SET FOR LIFE: A NOVEL

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This collection of six chapters is an excerpt from a novel based on the book of Job, as told through the viewpoint of a contemporary woman from Texas. A preface exploring the act of starting over, fictionally and creatively, precedes the chapters.
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By

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PART I
MANDALAS, DIORAMAS AND PILLOWCASES: THE HALLOWED ACT
OF STARTING OVER
Mandalas, the intricate sand paintings by Tibetan Monks, are ceremoniously destroyed upon their completion. It's a beautiful tradition, but one that can discomfit many of us less-enlightened folks. Whether because we're Western, or capitalist, or materialist, we don't, broadly speaking, tend to enjoy starting over. We like to think the time that we've spent on creating, the energy we've exerted, means we've built something we can step back and admire, forever if we like. Yet, as Yeats observes, things fall apart. Still, it’s the human tendency to fight against that uncoiling even when the “centre cannot hold” (1705). We want to believe if we hold tight enough, our creations should, and will, last forever.

Speaking of holding tight, one might not find a better example of that human tendency than the television series, “Hoarders,” a fascinating docudrama that chronicles people with mental disorders. A hoarder’s mental illness revolves around the accumulation of things—be it old newspapers, automobile parts, antique dolls, or, disturbingly, animal feces and garbage. In one “Hoarders” episode, a ten-year old girl who is already manifesting her mother's accumulative tendencies fights against having to throw away a broken diorama from a book project she'd completed years before.

“What is it that makes you so upset to throw this away?” the psychologist asked, crouched beside the girl on a filthy stairway.

The little girl buried her head in her hands, sobbing. “It's like I'm throwing away all of my effort,” she said.

Effort. It's that invisible, immeasurable energy behind all degrees, jobs, marriages, and achievements. No one knows the value of effort like the one who expends it—and we're loathe to see the physical manifestation of that expenditure end up piled next to dead rats and dust balls, or even as specs of colorful sand swept away by the wind.
I may not have to scrape trash off of my kitchen table to find a spot to eat my morning cereal, but I know something of how that little girl feels.

For my dissertation, I thought I would revisit a novel I had already drafted called *Set For Life*. By revising an entire book that I thought only needed a tweak or two to fulfill the requirements, I was, as a hopeful graduate student approaching the Goliath of a dissertation, set with a pocket full of stones. The idea for *Set for Life* is loosely based on the biblical book of Job, framed in a what-if question. Stephen King does an excellent job of discussing the what-if question in *On Writing*, one of the most useful books on the craft. King says, “A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot, which is fine with me. The most interesting questions can usually be expressed in a *What-If* question” (169). While a strong question may not render the *whole* question of plot moot—we still have to circle the bases to get home again—the what-if question can certainly be a solid *thwack* of a hit to get the story moving. As a writer, I'd worked with what-if questions before: What if a young minister's wife flees small-town existence and runs away to Mexico? (*Potter Springs.*) What if a golfing star blows his PGA hopes and moves back home to the broken relationships he's left behind? (*Whistle Blues.*) For *Set for Life*, I had an original source from which to spin a what-if question. As in, what if the biblical book of Job, about the man who lost everything because of a crapshoot between God and Satan, was placed in a contemporary setting? In Texas? And told through the viewpoint of a female survivor, rather than a male?

The book of Job presents an impressive puzzle. The showdown between God and Satan as played out through the life of a righteous man brings to mind questions about holiness, the arbitrary nature of what happens to us as human beings, and the way we respond to one another. Like many people, I tend to gravitate toward stories of brokenness and redemption, and Job's is a
humdinger. The story opens up much like a fairy tale: “There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). Job's faithfulness and great possessions are described in detail and then the point-of-view camera pulls back to an otherworldly conversation between God and Satan. Satan alleges that Job is only faithful because God protects him and God gives Satan permission to put Job through the ringer. Or, as Jesus put it in alliterative, agricultural terms to Peter, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat” (Luke 22:31). Job’s ensuing “sifting” in the land of Uz has become synonymous with suffering and hardship, thus familiarity of the reference-turned-cliché “the patience of Job” a phrase that might be better translated “the endurance of Job” (James 5:11). Yet, on closer reading, one may find that Job really isn't all that patient. Yes, he stays faithful to God, but his immediate response is to wish for death. He argues with his remaining friends, his wife (the only surviving member of his immediate family—an interesting strategic choice on Satan's part), and ultimately, with God. Of course, God wins in the end by speaking directly into Job's pain, asserting himself as the author of creation and the one with ultimate power. “Where were you?” is God's rhetorical question in the concluding chapters as God lists his involvement in everything from the creation of the heavens and the earth to his ability to call Leviathan from the depths. In the face of such magnificence, Job's only choice as a righteous man is one of humility and repentance. God responds by blessing Job with more than he ever had before—replaces the wealth, the livestock, and the children, as the text states, by twofold. As a storytelling strategy, replacing the extreme losses and with extreme blessings is potent. Yet, when it comes to the children, one might question, replaces? But oh, the ten who are gone!
In *Set for Life*, JoBeth is unlike Job in that she doesn't have that large immediate family yet or all that livestock, but she is a woman who has invested her worth—or her *effort*—like so many contemporary women in her job, her marriage, and her home. I struggled whether or not to give her children who must die if I were to stick to the true formula of Job, but I just couldn't do it. One, I have rather a soft spot for children myself and two, I was concerned that such a dark beginning might alienate readers from the get-go. Not many people would list Job as their favorite book in the Bible, or their go-to source for inspiration and comfort. It's a rather daunting and depressing story, although I'd match those zinging final chapters against any text for power and persuasion.

Job's ten children, according to some scholars, along with the figures of his massive amount of livestock, point to a metaphorical sense of completeness or wholeness (*Wesley* 613). For JoBeth, I thought it less important to give her children who would perish and instead tried to create a sense of her satisfaction, or completeness with her life, as she sees it, *Before*. Rather than having buildings inexplicably crumble on loved ones and servants bearing the bad news, I decided to use fire as my weapon of destruction. I liked the idea of new life coming through fire, literally and metaphorically, and the use of fire as a consuming example of holiness is frequently found in Biblical narratives: Moses’s experience with the burning bush (Exod. 3), Nadab and Abihu’s fatal choice to offer unholy fire (Lev. 10), and Elijah’s sacrificial contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). For contemporary purposes, I found through my research that some fires could be classified as an act of God, which worked with my themes for the novel.

I had my what-if question, my characters and my setting. *Thwack.*

Except, here's a problem in revisiting an old draft: sometimes the old draft feels, as we might say in Texas, flat out-wrong. If Wolfgang Iser is correct in saying that a second reading of
a text always produces a different impression than the first, my second impression was less than favorable (55). I had not created the right balance, as Iser describes it, between the poles of artistic and esthetic. I had the artistic pole, the created text, but the esthetic, the realization accomplished by the reader, was found wanting (50). Simply put, the story didn’t move me. In reading through the original draft, I saw how my writing had changed. The story had, if I may say, some clever bits and shimmers of writing that I enjoyed, but overall the story didn't create the response, or the phenomenon, I was looking for. Iser notes that writing must be “conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative” (51). The story had its pleasurable moments, and perhaps engaged the reader’s imagination, but I wanted more in terms of working things out, of activity and creativity. My stones, per se, were less solid that I had first imagined.

For example, in the first draft, Doug dies in the fire but not before JoBeth overhears a “butt-phone” conversation where she can just make out that he is speaking to someone—presumably the other woman—whom he calls “Baby.” JoBeth spends a great deal of time searching for the identity of “Baby.” Ultimately she finds her and is surprised to discover that Baby is not the ideal woman whom JoBeth fears, but rather Doug's plain secretary who serves as the perfect mirror, or looking-glass, for Doug's insecurities. Baby is a way for Doug’s greatness to be magnified. This idea of woman-as-magnifier isn't a new one. As Virginia Woolf writes, “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (1984). I found in revisiting Set for Life that I still wanted a magnifier for Doug, but decided it might be more powerful if JoBeth is the one who discovers she's been more of a reflective surface than an equal partner. When I
went to rewrite, I cared less about whether or not Doug was cheating and with whom and more about what that type of loss might do to a person like JoBeth and, by extension, to the imagination of the reader. There's something interesting about that deflection of emotion—fixating on the “who” vs. the all-overwhelming “what” of the loss. Last year's film *The Descendants* makes great work of this as George Clooney’s Matt King, with his crumpled face and wilted floral shirts, tramps around Hawaii looking for the lover of his comatose wife. His search is a deflection: instead of dealing with the real issue of how he, a self-proclaimed “backup parent, the understudy,” is going to raise two children on his own. But for *Set for Life*, I found on the second round that Baby seemed gimmicky and a way that I, as an author, deflected the emotion by focusing on the wrong thing. The what-if premise still held me, but I didn't like how I'd begun running after the initial start.

