to claw out my eyeballs. Dan the man is one of them. He’s a good person, I’m sure. He always has a smile and a hug, he always gives me a smoke if I’m out, but the minute that guy opens his mouth in a meeting I start feeling like I’m cornered and I need to escape.

“Page ninety-seven of the basic text says…” blah, blah, blah. It’s like he’s trying to hammer in nails with a screwdriver, fumbling and missing and annoying everyone around him in the process.

“… and then holy shitballs…” Holy shitballs? God, who uses words like that? I can’t handle it. I stand up and edge my way around the outside of the circle of chairs. I try to squeeze between people sitting on cold metal folding chairs and the wall. There’s barely enough room, people scoot out of my way and I knock down a poster. So much for slipping away quietly.

“Sorry” I mutter, not really sorry. I can’t breathe.

The air outside is cool and damp. I take a huge breath and I feel myself relax a notch. The church where the NA meeting is held is right downtown. Cars rattle past, women with impossible
heels and short skirts walk arm in arm down the street smoking cigarettes. I wonder who decided this was a good place for a church. There’s a payphone on the corner and I make my way to it.

“Hello?” Randy picks up on the second ring.

“Hey.”

“Lainey? Hey baby, how’s it going?”

“Shitty.”

“What’s up?”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“I think I’m gonna take off,” I tell him.

“You can’t take off. Come on babe. I know it’s hard, but we can do this. Yesterday you told me you liked being clean, you felt better, remember?”

“I’m not saying I’m gonna go get loaded,” I snap.

“Well what then?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s only two more months Lainey. Do it for me. Do it for Penelope. We need you.”

He sounds plastic. Like someone from a commercial. I hang up without saying goodbye.

“Elaine! What do you think you’re doing?” Susan yells, stomping towards me in her combat boots, her stomach jiggling over her jeans with each step. Susan is one of the counselors. She’s in her mid-thirties, short, spiky blonde hair, the name “Mona” tattooed on her upper arm inside of a heart.

“I just needed to get some air,” I try to brush past her but she catches my arm.
“Don’t you get an attitude with me. You know the rules. You know you can’t be using the phone out here.” The lines in her leathery face move as she talks and I can’t help but stare at them. She looks like a puppet when she speaks, like her chin and her cheeks operate separately.

“I was just calling to check on my baby,” I tell her, pulling away.

“If you were so concerned about your baby your ass would be sitting in that meeting trying to change some things, not out here on the corner calling the dope man. Get the fuck back in there.”

“You can’t talk to me like that bitch,” I step closer to her.

“I’ll talk to you however the fuck I want sweetheart. And guess what else? You will either shut the fuck up, and do what I say, or you can get your ass out.” Her face is right up next to mine now and I’m sure I’m going to hit her, but then, all of a sudden things change.

I get this thought in my head, just out of nowhere... I should kiss her. I wonder how she would react if I just tipped my face up and pressed our lips together. I stare into her eyes and I’m almost positive that she’s thinking the same thing. The way she’s looking at me isn’t harsh anymore, it’s soft and sweet and maybe even romantic, like she’s flirting. I take a step back. Susan blinks a few times, trying to hide a little smile. I turn and run back towards the meeting.

The rehab is a two story house up six blocks of hill from the church. The house is ugly. Gravel instead of grass and an empty pool in the back. A wooden fence, painted white, crumbling around the perimeter. A concrete walkway leads to concrete stairs, a concrete patio and a faded yellow door. From the outside it looks just like any other house in the area. Well used.

Inside is comfortable enough. Light blue industrial linoleum runs throughout, a wooden framed sofa with bright red fake leather cushions was the centerpiece of the living room. There are other chairs and seats in there for when we have group. Six bedrooms that we share, two
women in each, one bathroom for every two rooms, an extra-large kitchen with a board on one wall with all of the chores listed and names by them.

I hate it.

Most of the women are alcoholics. I have nothing in common with them. They don’t know what it’s like, the rush of stealing, or copping, the high, getting sick… All they know about is getting too wasted and blacking out and sleeping with strangers because I guess that’s what happens when you drink too much at a bar, you go home with people you don’t know. I don’t know much about that life either I guess. Alcohol isn’t my problem. My mom is my problem.

I miss Randy, and Jules and Marsha and Beetle. It isn’t fair. I know things needed to change. The drugs were getting out of hand, and with a kid… I need to do something different with myself. But this is too much. All because my mom called CPS. They were going to send me to prison because of all the coke they’d found, but the judge said I could have a chance here. I wish I’d taken the sentence and just been done with it. At least in prison I could still get high. Here they’re all up in my shit all the time.

It’s not even about getting high though. I know I need to stop. But damn, not even a beer? That’s crazy. How do they expect people to live that way? I don’t have any plans to stay clean after all of this. I mean, I’m not going to let it get as bad as it was, I just want to get my kid back from my mom so that she’ll leave me the hell alone.

I go straight to my room when we get back from the meeting. We’re allowed an hour of free time before lights out but I just want to go to sleep. Being clean takes a lot of energy. As soon as my head hits the pillow I’m out.

And just as fast I’m wide-awake again. The clock reads 2:37. I’m starving. I make my way to the kitchen, soft and quiet. We aren’t supposed to eat outside of mealtimes.
The moonlight pours into the house in light blue waves that make everything dreamy and serene. I can hear some of the women snoring and someone mumbles in her sleep. The light from the fridge cuts through the room. I grab a piece of cheese.

I turn and Susan is standing there. She stares at me with those same eyes. Longing, that’s what I’d seen earlier.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“What am I doing?” Susan says quietly, frowning. “What are you doing?”

“I… I was just hungry. I just wanted something to eat.”

“Oh really?” Her voice is thick and she smells like alcohol.

“Yeah. Really. What are you drinking?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she takes a step back.

“Don’t play games with me,” I say. “I can smell it on you.”

She stares at me for a minute. “Come in here,” she says, turning towards the staff room.

I follow her. The TV is on, the video she’d been watching is paused on a half-naked woman, a line flickered through the screen. Suddenly I wish I hadn’t asked, wish I’d stayed in my bed.

“Here,” she says, passing me a bottle of wine.

“I… Never mind.” I try to back out of the room but she’s faster than me. She stands between me and the door, bottle in her hand.