Re-reading my first draft of *Set for Life*, I questioned whether I had the passion to infuse the old text with new ideas or if it would be easier, better, and more satisfying to start anew. I was reminded of Jesus' parable about the futility of mixing the old with the new: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed” (Luke 5:36-37). This was my dilemma—inserting new writing into the old draft didn't match, and pouring a new vision into the old one threatened to burst the story and destroy the integrity of the piece altogether. Patching together the old with the new felt counterproductive and counterintuitive, but the alternative was terrifying. Starting over became not only JoBeth's inevitable struggle, but mine as a writer.
I had a decision to make, and other than the precedence of those fearless, sand-wielding monks, I had two concrete examples of how I might decide. One, I have a dear friend who had written and revised a novel over three years only to have a book that still wasn't working for her. She decided to pitch it and start over. (“Self-sabotage!” my inner editor cried, but I pretended to support her.) The resulting book, spanking new from page one to the last, worked. It worked so well she had agents fighting over her, and she's now chosen her pick of the litter and is ready to go to market. My second example is less writerly, but still speaks to the creative process. I am a knitter, and a few years ago I'd bought a beautiful, expensive yarn with which to knit an intricate lace pattern for pillowcases for my mother who tends to like intricate lace anything. The problem is, I do not particularly like intricate lace and I discovered after many weeks into the project with little more than a few inches to show for my work, that I don't like knitting intricate lace either. An experienced knitter encouraged me to frog it—frogging being the knitter’s version of trashing a manuscript—and start over with something new. I followed her advice and ripped the yarn to a ziggedy pile of string. I rewound it into a neat ball then proceeded to knit myself a lovely spring shrug. I gave my mother some homemade soap instead. When I decided to start over with Set for Life, I typed on my new outline: Remember the freedom of unraveling pillowcases. I would unravel the old and start with a fresh pile of white yarn to spin my story anew. I pledged not to consult the old draft at all—it might whisper into my fears and get me started on that fruitless patch job all over again.

I began with a new angle to help create more of an esthetic response in my reader. Elizabeth Bowen speaks of angle, in regards to the novel, as a definition between two senses, visual and moral (148-149). The visual angle is the camera-eye of the book. JoBeth’s brow and heart would still hold the camera, but I would allow the camera to zoom out in key moments to
give the story the occasional God’s eye view. Annie Proulx sets an impressive standard with this perspective, particularly in “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water.” Proulx forces the reader into her story with direct address: “You stand there, braced. Cloud shadows race over the buff rock stacks as a projected film, casting a queasy, mottled ground rash. The air hisses and it is no local breeze but the great harsh sweep of wind from the turning of the earth” (99). Her word choices set the uneasy tone before we meet a single character. The reader is braced, in an unfamiliar, antagonistic setting where clouds race, the ground is queasy, and the air hisses. She reminds us, this is no “local breeze” but something that originates with the very turning of the earth. Much in the way the opening chapters of Job begin not with the man but with the powers that be, I wanted to pull my angle back for a less-personal beginning to JoBeth’s tale.

My first big move was to eliminate the fish head of my story and begin where the action starts. A fish head is the unappetizing part of the story that most writers feel compelled to include to give the reader back story, character development, and other author-pleasing, reader-boring bon mots before cutting to the meat of the story. Rather than having JoBeth at Thanksgiving dinner with her family, cooking and hosting and being very Betty Crocker-ish in her beautiful home (read: fish head), I began with an article from the Claymore Gazette about the fire. This creates a sense of distance which I liked—”There once was a man named Job”—and hopefully underscores that newspaper articles are but snippets out of someone's life story. The choice to visually pull back in the new beginning creates a new moral angle to consider: that there's always more beneath the surface of a dry rat-a-tat text that can skim, sometimes cruelly, over the reality of a person's life. The introduction by way of news clip allows the reader to get through the summary of events in a short amount of time, and sets up something of a mystery as regards to
the fire. We no longer have to wade through the Before—what's important for JoBeth (and for Job) is the After.

In the new draft, we meet JoBeth after the fire, after she's experienced the rigmarole of the police, the shock, and the funeral. My first draft had all those rungs of the ladder that climbed up to the climactic catalyst (what if she loses everything?), but in this incarnation, I wanted to see the immediate aftermath of her fall. In Job's After, he sits on a curb covered in ashes, scraping his boils and bemoaning his existence. In JoBeth's, she sneaks out of the cocoon of her mother's home and goes back to the wreckage of her home, also covered in ashes. I wanted the reader to see remnants of JoBeth's former life, to experience her surroundings, to handle those objects that might have defined her. What we surround ourselves with can shape who we are, or who we think we are, to some degree, and become definitive identifiers into our character. As Anne Lamott writes, “Every room is about memory. Every room gives us layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows, our attempts to prove that we exist and are more or less Okay” (74). JoBeth walks through the memories of her rooms, where she used to exist and where she used to be, more or less, Okay. Hopefully, these layered memories underscore the fact that she is now, officially, Not Okay. Her shrines—the dining room, the kitchen, the bedroom—have been consumed. Her future existence is now threatened, proven by the destruction of her home. JoBeth’s tour of the house also allowed me to provide the details of her former life without having to include several chapters summarizing it. I agree with Francine Prose that “a well-chosen detail can tell us more about a character—his social and economic status, his hopes and dreams, his vision of himself—than a long explanatory passage” (198). This is why JoBeth, in Set for Life drives by empty swings in the manicured neighborhood, why the décor in her home is upwardly-mobile but bland (leather
couches, granite countertops, Buttercup walls), and why JoBeth leaves the confirmation cross from her father still hanging on the wall.

In Set for Life, the house had become a part of JoBeth, down to her psyche, and that losing it was like a death. In the original version of this story, JoBeth comes upon the scene of the fire only watch it burn, with its gaping eyes and mouth like a death scream from a jack-o-lantern. My goal was to make the house feel menacing and real—that the house and JoBeth's former life were dying. In this newer version, I started with the skeleton of the house—it has already died its fiery death and is waiting for JoBeth with its open jaws. But instead of viewing the carnage curbside, she must enter the belly of the beast, while it's still smoking, in order to confront her past and her fears. I also wanted to play on that gothic tradition of a sentient house seducing a character to do things he or she might not otherwise do. For the power of a house to influence a psyche, I used Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's short story “The Yellow Wall-paper” as a study of the breakdown a woman in isolation can experience—a woman whose real need isn't isolation at all, but the freedom to express herself through writing. The unnamed narrator begins with staring at her surroundings and then disappears into them—her identity is totally lost in what's around her until she becomes the creeping woman trapped in the gruesome bobbing heads of the wallpaper. In contrast, in Shirley Jackson's The Haunting (or, The Haunting of Hill House), the house is more alive and becomes a part of Eleanor, the house's identity and desires takes over Eleanor's, to the point where to lose herself within the house is the ultimate freedom, but to leave it leads to destruction. While Set for Life isn't a ghost story, or a tale of madness, I used some of the cues from these works to help build a sense of disorientation and fear for JoBeth as she explores the remnants of her former life. As in “Wall-paper,” I wanted to leave the impression that the house and the surroundings had trapped JoBeth in a way, had left her in a
cookie-cutter mold which she didn’t fit. She has escaped, narrowly, in a way that Eleanor in *The Haunting* was unable to do. Neither of these earlier stories fully explains the onset of the madness which gave me freedom to leave a question mark behind JoBeth's choice to down all that cheap wine and Xanax. Revisiting the house, for JoBeth, becomes a catalyst for the rest of her life—and the dark and light contrast of Before and After. JoBeth and Job are similar in their cloaks of ashes in the After; the difference is what JoBeth's choice is versus what Job does. I tried to make JoBeth's failed suicide attempt darkly humorous and to contrast the starkness of her isolation in her empty marital bed with the new setting: hyper-lit confines of Quest.