“You want it,” she says, shoving the bottle towards me again. I can smell the rich tang of red wine and my mouth waters. She’s right. I think about Randy, about my mom and Penelope. I sit on down on a scratchy sofa and look around the room. It’s cramped and cluttered, books piled on a table, stacks of files, dust layered on top of everything. A small window is propped open with a fan next to it buzzing away.
Susan sits on the sofa next to me, close. “You want a cup?” she asks, laughing a little.

I look back at the bottle of wine in my hand. The bottle is smooth, green with a little drop of red sitting on the lip. I bring it to my lips and pause, sniffing. It smells deep and rich. I touch my tongue to the little drop on the edge and the flavor of sour grapes dances through my mouth.

I stop myself. I shouldn’t be doing this. I think about Randy again. It’s his fault I’m here. I didn’t even know he’d left that coke in the freezer. I hadn’t turned him in though. Of course I hadn’t. The cops had known, but I’d kept my mouth shut. And this is what I get, stuck in some lousy rehab while he gets to stay with his mom in his nice comfortable bed and keep on living his life like nothings changed. I bet he’s still using too. He says he’s clean. He’s probably out partying right now.

I bring the bottle to my lips.

Oh man. Wine. It’s like falling in love, the way it slips off my tongue and down my throat, fruity warmth spreading through my belly. After a month away, I’m finally home. My body relaxes and with each sip I can feel myself becoming less uptight, less stuffy and mean.

Susan watches with a little smile as I drink, a nurse making sure I take my medicine.

“Good stuff, huh?” she finally says, putting her arm around me.

“What are you watching?” I ask, motioning towards the tits that were displayed across the screen.

“It’s called Pretty Baby. It’s got Susan Sarandon,” she says, pressing play. She pulls me closer. I’m uncomfortable; I’m getting into something I’m in the market for here.

“I think I should go back to bed,” I say, trying to move away, but she pulls me closer and before I know what’s happening she’s kissing me. And I’m kissing her back. And I like it.

I know, in the back of my mind, that this is no good. There’s no way this is going to end well. But for the moment, I just enjoy it. I’ve never kissed a girl before. It’s different.
She pulls back and I feel my face going red.

“Go on to bed then,” she says, laughing.

I know the thing with Susan is bad. I’m not trying to cheat on Randy or anything like that, but I know he’s doing whatever he wants anyway, it’s not like he’s being faithful to me. I know him better than that. He was fucking other chicks while I was right there in the same house with him, there’s no way he’s not doing it while I’m gone. I’m not that naïve.

I’m kind of over it with Randy anyway, though. Something changed after he let me take the rap for his dope. Of course I didn’t expect him to step up and admit to it after I was arrested or anything, but something about the whole situation pissed me off and made me lose respect for him. The fact that every time I talk to him he just tells me the same thing, do it for him, do it for the baby… what’s he doing for us though?

I decide to let things play out with Susan. She brings me pot and we drink wine in the staff room when everyone’s asleep and we fool around a bit and I’m surprised how much I’m starting to like her.

“We need to get me out of here,” I tell her after a couple weeks. We’re in the staff room. “We’ll both end up in trouble if someone catches us.”

“I know,” she says. She’s sprawled across the couch, I’m pacing. “Sit down, you’re making me nervous.”

“So what are we gonna do?” I ask.

“Well… maybe we could let you complete treatment early?” She seems apprehensive.

“I’d love that. What’s the problem?”

“I don’t know,” she says, not making eye contact.

“Suzy?” I move in front of her and she looks up.
“I guess I’m afraid that if I let you go I’ll never see you again,” she says.

I think for a minute. I hadn’t considered what it would be like to leave. I’d been so focused on getting out of here that I hadn’t thought about where I was going to go or what I was going to do.

“I don’t have anywhere to go anyway,” I tell her. I can’t move into Randy’s mom’s house and I sure as hell can’t stay at my mom’s.

We’re both quiet for a few minutes, thinking.

“You could stay with me,” she finally says.
Chapter 11
What Passes for Normal
Penelope 1997

Adam was fourteen and Ava was eleven. I could tell right from the start that Ava didn’t like me, the way she looked at me like I was gross. Adam eyed me with interest though and my first impression was that he could be cool. Maybe.

We sat around the smaller table in the “informal” dining room as Aunt Jenna had pointed out to me on my “tour.” I was already starting to hate her. She walked back and forth from the table to the kitchen, bringing food to the table.

“You bedtime is 8 p.m.” She was saying as I was checking out her blond haired, fair skinned kids.

“You will get up at 5 in the morning. You will do your chores before school and you will do your homework first thing when you get home.” She placed a glass dish on the table next to the salad. I reached for the salad and she stopped and slapped my hand like I was a two year old. Ava giggled as my face burned embarrassment.

“We don’t eat until Darren gets home,” she snapped.

I looked down at the floor. “Sorry,” I mumbled.

She turned and went back to the kitchen saying more things about rules and expected behavior. Adam looked at me with an apology all over his face and I looked back down at the floor. My dirty sneakers didn’t look right on the clean carpet.

At 5:30 exactly the door from the garage opened and a square man with a large belly and three strands of hair on his head stepped into the dining room. He barely looked like the man in the pictures, however his face had a kindness to it that I hadn’t expected.
“You must be Penelope,” his voice sounded too high pitched for his body and it made me want to laugh. He sounded like one of the adults on Sesame Street or some other kid’s educational show. I couldn’t help but smile. “I’m Uncle Darren,” he said, it like it was a sort of secret between the two of us.

“Hey guys,” he said to the rest of his family. Ava rolled her eyes, but Adam lit up.

“Hey Dad,” he said, sitting up straighter. “How was work?”

“Same old, same old,” Darren said in a happy sort of way. “How was school?”

“Pretty good,” Adam said. “I got a 93 on my geometry test and a 95 on my science project.”

“That’s great. What about you Ava?”

“Fine,” she said.

“Just fine?” Darren asked her as he undid his tie and hung his coat in a closet near the garage door.

She didn’t respond. Darren took a seat at the table and Jenna came and sat next to him. She took his hand and they all bowed their heads. I realized too late that they were going to pray. I had only seen a couple of friends families pray over dinner before. I bowed my head at the same time everyone else was lifting theirs and Ava made a snotty sound towards me.

“So… I guess this is a big adjustment for you,” Darren said, looking at me.

I nodded.

“How was your first day here?” he asked.

“Um. Okay,” I wasn’t quite sure yet.

“If you need anything you just let us know, right?”

“Sure,” I said.
“And tomorrow Adam and Ava will show you around school, introduce you to some friends, right guys?” Adam nodded but Ava just glared at me. Jenna had been quiet since he had come in the door. I felt like her voice had been the background noise of the entire day and now, without it, the house seemed a little bit more comfortable.

After dinner everyone moved to the den to watch TV. I went to my room and read my book til I fell asleep.

Calvary Christian Preparatory School was nicer than what I was used to. Cleaner. The kids wore uniforms. Aunt Jenna had pulled one out of Ava’s closet for me to wear for the day. I’d never been to a school with uniforms. Ava was smaller than me, so the top was tight and the skirt was too short, but I liked the way I felt dressed up like that. Like I was part of something.

Ava took off as soon as we got out of the car, which was fine. Adam walked with me to the office. He tried to make small talk along the way, but I couldn’t keep up with his words. My stomach was all clenched up and my hands were slick with sweat and there was too much to take in.

The school was small, even though it was kindergarten through 12th grade. I’d never been to an all grades school. Adam pointed out things to me on our way to the office, the PE field to the left, the lower grades building, the upper grades buildings. I tried to make things stick in my memory but I knew it was useless.

The office was pretty, but sort of strange. There was a crucifix against the back wall and lots of plants and a stained glass window and it felt more like a church than a school office. The office lady smiled at me with an “oh, this is the poor girl” kind of look and I wondered what my aunt had told them about me.
“Here’s your schedule,” she said, “Adam, can you show her to her classes or should I have someone come up from Mr. Gorzwick’s class?”

“I can show her,” he said.

“Thank you,” she turned back to some papers she was filing.

After that it was pretty much like a normal school, but smaller and there was lots of praying and bible reading. I only had one teacher for math and science and another for English and History instead of different teachers for all of the classes. And there were only two periods for PE for everyone in the upper grades. I was in the same period with Adam but he was with his friends so I didn’t say hi.

Mostly all of the kids ignored me. I saw Ava at lunch when I was getting my food. She was sitting at a table with four other girls that all looked just as snotty as her. I looked around the cafeteria for a place to sit and she made eye contact with me and whispered something to the other girls. They all turned toward me and laughed with mean clown faces and I turned away. So that’s how this was going to be. Whatever.

The first few weeks were uncomfortable. Aunt Jenna was wound tight. I expected her to go postal any minute. Uncle Darren was cool, but he wasn’t around a lot. Ava was a snot. Adam was alright, he tried to be friendly but he was distant and absorbed in things like video games and hanging out with friends.

My mornings started early. I’d never gotten up at 5 in the morning every day. I liked to stay up and read at night, so it was hard at first. But it got easier as the days went by. It felt weird to go to bed so early, but after a couple weeks I was really tired and ready to go to bed by 8 pm.

Aunt Jenna liked the house to be spotless all the time. She freaked out over every little speck of dust or water spot, so mornings were full of cleaning. She put me in charge of laundry,
which wasn’t that big a deal, but she had a different project every day too. The first day was the cupboards. We had to take everything out so that we could donate cans to the church food drive, and we had to clean all the shelves “so we don’t get bugs” she said. Then it was boxes in the garage that we had to sort through and clean out. It seemed like there would come some point where we had everything all caught up and she would run out of projects, but so far that didn’t seem to be happening.

“Is she always like this?” I asked Adam one morning after Aunt Jenna left. She had barked instructions to us about picking all of the grapefruits and washing them and putting them into baskets, then she had left to go do whatever it was that she did.

“Only when she’s not drinking,” Adam said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When she goes back to drinking, she starts collecting things. That’s where all the stuff in the garage comes from. All those boxes? She packs and packs and packs them and stacks them in there.” There did seem to be a lot of boxes in there. I thought it was just stuff families had in garages though.

“Why does she do that?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Because she’s crazy,” he said, and for some reason I felt this huge relief when he said that, like all that time I had been holding my breath, thinking there was something wrong with me that I couldn’t fit in in this nice, normal family. Adam got really quiet after that, so I left him alone.

Ava always got the easy chores, wiping the mirrors or sweeping the patio. She never really talked to me, just made faces or mean comments. That morning she was cleaning the television. We picked grapefruit, first by hand, then with a picker to reach the ones up high. After
three big baskets full my arms were achy and sore and I was ready for a break. It wasn’t even light out yet and I was already sweaty and worn out. Plus I needed to go switch the laundry.

“Hey, can we take a break for a few minutes?” I asked Adam.

“Fine,” he said.

I went inside and switched the laundry, then I ran to my room to change to a lighter shirt. When I passed Ava’s room she was lying in bed, flipping through a magazine. I decided to mind my own business.

I got back to the yard and discovered that Adam was still working away.

“Sorry,” I told him.

“For what?” he asked.

“For leaving you here by yourself.”

“It’s cool,” he said.

“How come ava doesn’t have to do anything?” I asked after a minute.

“Because she’s their favorite,” he said.

Then we heard the screaming.

“What the…?” We both ran into the house.

Ava was screaming, and I could hear Aunt Jenna trying to calm her down. We got to the top of the stairs and I heard Ava saying “It was her! I know it was her!” I got a sick feeling in my stomach and stopped, wanting to hear more before I walked into a trap, but Adam charged forward and brought all the attention out to us in the hallway.

“What’s going on?” he shouted over all the commotion. Ava looked up at us and then charged at me, Aunt Jenna caught her and pulled her back.

“I know you took it!” she yelled at me.

“ Took what? What are you talking about?” They were all staring at me.
“My necklace! The necklace Daddy gave me for my birthday!” She collapsed into her mother’s arms, wailing like a two year old.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, keeping myself under control. *Just breathe,* I kept telling myself.

“Go check her room mom,” Ava sobbed.

I stood there, not sure what to do, while Aunt Jenna marched towards my room. I knew I didn’t have any stupid necklace, but I knew that Ava was up to something here and she’d probably put the necklace in my room just to get me into trouble. I glanced back at Ava as I followed Aunt Jenna down the hall. Ava was grinning. Of course she was. Bitch. Adam stood there with a strange look on his face, then he went into his own room and shut the door.