Some of my favorite influences are from rehab stories and jumbles of unlikely people making friends. I think there's a universal pull there that I wanted to explore—how sometimes deep tragedy leads one to form unlikely alliances. That After somehow becomes more meaningful, more true, than all that happened Before. This is why one might argue that the friendship between Chief and Randle was likely the deepest of their lives, and why readers weep when Chief so lovingly murders his friend at the end. This is why “The Things They Carried,” and the characters who carry the things, are still alive to Tim O'Brien years after the Vietnam war. Or when Billy Pilgrim slips through time he so often finds himself with climbing through the rubble with his makeshift brotherhood in Dresden. This is why the ragtag group in Quest, and Maybelline and Roth and even Sam mean more to JoBeth than the women—Cassie and Rhonda—she grew up with in friendship, who can't quite get a handle on her After. It's after great loss, sometimes, that the true test of friendship and support becomes its sharpest and clearest.

While writing this book, I lost a friend of mine to her battle with melanoma. She had been incredibly sick for a year, with multiple hospitalizations, until she finally died in October
2011. One comment that Ken, the widower, made to me rang true: “People want to ask how you're doing, but they don't really want to know the answer.” Death and tragedy scares us; we don't want to be the next one to catch it—a feeling one could chalk up to selfishness but mostly has its roots in fear. That fear is why in Set for Life the neighbor Ed isn't concerned with what started the fire, or even how JoBeth fares as a widow: his true focus is on how his house nearly went up in flames as well, that he was thisclose to losing it all. It's also why Rhonda and Cassie are great companions at the funeral and holding JoBeth's hand, and even showing up in an initial visit at Quest. But for the long haul, her changes are too much for them, the ongoing care is too great a responsibility, and they fall away into the comfort of their own lives. They wish her the best, and it's easier to tell themselves that sometimes friendships die away of their own accord.

One of the hurdles, for me, in writing a book about a character's redemption after a great loss was to make it authentic but still readable. I wanted to honor JoBeth's struggle, but I also wanted to include bits of dark humor to keep the narrative flowing. Thus, the introduction of characters like Sam and Roth (an unlikely duo), and, less influentially, Carol and Dr. Palmer and Guenda. I find great enjoyment in groups of people who wouldn't normally gather, odd cross-sections of humanity who are forced to spend time together through outstanding circumstances. You find groups like this in the military, in public schools, and in psych wards. Writing about Quest was a challenge—again I wanted it to be authentic, to feel like this could be a real place with real people, but stay true to the tempo of the story. In cases like this, I'm always thankful for Henry James and his essay “The Art of Fiction” where he makes the argument that impression is experience. James writes, “Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue” (376). If I am, as James advises,
a writer upon whom nothing is lost, I don't have to necessarily spend thirty days in an inpatient facility to have an impression of what goes on there. However, it's helpful (in that awful, carnivorous, author kind of way) to have family members and friends who have had their own struggles with mental health—ranging from suicide attempts, to split-personality disorders, to anger management, to addictions—that create airborne particles for the silken spiderweb to catch. Or, as Natalie Goldberg puts it, using the metaphor of composting: “Our bodies are garbage heaps: we collect experience, and from the decomposition of the thrown-out eggshells, spinach leaves, coffee grinds and old steak bones of our minds come nitrogen, heat, and very fertile soil. Out of this fertile soil bloom our poems and stories” (14). For me, these real-life struggles, the steak and bones and crushed shells of eggs, helped create the impression/experience for me to build life in the Quack Shack.

When JoBeth awakes, the shift in setting was an opportunity to go from the isolation (literal and metaphorical) in both her mother's duplex and in her burned home, and into an environment of forced community. This was my way for JoBeth to meet other people, other people who have experienced their own celestial showdowns and come away limping, and to begin healing. This was a way to introduce her to Maybelline, a woman she might otherwise never have known.

The character of Maybelline was a surprise for me when I found her, in both the original and the new version of Set for Life. As Bowen says, “Characters pre-exist. They are found. They reveal themselves slowly to the novelist’s perception—as might fellow-travellers seated opposite one in a dimly-lit railway carriage” (143). Yet, the first time I met Maybelline the carriage was too dim for me to really see her, and our time on the railway was too short. She showed up, only briefly, in the original draft as a cell-mate of JoBeth's when JoBeth is mistakenly arrested for
starting the fire. In the second version, she became a major character—her personality, her back story, her struggles were too big to confine to mere moments in a jail cell. I have to confess, I fell in love with Maybelline more than a little bit. I like her honesty, her compassion, and her sense of security. I am impressed by her lack of self-consciousness when she rocks a tight pair of sweatpants. She is a round character, to me, but I struggled with making her a round character on the page. The most offensive thing I could do, for myself and for my reader, was to create another black stereotype to add to the many already out there. I wanted to be keenly aware of not reverting to the mammy/whore stereotypes, and to walk carefully when representing Maybelline's anger. The “angry black woman” stereotype—however powerful in its backlash against the mammy/whore representations—is still flat. If Forster is correct, and flat characters can only move us to “humour and appropriateness,” it became that much more important that Maybelline be fit to perform tragically, to be flawed and authentic (137). Yes, Maybelline provides moments of humor, but she's also a war veteran, a single parent, and in spite of her cheerful, some may say, aggressive approach to therapy, she doubts her ability to succeed and has moments of real despair: “Oh, girl,” Maybelline said, her one eye blinking. “You know there ain't no Santa, right?” (109). Prose points out the efficacy of establishing character through dialogue—rightly naming Jane Austen the master of this—and crafting Mayelline’s dialogue, tuning my ear to her speech, became an essential way to express her (124). Perhaps more so than any other character in the book, I labored over Mayelline’s dropped g’s, her double negatives, her substituted Spanish swear words. I hoped, through giving her speech veracity, that she would overcome sidekick clichés and fulfill a void in JoBeth’s life as a true friend who has gone through the trenches, seen the worst, and loves her anyway. Mayelline’s ability to overcome extreme adversity gives strength to the novel—she’s no longer a statistic in a jail cell, she’s a
hero who faces her deepest struggles with only one eye and ends up having strength to spare for JoBeth to lean on.

When I was editing Set for Life, because it is a book of memory and loss and new beginnings, I made notes to myself: ms search “remember.” This was a reminder to use the handy find-and-replace option in Word to search for all the times the term “remember” shows up in the manuscript. Short of reading the entire work aloud, which I recommend, it's a quick way to catch repetitiveness and filters. I've taught in creative writing classes that character filters like remember, thought, felt, knew and reflected weaken the action and create a sort of dreamy haze in description that's easy for the reader to walk away from. A writer can usually cut “she remembered” and go right into the memory. Here, JoBeth remembers a lesson from adolescence:

She clasped, and offered enough of a shake to not embarrass her father. He'd given her handshaking lessons when she turned sixteen and applied for her first job at the Hallmark store. “I don't hold truck with that half-handed little girl BS,” he had said, making her practice with him in the backyard, his hand still cold from his beer. “Shake like a man, and you'll earn a man's wage.” So far he'd been wrong about the wages, but the handshake stuck. (25)

My first instinct is to write, “She remembered when he'd given her handshaking lessons,” but it's cleaner without the filter and we have the instant leap from action (shaking Dr. Palmer's hand) to memory (the lesson) without taking the unnecessary pause through JoBeth's synapses. Still, in first writing or freewriting, most writers tend to include the tags and filters. And I wonder (“Britta wondered”) if it's a fear of stepping too directly into the moment of deep emotion or pain. Much like King's struggle to eliminate adverbs—“the road to hell is paved with adverbs”—I had difficulty removing all of the filters. I managed to cut many, but not all, which perhaps says
something about the immediacy of emotion and our human tendency to step away, even through words on a page, from that which makes us uncomfortable.