Aunt Jenna threw open the door to my room and everything looked just how I had left it.

“Where is it?” she asked.

“I don’t have any stupid necklace,” I said.

“I swear to God, if you lie to me again you’re going to regret it.” She stood there with her hands on her hips, staring at me like she wanted to kill me.

“I’m not a thief. I didn’t take her necklace. She is trying to get me into trouble.”

“Just shut your lying little mouth right now,” she said with her teeth clenched. She was scary like this.

She started with my desk drawers, pulling them out, going through all of my stuff, which wasn’t much. She moved to the dresser.

“What’s this?” she screeched and I was sure she had found the necklace, but when she turned it was my books in her hands.

“It’s just some books. Grandma gave me one and the lady from the children’s center gave me the other,” I said.
“Filth!” she yelled. “Why would you bring this kind of trash into my house?”

“It’s just… some books. I don’t understand,” I said.

“This is not just some books. This is the work of Satan,” she screeched.

I didn’t know what to say.

“You will not bring this devil worship into my home ever again. Do you understand me?”

I didn’t understand. I didn’t understand at all. But I nodded so that she would leave me alone.

“I found it mom!” she said, holding up a necklace. “I must have left it in the bathroom.”

She smiled at me and then darted off down the hallway. I felt anger boiling up and I bit down on my lip, hard.

Aunt Jenna stood there for a minute staring at me with hatred in her eyes.

“Any books, that you want to read,” She spit the words out like bullets, “have to be cleared by me first. Do you understand me?”

I nodded slowly, not trusting myself to speak.

She left the room with my books and I laid on my bed, trying with everything I had to not cry.

I heard movement and looked over. Adam stood in the doorway.

“Sorry,” he said.

I shrugged a bit and he came into the room. He sat on the corner of my bed.

“Ava’s a brat,” he said.

I shrugged again.

“I’ll get them back for you,” he said, his eyes meeting mine. “Don’t worry. I’ll get them.”

He smiled and patted my back a couple times and then left.

This family was so weird.
I went to the school nurse when I started my period. I didn’t know what else to do. I knew it was bound to happen eventually, and honestly I had been sort of obsessing over it, noticing every little change in my body, collecting evidence that at any moment I would stop being a child and enter the world of women. I’d heard horror stories of girls who thought they were dying, who screamed and cried and everyone knew what was happening except them. How embarrassing.

And here’s what a lot of people don’t get. When you’re in Juvie, the Children’s Center, when you’re a foster kid, nothing’s really off limits. I sat in class next to girls who don’t know anything about their bodies because their parents didn’t tell them. But when you don’t have any parents, it’s like the world opens up and all those things parents protect their kids from are right there for our taking, along with all of the information they hold onto and dole out a little bit at a time in some effort to protect us. Like knowing about our bodies is something we need to be protected from.

My grandma told me about my period a couple years ago. It was a quick, awkward talk that left us both feeling weird. I went to the school library and didn’t find much, so I went to the city library and scored big. The girls in Juvie had told me all about sex and birth control. I even knew where to go to get on the pill or get free condoms. But I didn’t know where I could get a maxi-pad without having to steal them. Plus it was during school.

“Is this your first time?” The school nurse was small and mousey. She had short hair and big ears and glasses. I nodded
“Has your mom talked with you about it?” she asked.

“My moms not around. I live with my aunt.” I felt that tickle behind my eyes, like I might cry. Lame. I took deep breaths to fight it off.

“Oh! You’re Jenna’s niece!” She lit up with recognition.

“Yep,” I said.

“Do you want me to call her?”

“No.”

“Well, okay then.” She handed me some pads to put in my backpack and sent me on my way. I watched which cupboard she kept them in, just in case.

Jenna’s reaction wasn’t what I expected. I don’t know what I’s expected. In the car on the ride home I asked her if I could talk to her privately when we got home.

“There are no secrets in this family Penelope. Anything you want to say to me you can say in front of every one, “ she talked at me from the rearview mirror.

“Never mind,” I said, watching the houses pass by through the car window.

“If you have something to talk about then let’s hear it.” I glanced at Adam and then at Ava. Adam was avoiding looking at me; Ava was glaring like she was ready to fight.

“I started my period,” I blurted out.

She slammed on the brakes, causing a car behind us to slam on their brakes. She was bright red when she pulled the car to the side of the road. She got out of the drivers seat, slammed the door, stormed over to my door and yanked it open.

“Out,” she said, veins bulging in her forehead. She slammed my door too, after I climbed out. She yanked me by the arm until we were a few feet away from the car, close to some bushes, and she started screaming at me. “You will not talk that way in front of my children!” She went
on and on. I noticed a piece of paper lying on the ground, near the bushes. It was old and crumpled and muddy, but it was clearly a letter. I could make out the light blue lines and pencil handwriting. I imagined what it might be. A love letter that someone had discarded after a breakup. A letter between friends, something that had fallen out of a backpack or a purse and been forgotten. Maybe a letter from a girl to her mother. Jenna kept screaming until she was all worn out.

“You can walk home,” she told me and I had to work to keep from smiling. It was the first time since coming to live with Aunt Jenna that I was alone, unsupervised.

I don’t know for sure when the thing with Adam and me started. Or even which one of us started it. I know he kissed me first, but it started way before that. Maybe working in the yard when we kept bumping into each other, or maybe when he snuck in my room to return my books and I gave him an extra long hug. Maybe when Jenna went out to help her church group and left Adam in charge and he put on that awful movie and by the end he was holding my hand.

I kept having all these thoughts about him though, before anything even started. I knew it wasn’t right. I mean, I guess it wasn’t right. He was my cousin and that was supposed to be gross and all, but it’s not like we were babies together or anything, we just barely met each other and I didn’t really get why he was any different than any other boy. Except, of course, in all the ways he was different than other boys, none of which made him gross. He was nice to me. He was cute too, and smart.
So I kept thinking about what it would be like for him to kiss me, I kept imagining it, pressing my thumb and finger together and putting them to my lips to get an idea of what it would feel like. And when it finally actually happened, it was nothing like I imagined.