Rewriting *Set for Life* from scratch was an uncomfortable decision, to say the least, but I’m thankful I didn’t shy away from the process. By starting over, I was able to let loose of the confines of the original draft and I didn’t have to strain the seams by shoving new prose into old chapters. I experienced again those new-writing neuroses, questioning my choices, the struggle of seeing the vision through to the end—all necessary hurdles in growing as a writer. Casting shiny new stones at the giant was a lesson in faith and fearlessness. As a writer, crafting the artistic, I had more encounters with the esthetic. I can only hope it will be so for my reader. In the end, I identified with JoBeth and the people I met in her journey even more and I stepped away from the carriage, thankful for the ride.
Works Cited


PART II

SET FOR LIFE: A NOVEL
CLAYMORE, Texas—An overnight house fire killed at least one person in the Holly Hills subdivision of east Claymore, officials said early Friday morning. Officials were unsure of the cause of the fire which started late evening Thanksgiving Day and declined to reveal the identity of the body. Firefighters responded to a call at 10:45 p.m. to the fire at 7300 block of Everglades.

Neighbor Edward Miller said he saw smoke pouring from a second-story window and called 911. He and other neighbors expressed fear that the sparks may spread throughout the street's Cape Cod-style architecture. “This is a wood-sided community, very little brick,” explained Miller. “With the wind blowing like that, we all could have been hit.”

The house was fully engulfed when rescue workers arrived, but firefighters contained the blaze to the one home. Early reports indicate the home as a total loss. Investigators report they have no leads on the cause of the fire at this time.

Emergency workers rescued a dog from the home's gated backyard.

Record-breaking drought throughout North Texas may have increased the speed at which the fire gutted the home. “I've never seen anything like it,” rookie firefighter Joe Neally stated. “Even in training school—to see it go up so quickly, so completely, was a real shock.”

The home listed in tax records as belonging to Douglas and JoBeth Naylor.

Neither of the homeowners was available for comment at the time of this printing.
JoBeth Naylor slipped down the duplex's stairs, quiet in cotton socks, cheap tennis shoes tucked underneath her arm. Photographs on the wall followed her descent, her own likenesses through time standing guard: kindergarten with white-blonde braids perched on a yellow wooden chair, fourth grade; snaggletoothed in the sing-along showcase, her hair chopped in an unflattering junior-high page boy; draped in choir robes too long for her short frame in high school; a bare-shouldered close-up of a glowing bride. A bride who can't quite believe her luck, her eyes bright and manic. She ignored the photographs, curved expertly on the landing where a faded nightlight glowed orange on the reclaimed hardwood floors. She paused in front of the baby gate at the hall bathroom, shadowy dark. Was Edgar asleep inside or had her mother listened to the dog's whines and taken it to bed with her?

Her plan hinged on the silence of a rescued border collie.

Thankfully, the canine gods, a clear minority in their celestial benevolence, smiled upon her and she made it to the kitchen undetected. There, she rummaged silently through kitchen cabinets, sticky from age, and found what she needed: a child's plastic cup and a prescription bottle of Xanax. Neither belonged to her. The cup, with a scratched Ariel swimming on the front, was a favorite of her niece's—Emma, not Bitsy—for overnight visits. The pills were her mother's. They were an old prescription, long expired. Her mother had never taken them regularly but preferred to deal with what she called her “shadowy days” after her separation from Cle, JoBeth's father, through yoga and herbal teas.
JoBeth tucked the cup and the medicine into her handbag, a designer one that Doug had bought her for her 30th birthday, and contemplated the closet door by the entryway. Too creaky to risk a coat? Yes. She wrapped silencing fingers around her car keys and huddled tighter in borrowed pajamas. The pajamas—blue cotton with stylized cowboys riding broncos—were on loan from her brother. She'd tossed a sweatshirt that she'd squirreled from the laundry room over her top. It was from a retreat her mother had attended and proclaimed loudly on the front, “Woman of Faith.” It would have to do.

After she slid the deadbolt, the duplex's front door opened without creaking and she hustled down the pebbled walkway. Under the light of the moon, she made her way through the communal courtyard with the algae-laden fountain and dead vines choked along the path. Doug's car waited for her along the quiet street and, with a beep of the alarm, she was inside. The car, an enormous pearl-white Cadillac, still smelled of his aftershave. Spicy and clean. Taking great nervous gulps of frigid air, she started the engine with a purr, half waiting for someone to discover her. As she pulled out, the buttersoft leather seats seeped cold through her pajamas, and she fumbled for the seat warmers, jumping a curb while she looked for the right button.

Unsuccessful, she wriggled in place to create warmth via friction. She passed through the sprawling lots of her mother's more affluent neighbors where ranch-style houses and Tudors loomed on wooded acre lots. Most had turned off their Christmas lights for the evening, but shadows of manger scenes squatted in the darkness, and deflated Santas collapsed in piles of plastic, waited to be filled anew the next night.

Her mother's neighborhood, one of Claymore's oldest and most established, was ringed by townhomes and duplexes. Smaller, well-kept places with the socially-approved zip code, inhabited by the divorced and the pensioned. Among whom her mother was something of an
oddball, an unreformed hippie who grew vegetables in her front yard instead of holly bushes, and who strung a handmade clothesline in the backyard to avoid running her dryer. At the very edge of the neighborhood, the townhomes gave way to tennis courts and, worse, apartments. It was then cut off by a street made busier through the decades. A 24-hour Pak-a-Sak dominated the crumbling corner.

JoBeth pulled into the convenience store's lot and parked the car. She shoved her feet in the shoes, still unlaced, and stepped inside the well-lit but shabby store. The counter was decorated with a small tree and blinking rainbow lights, and “Baby, It's Cold Outside” piped through speakers in a depressing effort at cheer. Still, JoBeth hummed along. It was one of her favorites. She'd sung it as a soloist in high school, and still knew every word.

The kid behind the counter had a spattering of freckles, red hair, and a name tag that read Garrett. She didn't know him, which was something of a surprise—a welcome one that brought a measure of relief—especially since she kept the attendance roles for Claymore High.

The kid, Garrett, looked up from his Sudoku puzzle—the kind JoBeth could never figure out, even on the one-star days in the paper—then smiled and said howdy. Not howdy like a cowboy cartoon, but as someone relaxed with the word, trained to politeness. Haddee. His smile revealed two crooked incisors, which made him look a bit like a vampire. If Ron Howard were a vampire.

She waved, aware of her pajamas and unkempt hair tied in a knot on top of her head. The maroon sweatshirt with its bombastic message that underscored the hypocrisy of her intended mission, and did nothing to flatter her pale skin.

Before, she would have never gone out in public like this. She would never be out this late alone, let alone dressed like she just fell off a turnip truck. Before, she would have worn
shoes to match her bag, her hair frizzy hair straightened, and an outfit carefully selected to make the most of her short, curvy frame. She was learning that everything in her life fit into the two-part equation: Before. After.

Following the aisles of overpriced toilet paper and individually-wrapped analgesics, she made her way to the refrigerated cases at the back of the store and selected a cheap 1.5 liter-size bottle of Pinot Grigio. It cost less than ten dollars, which really didn't matter, because she had a crisp $100 bill to spend. Doug kept the cash in the car's console for emergencies, and she figured this qualified. She took the money, the wine, and two fried apple pies wrapped in waxed paper to the counter.

Garrett shook his head. “Can't sell that to you, ma'am.”

She looked at the pies. “Are they not fresh?”

“No—the wine. It's after hours.” He shrugged wiry shoulders and pointed to a sign that said no alcohol sales after midnight, except Saturday which allowed sales until 1:00 a.m. It was Thursday, one week after Thanksgiving.

“What time is it?”

“It's 1:30.”

“Already?”

“Yes'm. Fraid to say.”

She had no idea. She had spent the evening waiting for the house to quiet, reading books in her mother's guest room. Gloria had outfitted the guest room with twin beds for the girls, and JoBeth slept in the one closest to the window, which overlooked the courtyard below. The guest room closet stored spare luggage, artwork Gloria no longer displayed, and JoBeth and Cole's childhood keepsake boxes. The boxes weren't anything special—just cardboard ones meant to
store files, but, like Gloria always said, it's the inside that matters. JoBeth's was filled with tennis certificates (never medals), video tapes of her musical performances, mediocre report cards, and her favorite old books. Mostly paperbacks, the pages dog-eared, and her own childlike handwriting on each title page. This book is the property of JoBeth Haskins, written in a bold hand. Green marker. Even then, she'd been proud of her things, wanting to keep them.