He’d started coming into my room at night, when everyone else was asleep. The first time was when he got my books back out of the trash can, but then he kept coming. Not every night, just some nights. And it wasn’t anything creepy, we just hung out and talked and it was nice to actually finally have someone to talk to who didn’t act like there was something wrong with me. The kids at school treated me like I had a disease. So it was cool when he came and sat on my bed and shared his cookies or candy with me. And it was even better after that first time he kissed me.

“Do you think this is wrong?” he’d asked me that night, just after I had discovered that the difference between his soft, sure lips and the back of my hand was like the difference between watching a roller coaster ride and being on a roller coaster ride. My stomach did this thing it had never done before where it felt all weird and excited and good.

“No,” I’d answered, and he leaned down and kissed me again, making my whole body tingle, like I was finally coming alive.

I’d had a crush on a boy back in sixth grade. He was a little bit chubby with dark skin that looked beautiful against the white t-shirts he wore. Doug. He was new that year and didn’t fit in with the popular kids either. I’d watched him sit by himself at lunch and ride his bike around the neighborhood alone. He lived a few houses down from my grandma and I’d spent a month obsessing on how to approach him when finally one day I just went up to him at the lunch table where he was sitting by himself, and I asked if I could sit by him. He said sure and we sort of started to hang out at school sometimes. I started coming to school early to hang out with him.
before school, but I didn’t tell him that. I just happened to be there early. So one day I was walking around the school pretending not to look for him and I saw him with a couple other boys, boys who teased me. I walked past them, heading toward the cafeteria.

“Anyone have a Penny?” one of them had said and I heard laughter. I looked over and saw Doug laughing along and I felt a little crack in my heart.

“I think she’s got a crush on you,” Evan said to Doug. Even was the most popular boy in the school and he was cute, but he was such a jerk that it was hard to see why everyone liked him.

“Gross,” Doug said. “She smells like a dog.” They all laughed again and I continued walking, pretending not to hear them. Doug had been killed in a car accident a few months later and I’d cried and cried.

I couldn’t focus on anything. At school, all I thought about was Adam. At home I tried everything I could to get a minute or two alone with him. Jenna didn’t give any of us much alone time, but after Uncle Darren got home at night she eased up a bit. Everything changed when Uncle Darren came home. It was like everyone was holding their breath until he walked through the door and then all of a sudden we could all relax. Aunt Jenna especially.

Grandma’s surgery was scheduled for a Wednesday. I’d been with Aunt Jenna for about a month and she wasn’t sure what to do with me. She was supposed to go stay with grandma for a few days and help her, but she didn’t trust me enough to leave me there. I overheard her talking with Uncle Darren one night when they thought I was asleep. Aunt Jenna sounded like she was drunk, she was loud and her words were slurring.

“She’s up to something,” I heard her say.

“She’s just a child Jenna. She’s been through a lot, but she’s a good kid,” Uncle Darren was talking all calm and nice.
“She’s just like her mom. She’s got something bad in her.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Jenna.”

“Don’t tell me I’m being ridiculous,” she raised her voice.

“Alright. You’re right. I’m sorry. Let’s talk about this tomorrow,” Uncle Darren said.

“Darren, my mom’s surgery is in two days and I don’t know what to do about this kid.

Maybe we should send her back.”

My fists clenched and I felt like I might scream.

“What reason do we have to send her back?”

“She’s trouble. I can feel it.” There was a loud bang like something had fallen.

“Jenna, come on. Come to bed. She’s going to be fine here with the rest of the kids.

You’re just worried about your mom.”

I’d never actually seen Aunt Jenna drinking. I’d smelled alcohol on her a few times, and I’d heard her stumbling around, talking like she was drunk, but she tried to hide it. No one talked about it.

She did end up leaving me there with Uncle Darren. He would drive us to school and we would walk home. He would come home early to make sure we had dinner and did our homework.

“Some of the women from the church are going to take turns checking in on you,” Jenna said to us the evening before she left. “I’m trusting you all to do what you are supposed to do.”

She was staring at me. I nodded trying not to let on how elated I was at the idea of being home alone with Adam for three days.

“When can I go see Grandma?” I asked.

“Maybe next weekend if she feels up to it,” she was still giving me that look, like she knew I was up to something.
“Can you give her a letter from me?” I asked.

“As long as it’s nothing that’s going to upset her.”

Grandma,

How are you? I miss you a lot. I’m really worried about you too. I hope you’re feeling okay.

I’m trying to do good. I haven’t given Aunt Jenna any trouble. I’ve been going to school every day and even doing my homework. The school here is weird. I miss my old school. But my grades are better. They make us pray and read the bible a lot. I know you like that.

Adam is cool. He’s helped me a lot. Ava doesn’t like me, but she’s a brat and I don’t like her much either. I’ve done good with not getting into fights with her and just ignoring her when she is being mean though. You’d be proud.

Really I feel so weird being here though. I feel like I haven’t seen you in so long. I know you have enough to worry about and I don’t want to make things worse for you so I’m trying really hard to be good and to stay out of trouble.

Have you heard anything about my mom? Has she sent any letters? Have you talked to her at all?

I love you grandma. I hope you feel better soon.

Love,

Penny

I drew hearts and flowers on the paper and folded it up into a heart shape. I gave it to Aunt Jenna as she was loading up the car with her bags. She was taking an awful lot of for three nights, but she was strange like that.
“You’d better not cause any problems while I’m gone,” she said, giving me a deep look.

“I won’t.”

“And you stay away from Adam,” she said. My heart jumped. Did she know? I stared right into her eyes.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I see the way you look at him,” she said quietly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Was she being just being paranoid or did she actually know something? My heart was pounding

“Well good. Let’s keep it that way then.” She turned back to her bags and stuffed my letter into one.

She left the next day after dropping us off at school. The school day seemed to drag on forever. I watched the clock all day and the hands slowly inched towards 3pm when the bell would ring dismissing us from school. Mrs. Monserate called on me three times in English, my last class of the day, and I didn’t know where we were at.

Adam was waiting for me near the corner after school.

“Where’s Ava?” I asked.

“She’s already gone,” he said.

After a few blocks when no one was around he took my hand and my stomach started feeling all nervous and tingly and good.

There was a park halfway between the school and home and Adam pulled me away from the street and towards a bench that was back a ways, shaded by trees. No one was around. We set our backpacks down and climbed on top of the table sitting side by side with our feet on the bench, knees touching.
“I’ve never felt like this about anyone,” he told me.

“Me either,” I said.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want you to get into trouble. My mom would flip if she knew.”

“So we don’t tell her,” I said.

He hopped down from the bench and stood in front of me. Sitting on the table I was almost taller than he was. He put his hands on my legs, pushed them apart and brought his face next to mine, his hands on my waist. He leaned in and kissed me, gentle at first but then deeper, his tongue pressing into my mouth, his body pressing into mine. His hands crept up to my breasts and a strange little moan escaped from my throat. He pressed into me more rubbing himself against my crotch. And for no reason at all, I got scared.

“Wait,” I said, gasping for breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said pulling away.

“No. Don’t be sorry,” I giggled a little and then I felt dumb. I didn’t know what to say. I’d heard all about sex from kids at school, the girls at Juvie, but I didn’t want to do it yet. “I’ve never done any of this before,” I told him. “I’ve never even kissed anyone else.” My face was burning from a combination of embarrassment and excitement.

“Really?” he asked, seeming kind of proud.

“Really,” I said.

“Well, I haven’t done much either,” he said sitting next to me again.

“So let’s just not rush it, okay?”

“Sure,” he said, his hand squeezed the inside of my thigh and I almost took it back. Stay in this scene just a little longer. Heightening the awkwardness.
“Where were you?” Ava demanded as soon as we opened the front door.

“What do you mean?” Adam asked.

“I’ve been home for almost an hour,” she said.

“I forgot a book at school and had to go back,” he told her. She eyed me suspiciously.

“I don’t believe you,” she said.

“Well you don’t have to.”

We pushed past her into the house and went to the table to work on homework, our usual routine.

My mind was all over the place. I wondered about the things we had read in the bible and talked about at school and at church on Sundays. I didn’t believe in God much, but what if this stuff was real? It seemed like an awful lot of grown ups believed in it. Was I a sinner? Were Adam and I going to go to hell? It didn’t feel bad or wrong. I couldn’t concentrate on my homework.

“I’m going to go lay down,” I said. He looked at me, concerned. “My head hurts.” Ava rolled her eyes at me. I went to my room and stretched out on my bed.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew Ava was standing over me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“It’s dinner time. My dad sent me up here to get you,” she said.

“Okay. I’m coming.” She didn’t move.

“Did he do anything to you?” she asked.

“Who?”

“My brother. Duh. Who else?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said sitting up.
“Whatever,” she turned to leave, but then she stopped. “He’s going to tell you that you’re special and that he’s never felt like that. But he’s lying. You aren’t special. He’s already done it all.” She turned away again, reaching for the door. I grabbed her arm.

“Wait, what are you talking about?” My stomach clenched. She turned to face me again and this time I could see tears in her eyes. “What are you saying Ava?”

“Nothing,” she pulled free and rushed out of the door and was gone.

I was so confused.

I didn’t know whom to trust. Logically, Ava had not earned it. But something about her words and the look on her face had wormed its way into my brain and there was no getting it out of there. She’s been nasty to me and gotten me into trouble for nothing. But still, her words ate away at me. How could she know?

I tried to play it off like everything was fine. I went back to my room after dinner, claiming that I still had a headache and that I might be coming down with something. My door didn’t have a lock though, and I was almost certain he would come to my room. I needed some time to sort out my thoughts. I played with the idea of telling him what Ava had said, but something told me to keep it to myself for now.

*Does it change the way I feel about him?* I asked myself. I didn’t know the answer. If he had just lied to me about how much experience he had that would be one thing. But if he had done the same things with his sister… She had to be making that up. Didn’t she? Why would she make something like that up though? And how would she even know about us? My thoughts kept circling around and around.

Of course he came. I pretended to be asleep when he slipped into the room. I breathed deep and even faked a little snore hoping he would just go away and also hoping he wouldn’t.
He didn’t. I felt his weight on the bed and my heart sped up. I tried to keep my breathing deep and even as he played with my hair, as his fingertips traced my face, my lips. My heart was pounding and I could feel sweat breaking out on my back as his fingertips brushed down my neck and over my breasts. I tried my best to fake sleep as he traced my nipples through my shirt. I couldn’t pull it off. I caught myself letting out a little moan and I masked it as a yawn. I rolled onto my side and opened my eyes just a little. He snuggled down next to me in the bed and slipped his arm under my head.

It felt so good to be touched and held. No one had really touched me or cuddled with me since my mom had been gone. What had I been thinking anyway? Ava wanted me to be miserable. She didn’t care about me. And she was a good actress; I’d already seen that with the necklace incident. My body was telling me this was good, so I let him. I let him touch me. I let him kiss me. His kisses weren’t sloppy or awkward. He was confident about what he was doing, and it felt so good.

I let him lift my shirt and I gasped with pleasure when he brought his mouth to my skin. No, nothing about this felt wrong. And when he reached his fingers inside my underwear it took everything in me to keep quiet. I was no longer just letting him, I was encouraging him.

He made a little grunting, moaning noise and then, abruptly, he stopped. I wanted him to keep going, but he didn’t. We both lay there in my bed catching our breath. I didn’t understand the tears that dripped down from the corners of my eyes. I didn’t understand anything. He got up and left without saying a word and I laid there the rest of the night wondering what was happening to me.
Mom,

I really wish you were here. I’m sorry I haven’t written to you before, I was just so mad. I’m still mad. But I’m scared too. And I don’t know what’s going on or what to do. I just want us to be together again like it used to be, when you would sing to me and we would dance to crazy songs and watch TV and you would make me dinner and listen to how my day was. I know things weren’t great all the time and I know I was bad sometimes, and I’m sorry.

I didn’t think I needed you anymore. I had Grandma and it was all right. But now grandma’s sick and I’m at Aunt Jenna’s house and nothing makes sense here. Everyone has so many secrets and I can’t even read a book without worrying that I’ll get into trouble and I think I’m falling in love with a boy and I don’t know what to do. I feel like everything is all wrong and I don’t know who I’m supposed to be or what I am supposed to believe and no one likes me. The kids at school don’t pick on me here because they don’t even acknowledge I exist and the only person that seems to care about me at all is Adam but I don’t know how much I can even trust him anymore.

I know there’s nothing you can do about it. I just wish I could at least talk to you. I’m sorry.

How are you? How much longer until you get to come home? I miss you Mom.