While her family clustered in the living room downstairs, she stayed in the guest room, huddled under a handmade quilt, reading. Blocking out the chattering of the girls, her father's drawl, Cole's deep, undecipherable bass. She was hiding, if she were honest, which she wasn't. She told herself she deserved a break, needed alone time as she fingered the pages, smelling the rot of yesteryear, and passed the time revisiting stories that somehow seemed new again. Encyclopedia Brown was just as clever as she remembered. Where the Red Fern Grows just as sad, Blubber still angsty and true. She'd lost herself, page after page, biding her time. Hadn't meant for it to get so late. And now her plan was ruined. Her plan that had been poorly hatched at best. She'd never been much of a strategizer. Doug had been the listmaker, the attorney who knew all the rules, the one who chartered their lives.

“Oh,” she said to Garrett, her tongue feeling thick with disappointment. She breathed, scrambling. Forced a smile. A not-crazy smile that felt false anyway. “Well, I'll just take the pies.” She passed him the hundred-dollar bill. “Can you make change?”

After drawing a line over the bill with a marker, he could and he did, carefully onto the counter. His nails were clipped and clean, like Doug's used to be. But he had calluses that Doug would never have. “You have a good one,” Garrett called as the open door whooshed cold air upon her once more.
Clutching the paper bag, feeling like a hobo, she stopped at the car. We don't say hobo, her mother would correct her. The cash humming in one hand. She turned, leaving the pies in their bag on the hood of the car.

The door jingled again and Garrett again offered a knee-jerk haddee, then a small frown. “Listen. I'd really like that wine,” she said, pretty as you please. The bottle still sat, sweating, between them on the counter.

He looked uncomfortable, as if afraid of being rude. “Sorry,” he said with an air of genuine sincerity. “I'd like to but—”

“I'll give you fifty dollars.” She met his gaze directly and didn't smile. Women smile too much, Doug had once told her. It's a throwback gesture, an unconscious manner of appearing submissive. The best in court don't do it, he said. They speak like men, and they win.

His cheeks pinkened. “That's not—”

“Sixty.” When you negotiate, be aggressive, Doug would say. This, after they bought their first home and he saved five-thousand dollars on closing costs and got the builder to upgrade the counters to granite, gratis.

“Eighty,” she said, upping her own ante.

An awkward laugh escaped him, but his eyes went to the folded bills in her hand. He'd just counted it out, so he would know exactly how much was there. He was probably a farm kid, raised in a nearby community, working nights to save to get out to someplace else. JoBeth knew the feeling—except she'd never made it out. Tonight, perhaps, she would.

She opened her hand, let the papers, green and meaningless, flutter to the counter.

He looked regretful and shrugged. Nodded an ear to the back corner of the store. “Can't do it. Cameras.”
“I see.” She paused, thinking. “You know, I'm just going to use your ladies' room if you
don't mind. I'll put this back on my way. Then I'll go.” This time, she did smile. A southern
woman, ever polite. Switching tactics.

“Sure,” he said. “Take your time.”

She did. Used the facilities and washed her hands, careful not to look at herself in the
mirror. Not wanting to see what her eyes looked like. Didn't want to remember herself this way,
in this moment. Instead, she concentrated on aligning each of the bills, folded them in half, and
placed the stacks on top of the soap dispenser in a neat fold so they wouldn't fall off.

When she exited the restroom, his head was again ducked toward the puzzle. The
refrigerator door opened with a quiet pop of the seal, and she removed a second bottle of Pinot
Grigio without too much clanking. She checked a small convex mirror, placed high in a corner
that would reveal her actions to Garret. He was still not looking. She tuck the bottle, icy
against her side, cold pressed against a sports bra borrowed from her mother, hidden under the
“Woman of Faith” sweatshirt. She stiff-walked out the door, keeping the bulky mass away from
the cameras. And Garrett, who surely suspected, who had surely glanced while she fumbled and
clanked, in a moment of complicit understanding, blessedly looked the other way.

#

In the car once more, she drove down the familiar route to her former house—two exits
east to Claymore's newer side. She passed the old library, the high school where she worked, the
little shopping mall with its one department store, her favorite restaurant with 10-ounce
hamburgers and French fries made with real potatoes.

She passed a few cars on the interstate, and a big rig with silhouettes of naked girls
waving cheerily on its mud flaps. Claymore's east side boasted newer neighborhoods, smaller
trees, and higher mortgages. Her exit took her past an Applebee's, a Bank of Texas, and Brookshire's grocery. Past the bakery with fancy coffees where she used to meet her girlfriends, Rhonda and Cassie, on Saturday mornings when Doug went golfing with his partners from the firm. Before. The sign to her neighborhood was discretely lit, a gentle glow that highlighted the oversized golf ball shrubs that flanked the brick signage. The park behind, aglow in the moonlight, boasted silent swings and empty slides. Little toy cars were attached to coil springs for toddlers to ride, the kind of playground equipment that was never really as fun as it looks. The jungle gym was shaped like a half-dome, intersections connecting, the metal bars shining like an inviting cage.

She pulled to a stop next to the park and shut the car off. She had no wish to draw attention with this car on this street. Even though most of her neighbors would be sleeping, or attached to their computers or big screen televisions. Nobody in Holly Hills spent time looking out the window the way they did in her mother's neighborhood. Even so, the rest of her journey would be on foot.

Fresh air will feel good, she told herself. You've spent too much time inside.

She eased her way out of the car with the wine, the pies, and her handbag, and with the push of a button, popped opened the trunk. When Doug had bought the car from a dealer in Dallas and had it shipped in, they'd joked about how the trunk was roomy enough to carry several dead bodies. Har har. The Christmas stash—bags and bags of gifts she'd purchased at midnight madness sales on Thanksgiving evening—was still there. She hadn't looked through them at all, since that night. Before.

These were the presents she'd shopped for through the wee hours after Thanksgiving, in special black Friday sales. She had driven, by herself, all the way to the mall in Longview where
she'd shopped for everyone on her list. She loved things on sale. Other than her $100 bottle of stolen wine, she'd never willingly paid full price for anything. Doug—for all his hard-core negotiating and care—was the one constantly telling her to buy the best and not regret it, but she couldn't resist a good deal. So the car, his since it was bigger than her Nissan, was crammed with Cinderella Barbies for Bitsy and Emma, half-price sweaters for her dad and Cole, a cookbook for her dad's girlfriend Tammi, and a set of zebra-print towels for her friend Rhonda. Normally, she wouldn't presume to buy another woman bath towels, but Rhonda had emailed a link to the style and said, “If I don't get these for Christmas I'm going to sit down on the floor and cry. Tell Frank you're getting them for me, and he'll pay you back. It'll save me from having to return yet another colossal disaster that he puts under the tree.”

For Doug, a new book by an author she'd never heard of that he'd read a review of in The New Yorker, a magazine which he read cover to cover and that she only enjoyed the cartoons. She'd also found expensive silicone spatulas in a cheery red that would go well in their kitchen. Doug liked to cook a lazy Saturday breakfast—blueberry corncakes, melon and prosciutto salads, crisp peppered bacon. When she made breakfast for herself, it was usually instant oatmeal from a variety pack. She hated the days when the only packets left were the plain, so she always tried to have a fresh banana or a bit of peach on hand to slice into it.

She'd made two purchases for herself that evening: the first was silk camisole and tap pant set. They were a rich green and Christmassy and would set off her fair coloring, as well as hide her upper thighs that tended to carry the majority of the last 15 pounds she wanted to lose. The other purchase was a faux-fur throw. It was cheap and Doug would hate it, but she couldn't stop petting the throw in the store. Besides, it was only ten dollars.
Shivering in the street, she dumped out the big plastic bag with Rhonda's towels and quietly reloaded it with her chosen supplies. Steam still escaped the exhaust pipes, and her breath misted while she rustled around, the trunk thoughtfully illuminated by a small bulb. She was thankful for the car's trunk latching feature—with a light pressure it closed itself in a pressurized whoosh instead of a slam like her Nissan, now a twisted pile of scrap in a junkyard, required. The neighbor's houses seemed asleep, but she didn't want to attract any attention.

After shutting the trunk, she began walking, not bothering to lock the car behind her. It didn't matter. Let them have it. She didn't have far to go, and she hummed to herself as she walked. *Baby, it's cold outside.*

The homes in Holly Hill were mostly two stories. Cape Cod style, as the developer said when she and Doug met him at the planning session, pointing to glossy photos of pristine siding in muted pastels, trimmed in pure white. When he made partner, Doug signed the papers on a corner lot with a balcony leading from the upstairs master suite that overlooked the pie-shaped back yard. She had insisted on the two-story model—barring her mother's post-divorce duplex, she'd grown up in one-story homes and found stairs terribly elegant. The thought of little feet running down them on Christmas morning, an evergreen garland with white twinkle lights woven through the balusters, thrilled her.

While they were building, and living in a teeny first floor apartment close to the interstate, she had helped plan the house. Once she and Doug wed, she became a full-time housewife, a term she and Doug giggled over, and she spent hours with decorating magazines, clipping photos from her favorites, creating photo albums online. The building had taken months longer than the developer had promised—but she told herself the wait was worth it. She had an investment in every inch of the house, from the Saltillo tile floors to the antique doorknobs it had
taken her weeks to find, bid, and win on eBay, to the reddish stain on the baluster that ran up those treasured stairs.

They never had managed the pitter pattering, but she had fashioned a hell of a garland with poinsettias tucked in, silver beads, and on the landing, a red and golden bow.

Of course, all that was gone now.

Her street, Everglades, was quiet and she approached the curb where her home used to be. The house next door, a faint light glowing in what JoBeth knew to be the living room, still had too many cars in the driveway, stacked in a way that she thought was trashy. It had bothered her, on that Thanksgiving morning with her family coming over, the way all those cars piled next door looked like a used lot.

Trashy cars were nothing compared to the abomination of what used to be her own home, hulking in front of her. The structure was still there, vaguely—it looked like a burnt-out jack-o-lantern. The red orange flames that had consumed it so hungrily, so mercilessly, had gouged out holes in the walls, had left streaks of black as a reminder of its presence. Someone—probably Cole and her dad—had boarded the front door to cover up its open-mouthed death scream, along with the first floor windows that had popped out, a shower of shredded glass that sounded like gunfire when they blew. The grass around the house, already paper dry from the drought, was gone through a combination of fire and the firefighters stomping around like alien astronauts. The rosebushes were cracked in half, the flowerbed with the zinnias she'd nursed from seed was a trampled wreck. The roof was gone, bare jousts blackened with smoke. It smelled of fire, of the stale water from fire hoses, of burned plastic, of something sweeter and gristlier.

Across the street, Ed Miller's front porch light went on, but no one came out. She edged around the side of the house, in the narrow space between the property lines carefully delineated
by red-tipped photinias (amazingly alive), and climbed through the remainder of her side gate into the backyard where she'd have less chance of being spotted. The edge of her sweatshirt caught a raw edge of wood, broken through by the firefighters, and she took a moment to untangle herself. The minimally landscaped backyard, with its plain expanse of Saint Augustine grass unadorned except for Edgar's ashen piles of poop, bore the evidence of the firefighters as well—pockets of dried mud where the excess water had created mini-torrents in the grass. She picked her way over more shattered glass and tugged at a loose edge of plywood over what had been her living room window.

She hadn't been inside since Thanksgiving night. Before. When her home smelled of turkey and pecan pie and fresh baked rolls. When it was filled with the laughter of children and conversation and the ball game on television. Her family, her friends, had urged her not to return to the house until it was safe. Whether safe meant cleared accessible by officials, or safe for JoBeth's fragile state they wouldn't say.

“Not until you're ready, sweetheart,” her mother Gloria had said, handing her a plate with grilled cheese on whole wheat and a bowl of homemade tomato soup. The plate and bowl were hand-thrown clay. No Chinese ceramic in Gloria Haskin's house. “There's no need to rush,” she murmured while JoBeth slurped the soup.

“When will I be ready?” JoBeth asked. So far, no one had answers for her. Even to what seemed like the simplest of questions. Why did my house burn down? What killed my husband? Was he dead when he burned? How bad does he look? They cremated him without letting her see the body—Cole did the identification for her, a sacrificial act to be sure, but surely what she imagined, the crackled skin, eyeballs melted in the sockets, his beautiful body rotted and gore, must be entirely worse than reality. But she didn't have the chance to see.
“You'll know,” Gloria replied, idly braiding the curly wisps of JoBeth's hair while she ate her sandwich. “You'll just wake up, and you'll know.”

This, like the rest of the euphemisms offered to her between the folds of greeting cards and in the press of perfumed hugs, was worthless. It was impossible to wake up to any clarity when she felt like she never slept. That in the week since the fire, the funeral, the endless condolences, her dreammares and nightwakes and stories and past and present and regret had become molten, fluid, and nothing at all seemed fixed or clear or real.

The board in her hand felt real, the acrid smell burning her throat, the rough spot under her nose that was rubbed raw from crying.

The plywood tore free with enough room for her to edge one pajama-clad leg over the edge, balance her weight without cutting herself on the glass, and step fully into the wreckage of her living room.

They had shown her pictures of the house, her father and Cole, trying to be helpful. To get her used to the shock, the total devastation. It was laughable, really, what film cannot contain. Sometimes a good picture can capture the quality of life, through laughter or a smile, the turn of a curl, the loft in an exhilarated jump. This picture, this reality, had no words. Destruction is tough to capture.

The television, a flat screen Doug bought with bonus money at the firm, lay melted and twisted by the wall. The couches, brown leather, stank of burned flesh, the coils showing through the ravaged cushions. The wooden shelves where she'd kept her photo albums, her favorite books and keepsakes, were toppled and burned. Piles of half-scorched books, waterlogged and warped, lay like bloated offerings, their pages spread wide. The sight of the one room, the place where she and Doug had eaten casual dinners at the coffee table, argued about finances, played
Scrabble, and occasionally made love because they were childless and had the freedom to be naked in the living room, was a blackened, ash-filled sore.

She gagged and spit mucous in a corner that had once housed a grandfather clock from his mother's side of the family. His elegant, east-coast family who wore the finest suits to the funeral, wept soundlessly into linen handkerchiefs, and left as quietly as they came. Their only mark the white funeral spray that shamed the florid, overblown arrangements from the rest of Claymore. Gloria had brought some of them back to the duplex, determined to make use of them in some way. Perhaps to end up in a potpourri or a sachet packet.

Yet one afternoon, while Gloria was away getting groceries, JoBeth took advantage of her rare moment alone to shove a fistful of noxious gladiolas down the disposal, whirring and gurgling, until it overflowed. The rest she dumped out back on top of her mother's compost pile, leaving the cards and the little plastic holders intact.

Making her way carefully through the house, she scrabbled and high-stepped to the room that had once upon a time been her kitchen. Her appliances stood in the same places, but the cabinets were partially gone and wires hung free. Black patches marred the once-yellow (Buttercup) walls and shattered glass created a ghostly mosaic on her granite (Glacial Mountain) countertops. She didn't open the refrigerator—not having any desire to discover what a week's worth of no power had done to her leftovers. The cream sauce for the cranberry bread, with real butter and cream, was a special loss. The paper handprint turkeys Emma and Bitsy had made for her at school were burnt into indistinguishable curls. Her dishes—the ones she'd registered for her wedding and featured a subtle floral pattern she'd hoped would be classic forever—were gone. The silver cross her father had given her on confirmation, still hung on the wall, a spot near the back door, apparently unhurt. She left it there.
The dining room, where they had sat around her Queen Anne table, the cornucopia centerpiece that she'd bought real little gourds for, and colorful leaves from Jo-Ann's fabrics, was a jumble of wood and more ash. Her china cabinet with the heavy crystal from Grandma Mimi had exploded open, the wooden shelves burned and fallen. Part of the ceiling was gone, and she could see through the rafters to the bedroom above.

It was the smallest bedroom, the one Doug had called the nursery, but procreation was delayed, so he used it for a home gym. The room housed a treadmill, bench set, and an elliptical machine that he bought for her that she never used. He used the gym so frequently—almost every day—it always had an aroma of his sweat. Of course, now it wouldn't. Some of the dumbbells had fallen through the weakened ceiling and lay on bits of broken chairs.