Love,

Penny
I stumble up the cracked concrete stairs, my mind not telling my feet the right times to move, where to land. I sit for a minute, an attempt to collect myself. The can of diet coke that had brought me out of my studio apartment bounces down the stairs as I pull myself up by the flaking black railing. I drag myself the last few steps, the soda forgotten.

The heroin tugs at my consciousness, dark fingers pulling me into beautiful nothingness. I try to cling to the light, to awareness, just long enough to make it back to my room. I crawl on the cigarette stained stucco walkway, little bumps in the surface calling out for closer inspection. Second door on the right, I tell myself over and over. The sun is a brilliant white on the walls and I cling to it when the dark tide of the drug washes over me. I think I might puke.

I fumble with the doorknob, it slips in my hand, not wanting to cooperate. My fingers are fat little sausages, disconnected from my body. I hit the door a few times and call out to Randy, my voice coming from some far off place in the light. The darkness is folds in on me for a minute, or ten, time is meaningless. It recedes into the light again and I find my way in the door. The room is dark and smells like coffee that has sat in the pot so long that it’s evaporated into the walls leaving its bitter taste in the air.

“Randy,” I call into the room, closing the door, the darkness all around me now. I find my way to the brown carpet, thin from wear. I feel the threads dancing under my skin as I sit in front of the door. The dark curtain is drawn over the foil covered window only allowing narrow
beams of light to cut through the room, little particles swirl in the beams. The darkness of the drug overtakes me again and I melt into the floor.

The ringing of the phone drags me back up, out of the pool of black ecstasy and I manage to stand, using the wall to support me all the way into the room. The bed is out of focus but I see him lying there on top of a blanket scarred by cigarette holes. I see him and it doesn’t make sense to me. The phone rings and my world tilts to the left as I sit on the bed next to him. He doesn’t move. I know. I see the death written on his face in permanent marker. My sweet, sweet Randy boy. I lay my head on his chest and the blackness washes over me again.
“Your mom’s getting out soon,” Stephanie told me.

It was like she’d poured ice water down my shirt. I jumped up, needing to move. We were in an empty office room at school. She’d pulled me out of class and I was happy about the disruption. We were in the middle of Bible study and I hated Bible study. She sat in a chair on one side of a big empty desk and I sat on the other. It felt like the principal’s office, like I was in trouble.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Well… it depends on the judge. The prisons are overcrowded and they’re letting people go early if their behavior has been good.”

“What does that mean for me though?” I didn’t care if she’d been good in prison. Like that was supposed to make up for the shitty things she did when she wasn’t in prison.

“If she does the things we tell her to do then you’ll go back to live with her,” Stephanie stared at me, her eyes were intense and I had to look away. I knew she was trying to read me, and it bothered me. I wanted a chance to figure myself out before she did.

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Why don’t you want to?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to, I just asked, like what if:’

“There’s going to be a lot of things that she has to do to prove that she’s going to change and that she wants to do what’s right for you Penelope. It won’t be something we just jump into.
You guys’ll have visits first. You haven’t even seen her in a long time. You need to get to know each other again.”

“But don’t I get any say in it?” I was starting to get angry and I wasn’t’ even sure why. I wanted to see my mom. I missed her so much that sometimes I cried thinking about it. Any time I prayed, that’s what I asked God to do. Even though I wasn’t’ really sure there was a God. I wanted her back. But I was mad at her too.

“Of course you get a say in it. Especially now that you’re older. You get to tell the judge what you want too, before you even visit with her, and then again before we let you move back in with her and again after you’ve been with her a couple months. Nothing is going to happen without your input.”

I didn’t believe her. They hadn’t asked my input for anything else. Why would it matter now?

“How are things going with your aunt?” she asked.

“Fine. I guess.”

“What do you mean by fine?” she was doing that stare thing again and I looked out the window at the parking lot.

“They’re weird. But it’s alright. I mean, there’s nothing awful. They’re just a weird family.”

“At least they’re your weird family,” she smiled and I smiled back. “What about Adam? Your aunt says she has some concerns about how much time you are spending with him.”

“Well maybe if she would let me have friends or go to the library or something then I wouldn’t be stuck with Adam all the time,” I said. What a bitch, is what I wanted to say, but I kept it to myself.
“You have to earn her trust Penelope. She isn’t going to just let you do whatever you want because you give her a hard time.”

“When have I ever given her a hard time? And what do I do to earn her trust? I haven’t done anything wrong. I go to school, I haven’t gotten in any fights, I’ve even been doing my homework.”

“She says you’ve had a bad attitude and you’ve been sneaky.”

“Well that’s a lie.”

“You have a bad attitude right now” She stared at me.

“Because I’m being accused of things that aren’t true! I’m trying my hardest to be good and no one even cares, it’s never good enough!” My face was hot and tears were clogging up my eyes. I’d stood up again.

“Calm down Penelope. I’m just trying to find out what’s going on here. I’m not accusing you of anything.”

“Why would she even say that?” I asked. “Why is nothing ever good enough for anyone?” I sat back down in the chair and leaned forward to put my head on the table. “Why doesn’t anyone ever want me?”

“Oh honey.” Stephanie came and rubbed my back but it didn’t help. I felt like my chest was being torn apart from the inside.

“Hey, do you want to go see your grandma this weekend?” she asked after a few minutes. “I spoke with your aunt about taking you to see her. I’ll take you on Saturday.”

I hadn’t seen my grandma since I’d been at the Children’s Center. It was weird, driving down the streets towards her house. Everything looked so familiar, but so different. I’d never
realized how dirty the neighborhood was. The paint was faded on all of the old wooden garage doors, concrete and asphalt covered every surface, the only trees or living things were in the small patches of yards that ran around the houses. Old, dirty cars with cracked windshields and flat tires were parked where yards should go, surrounded by chain link fence and mean looking dogs. I hadn’t been gone long enough for things to have changed so much. I wondered if it had always been this way. In my mind, my grandma’s house was cozy and comfortable, full of smells of chicken pot pies and mashed potatoes. I didn’t remember beer bottles in dirt yards, wooden fences patched together with baby gates and chicken wire, kids running around in diapers with no clothes or shoes.

But then, looking back I could remember summer days in plastic swimming pools, dressed only in a pair of panties that showed right through once they were wet. Maybe it had always been like this, maybe it was me that had changed.