The carpet had burned off the stairs and some of the steps were missing. A yellow caution ribbon was taped at the landing, and it was the brightest thing in the house of grays and blacks. It tore easily. She had a wild thought of wrapping it around herself, twisting and turning in the yellow tape until she was fully encased, like a mummy. Instead, she let it flutter to the ground. Like the bills. Like ashes.

The partial stairs were tougher to navigate than the relatively stable ground floor. She grabbed the wall for balance with her bag in her right hand. Unlike Gloria, she had never hung pictures on her stairway and had never planned to, so her palm rubbed the wall unhindered. She made it to the second-floor landing without falling.

Upstairs, the fire damage and the gaping holes in the floor disoriented her. Had it not been for habit and an ingrained sense of direction she wouldn't have believed the room at the end of the hallway to be her bedroom was actually that. She crossed the threshold. It was worse than downstairs. The fire had painted a gruesome mural on her walls, streaks of black and gray
painted with the gleefulness of a ghoul. What had been her marital bed, a king with shabby-chic bedding, a splurge from Pottery Barn, was now an imploded mass of metal and charred mattress.

In a sickening rush, her right leg gave way beneath her. Her foot stabbed through weakened flooring with a crack. Throwing her weight left, she landed painfully on her hip, barely escaping falling through. Hanging there, she shook at the strain of her own body weight as parts of the ceiling fall to the floor beneath her in thuds and showers of dust.

When she pulled up, her shin dragged on a nail. A gash opened through her pajama bottoms, her skin stinging. Blood seeping on Cole's cowboys. Checking the wound, she thought about a tetanus shot, and then remembered. She wouldn't need one. She gagged, for pain or fear she didn't know, crawled toward her bathroom and, snot and tears running freely burning the rough spot under her nose, and vomited onto the shattered tile floor. She couldn't make it to the toilet—it was barred with rubble and probably didn't work, but at least she hadn't puked on her own bedroom floor.

After a minute, she crawled back—it seemed easier, on all fours, rather than placing one foot in front of the other—toward the remains of the place she'd slept every night alongside her husband. Clearing a space for herself free of debris, her hands blackened with soot. Stomach acids sour in her mouth, she climbed toward what had been her side of the bed. Doug had liked the side closest to the bedroom door, in case of intruders, he'd said. A romantic.

She opened her bag, and tugged out the faux fur throw. Spreading it over the charred, moldy mattress and remnants of pillows. The wine top unscrewed easily and she poured a generous amount into the Ariel cup. She had not sunk so low as to drink directly from the bottle.

“To us,” she said aloud, her voice echoing strangely in the barren room. The maudlin toast embarrassed her and she whispered, “Sorry. I don't mean it that way.” The wine was cold
and tart and rinsed the bitter vomit residue away. She unwrapped the first apple pie and opened
the bottle of Xanax. The crust crumbled a bit onto the throw with the first bite, but she didn't
mind. The filling was gooey enough that the pills stayed suspended amidst the apple pieces when
she poked them into the pies, dot by dot until the canister was empty. With big enough bites, and
generous swallows of cold white wine, she hardly noticed the pills at all.

She ate and drank slowly, steadily, wrapped in her blanket. She consumed her future the
way the fire had consumed her life, mindlessly, fearlessly, and without thought of the loss and
damage she would leave behind.
Chapter 2
Before and After

The indistinguishable voice coming from just behind the back of her head, JoBeth realized, was not an inductive call from heaven but someone barking through a speaker. “Joopresscallbu-on?”

She lay stunned, facing up to an unfamiliar ceiling, blinking. The ceiling had fluorescent lights and the same moveable tiles the high school had. She knew she wasn't dead; she was pretty sure she wasn't at Claymore High School either. She'd never gone to sleep at work before, and had certainly never woken up flat on her back staring at the ceiling. She'd heard others had—a few years back a counselor the cattiest teachers referred to as “the chinless wonder” had a raging affair with a science teacher. Both females. But, as far as she could recall JoBeth had never been in a similar predicament.

The surroundings were totally unfamiliar, but bespoke of a hospital with its generic green walls, bad floral artwork, and a whiteboard across the room with the date on it and a sign that read, Your Floor Nurse Today is: Ashley!

An I.V. ran from the back of her right hand to a standing pole beside the bed she was lying in, which explained why she was on her back. She normally slept on her side or her stomach. The bed was hospital issue, raised handrails on either side. The right arm of her “Woman of Faith” sweatshirt was jaggedly cut off mid-arm, exposing her wrist and hand which rested on top of a thin blue blanket. Her mother would be royally pissed at the waste of a perfectly good sweatshirt, though she'd probably turn it into a tote bag or dust rags or stuffing for a knitted toy.
The pillow crinkled when she moved and a quick check under the blanket told her she was still in Cole's cowboy pajamas. She lifted her hands, palm facing away. Dirt darkened beneath her fingernails in little half-moons but her wedding ring was still present. It was a platinum band with a flawless princess-cut diamond. Doug had ordered it for her from Tiffany's. She'd pretended to love it, but secretly she had hoped for something a little less generic. Something antique, or with color even, like Princess Diana's sapphire. Her mother had been an unabashed Princess Diana fan, and JoBeth had secretly admired the new princess even more. Had DVR'd the wedding and bought every trashy magazine with William and Kate on the cover in spite of Doug's teasing.

She pulled the sweatshirt neckline back to sniff under an armpit. Musky and sour and reeking of ash: she hadn't bathed.

A beep, and the voice again. “Joopresscallbu-on?”

“No,” JoBeth said aloud. Wondering if the speaker could hear her.

How had she gone from sleeping in a fire-torn abyss with the taste of chilled grapes and apple-flavored Xanax, to this person yelling at her through stone-age speakers?

She twisted her head but couldn't figure out how to work the dials, so ignored the voice and the irritation behind it. Pulling the blanket off of her legs, she found her feet still in socks, but no tennis shoes. Her shoes were in a plastic bin on the floor next to the bed, and the shoelaces had been removed. After pulling the sheet curtain aside, she discovered she had a roommate, not five feet away.

A large black woman lay on her side on the narrow hospital bed, her face turned away to the window. One full arm rested against the curve of her body. Her elbow, the one JoBeth could see, had warts on it. The woman's feet stuck out of the end of the blanket and her ankle-cuff
socks were mismatched: one pink with purple stripes and the other yellow with multi-colored stars. Both showed severe signs of wear at the toes and heels and the pink one had a hole in the tip. Her big toe, poking exuberantly through the top of the sock, was painted a sparkly purple. The woman, her brown hair in wild tangles, was snoring.

“Hello?” JoBeth whispered, even though it was impolite to wake a sleeping stranger. The woman didn't move.

The exit door to their room wasn't completely closed, and outside in the hall someone wearing green scrubs passed by with a rolling cart. Food smells drifted with it, as did laughter from further away, out of sight. A smaller second door led to what appeared to be a bathroom about eight feet away.

Scooting past the handrails, JoBeth eased her stockinged feet out of the bed and stood wobbly on the floor. Whatever blood had been in her head travelled rapidly down her extremities. She held on, breathing the dizziness away. Dragging the IV pole with her, she shuffled her way to the bathroom, cramped over with stomach pains. The bathroom light hummed when she flicked it on, and she saw the small space was outfitted with a toilet, a wheelchair bar and a shower. It also had a mirror. Small, icy clean, and all too clear.

JoBeth still had dirt caked on her face, and the edges of her lips were cracked and sore. The fair skin underneath her eyes was blackened, as if she had been punched. Maybe she had. Her muscles were sore, tender, and she had a nauseous feeling in the pit of her stomach that radiated outward in queasy pulses, in time to her heartbeat. She raised a hand to her lips, touching the dry skin gingerly. The bathroom bore none of her personal effects: she remembered with a clutch of sorrow her favorite lip balm that she kept beside her bedside at home. Before. It came in a yellow and red tube and was called Boss Lady Lip balm, with a pinup cowgirl saucily
roping the air above her. The balm tasted of vanilla and had SPF 18 and was one of JoBeth's favorite things. Applying the balm was an indulgence, a ritual, to slide over her lips before she fell asleep each night. It was also one of the many things that had melted into a pile of nothing. She pursed her lips together, ignoring the dry sting.