We parked on the street, my grandma’s car sat in the driveway, a layer of dirt so thick I couldn’t see through the windows. I knew that was not normal. Grandma had always kept her car clean. The yard was looking shabby too. The bushes near the house were dried out and overgrown; weeds had crept into the little patch of grass that made up the front yard. Stephanie rang the doorbell and we waited.

It seemed like we waited a long time before we heard the locks on the door turning. When it finally opened I barely even recognized my grandmother. The woman that was so big in throughout my entire life stood small and stooped in front of us. In my mind, my grandmother had blonde hair with thick curls. She had large breasts where she used to snuggle me and a great big belly that made it hard to sit on her lap. The woman who stood before us wasn’t much bigger than me. Her hair was grey and cut close to her head. Her skin looked like it was falling off of her body, her bones prominent through her clothing.
“Grandma?” I asked. My voice came out sounding scared and Stephanie gave me a sharp look.

“Penny! Come here my baby girl,” she pulled me close for a hug that felt too frail.

“Grandma, I miss you.” There were those stupid tears again.

“Oh stop with that now,” she said and even though she barely looked like my grandma anymore, she sounded just like her.

I followed her into the living room. Her cop show played on mute. I sat on the sofa, noticing the frayed edges and the spots where I had spilled soda and it hadn’t come out of the cushion. The carpet, spotted with black clumps that might have been gum at one point, was almost worn through in spots. The wood panel walls that always made me feel safe now felt too close together. I looked at the photos on the walls, my grandma with my mom and my aunt when they were all young. Me as a baby. I’d never paid much attention to these photos before.
Chapter 15

Home

Elaine 1997

The doors buzzed and I pushed through them, out into the world for the first time in three years. It was a strange feeling, I was being turned loose. It was disorienting. I didn’t know whom to call to pick me up, so I hadn’t called anyone. I’d opted for a bus ticket.

There were two people on the bus. An old man with gray hair and a cane who sat in the first seat, closest to the driver and a heavy Mexican woman who took up two seats in the middle. I avoided making eye contact with any of them and sat in the back. I watched out the window as the world flew by, farms, cattle, an occasional house or car. It seemed unreal. I’d been waiting for this for so long. Three years. I couldn’t believe it had been three years since I had felt freedom. I could go anywhere I wanted. I could go to a store and buy a beer if I wanted.

All I really wanted, though, was to see my family. Mom and Penny. I wondered what my sweet little girl was like now. She had only just recently started writing to me, and I was shocked by how grown up she was sounding. I wondered what she looked like. Mom had sent me pictures at first, but the letters and care packages had grown farther apart and I hadn’t heard from her at all in the past few months. I still wrote to her. I knew she was sick and I was glad I was out now so that I could help her. I wished I hadn’t been so hardheaded for so long. Sure, we had our differences and she wasn’t always a great mom, but she’d always been there for me and it hurt my heart to think that she might not be around much longer.

When the bus pulled up to the station it was like I was walking through a film set where a movie I’d once loved was filmed. It was eerie, the memories that came back to me; my dad picking mom and me up here when I was a little girl. I couldn’t remember where we had been,
but I remember his big smile and the smoky smell of his car, the way mom had run to him and they had kissed and it had made me blush. A memory of Randy filled me with longing. He had been in San Francisco. Man, it’d seemed like he was there for so long but it must have only been a few weeks, a month. He was supposed to be scoping out a job but it didn’t work out. He’d come back strung out again. I shivered thinking about it. I flagged a taxi to drive me the rest of the way to mom’s house.

I had a plan. I wasn’t going to be like everyone else, in and out of prison, on and off of drugs. I was going to get my shit together. I knew I had a lot of work to do. CPS alone wanted me jumping through every hoop imaginable. But I was going to do it. I was going to get a job and my own place for once. A real place, not just a room to rent. I would get Penny back and maybe I could even go to school.

These thoughts ran through my head, the same thoughts that had kept me going in prison, thoughts that had lifted me up and made me feel better. Sitting there in the back of that taxi watching the neighborhood I had grown up in sliding by, those thoughts began to weigh me down. Looking around at the worn down houses, the gang members standing on the corner, I wondered how many of the kids I grew up with had any sort of chance. I wondered who was even still alive. I’d run into girls from elementary school in prison, and before that in county. It was different seeing it on the outside though.

We pulled up to my mom’s house. The house I’d grown up in. The place in my mind where home always existed. It was strange that even now, at 34, with a child of my own, when someone asked about home, this was where my mind went. It had never been the apartments I had shared with Randy, the rooms I had rented with Penelope.

The house looked bad. Mom had always been good about keeping it up, but now the bushes were overgrown, the grass was dead and the garage needed a fresh coat of paint. I wasn’t
sure if I should just walk in or knock and I stood there raising my hand to knock and then lowering it. She knew I would be coming soon, but I hadn’t spoken with her in a week or so. She didn’t know I was out. I stood on the doorstep and the thought crossed my mind that maybe I should just walk away. Just go somewhere new and start over. I still had a little bit of my gate money left, I could hop on another bus…

I tried the knob. It was locked. I rapped lightly on the door and waited. Nothing. Maybe she wasn’t even here. I should have called from the bus depot. I knocked again, harder this time. I was about to give up, to walk back down the street, maybe see who was around, but I heard the locks turn. It felt like slow motion. Like we were moving underwater or something, it seemed to take forever for the door to open.

An old lady stood in the open doorway and it took me too long to process that it was my mom. When had she gotten so old?

“Mom?”

“Elaine?” She pushed her glasses up closer to her eyes. “You’re here.” She gave a slight smile.

“Mom!” I put my bag down and threw my arms around her. She felt small and sharp in my arms, fragile. When I pulled away she had tears in her eyes.

“Well come on in,” she said as she moved aside. “We have a lot to discuss.”

“Could I take a shower first?” I hadn’t had a real shower in three years.

When I got out she was asleep on the sofa, her show played quietly on the TV. I stood in the living room and turned in a circle, looking around at the house. It was just how I remembered it, only dirtier. I went to my room, the room I had grown up in, the room where I used to sneak out of the window at night, where I cried and raged and made out with boys. It was different. My
furniture was all gone, the posters taken down from the walls. It looked more like a guest room now. I stretched out on the bed and fell asleep.