Her hair, white blonde, seemed to have formed a tangle conspiracy with her roommate's: it too sprung wildly from her head. What in hell had happened to her hair? A squirrel orgy? She lifted sections in small chunks, peering through it carefully. Did she have new strands of gray? Her mother had gone completely gray since age 35 and had a longstanding love affair with Clairol Nice 'n Easy Natural Brown until the divorce. After that, she let the gray reign.

JoBeth once read in a Stephen King novel about a woman who had gone completely gray after a forced encounter with the devil. JoBeth didn't believe much in the devil, but she did believe shock and stress could age a person. The first time she'd seen Gloria fully gray, post-divorce, she cried. Gloria, ever calm and free of self-consciousness, had understood. “It's a reckoning with mortality, honey,” she'd said. “That's why you're so upset.”

Whatever that meant. In the mirror, JoBeth's hair proved to be as blonde as it ever was, not that it mattered.

She ran cool water over her hands and when her legs began shaking, she sat down on the toilet, pajama pants on. Her stomach cramped viciously—worse than menstrual cramps, worse than her father's chili.

A tap sounded and a short woman with thick blue eyeliner and bleached hair swung the door wide without waiting for JoBeth's yes. The dancing caterpillars smiling from the woman's scrubs were in sharp contrast to her disgruntled expression. “Did you push the call button? You need help?” The voice was the one from the speaker. Joopresscallbu-on?
“No,” JoBeth said. “I didn't call for help. Do I need to?”

“You shouldn't press the button unless you're trying to call,” the woman said. Her name tag read Ashley. “We have a lot of patients in this wing, and I can't be expected to run up and down the hallways on false alarms.”

Alarms. The alarms—real not false—sounding. The sirens screaming down her street, the honks and the beeps and police officers barking into walkie talkies. A night full of noises and flashing lights and stinging smells. That night, after midnight sales and a trunk full of presents, halted by a pockmarked-faced cop on her way home, the way to her street barred by emergency vehicles. She'd left Doug's Cadillac a block away, engine on, as she raced into the noise and the unbelievable heat. Her feet slapping down the street as she ran past the police barricade, through the choking smoke. Her neighbors holding each other in huddled groups, some on cell phones, terror marching across their faces as if they feared the judgment devouring JoBeth's life would leap catty corner onto their wood-framed houses and consume them also. Alarm had its own sound, a smell, a facial expression.

JoBeth rubbed her face in her hands. “Look,” she said to Ashley, finding her voice scratchy and froggy. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push any button, and if I did, I apologize.”

She felt ridiculous for apologizing. After all, she was the one whose life was clearly a wreck and Ashley could seriously use some lessons in elocution when it came to hospital intercommunications.

“Well,” Ashley said. “Fine then.” She crossed her arms, giving JoBeth, with her tattered sweatshirt and dirty fingernails, the once over. “Listen, I can get you some ice chips if your throat is sore. Or a Gatorade?”
Why would her throat be sore? JoBeth swallowed, then realized it wasn't sore; it was shredded. As if she'd swallowed the glass from her exploded china cabinet. She looked up and saw the woman had lost her frustrated demeanor. Some nursing instinct, entwined with innate sympathy, had apparently kicked in.

“That'd be great,” JoBeth said. “Gatorade. With ice.”

The nurse left and JoBeth, door locked for privacy, sat for a good five minutes on the toilet trying to relieve the pressure in her stomach. Nothing. Resigned and dragging the I.V., she returned to her bed to sip the unnaturally blue electrolytes thoughtfully left on a bedside tray. Ashley had pulled the sheet curtain closed again, but JoBeth peeked around it to check the status of her roommate. Still oblivious, the woman in the bed next to her had rolled over. The entire right side of her face was covered in bandages and the left side appeared swollen with shallow cuts. With restless hands, she convulsively worked the edges of her pillow as she slept. The exposed big toe twitched from time to time. Her snoring, a gentle lolling sound, continued.

The sound reminded JoBeth of Doug, of the way she had fallen asleep hearing his snores for the past seven years, up until that night. Since then, the void of silence, the elusiveness of rest. She missed that deep buzzing sound, the ebb and tide, the comfort of knowing another living human being was a hand reach away.

“What happened to you?” JoBeth whispered, even though the woman wouldn't hear. It was enough to ask.

She climbed back in her own bed, careful of the I.V., smoothing the ruined sweatshirt over her arms. Turning to her side, the side she had slept on in her marital bed, she ignored the scratchy texture of the hospital linens. Instead, she listened to her roommate, letting the sound, the rhythm, lull her back to sleep.
When she next woke, it was by unnatural means. As unnatural as Ashley honking through the intercom, and no less of a surprise. A narrow-shouldered man in a white jacket stood next to her bed, gazing down at her. How long he'd been there she had no idea, but he had kind eyes and a tentative mustache, and didn't look like the rapist type.

The curtain by her neighbor's bed was open. The bed was empty and made up fresh.

“’I'm Dr. Palmer,’” the man said, extending a hand.

She clasped, and offered enough of a shake to not embarrass her father. He'd given her handshaking lessons when she turned sixteen and applied for her first job at the Hallmark store. “I don't hold truck with that half-handed little girl BS,” he had said, making her practice with him in the backyard, his hand still cold from his beer. “Shake like a man, and you'll earn a man's wage.” So far he'd been wrong about the wages, but the handshake stuck.

Dr. Palmer looked a little older than she was, maybe mid-thirties, half a foot shy of six feet. But he didn't seem like he came from Claymore. Funny the way a town can seep its DNA in its general populace, no matter how many family trees thrive there. She didn't know any Palmers. Cole was better than she was at people—she'd have to ask him.

Dr. Palmer cleared his throat, as if making way for a formal speech. “I’d like to tell you a little bit about why you’re here.” His words came out with a rehearsed tone, as if he'd said them many times before. Perhaps he had. “I imagine you have questions, but let's start out with what we know.” He smiled a little. Kindness twitched his mustache, seeped into his tone.

Evidently, Dr. Palmer knew plenty. If not from first-hand experience, then from various reports and witnesses. Through Dr. Palmer's even explanations, woven with graceful euphemisms, he informed JoBeth of what she didn't remember. He gave her the facts: multi-
faceted jewels that shimmered with a foreign sheen—key points her life, and she'd missed
them!— the spinning imagination in her head, of kaleidoscope color and whirling sounds, strung
them together, these silken threads of what she didn't remember.

She didn't remember, nor did Dr. Palmer have much information to report on, the
teenagers who found her when they snuck into her burned out home to smoke pot. How they had
scuttled up the stairs, much easier than she had, daring one another to go higher, leaping like
hinds feet over the missing steps, one dropping a lighter and the hands-paper-scissors game to
play for who had to retrieve it. The loser who did, who crept back up to his buddy, already
planning to brag to their friends how they'd found a dark-of-the-moonstage spot, where someone
had actually died, man. Their bravado-laced snickers that they choked on when they found her,
passed out, empty bottle by one ear, drooling onto the blanket she still clutched in one arm. She
didn't remember their heated debate over whether or not to call 911 because they'd get busted or
their accusations as to whose fault this was. Neither got close enough to touch her—they rightly
suspected her as the originator of the vomit pile that smelled incontrovertibly ripe. One flipped a
coin, a Chuck E. Cheese token he kept for luck since second grade, lost, and made the call. They
had no idea she was the homeowner: they thought she was a drifter, possibly a crack addict,
which they airily surmised to the operator when they made the call.

She didn't remember the firefighters—those blackened astronauts revisiting the lifeless
planet—who came back to the house and had to remove her, because the first EMT at the scene,
a sturdy Hispanic woman who could out benchpress most of her coworkers, ran out of luck on
the rickety stairs, recently so rife with traffic, falling through the eighth one to break a femur and
two ribs. Nor did she remember the streams of her neighbors watching the second tragedy unfold
at 8115 Everglades within the space of seven days. The silent shakes of their heads, the
whispered conjectures, the covering of the little ones' eyes so as not to see her loaded up on a gurney and unceremoniously chuted into the back of an ambulance lit up like Christmas. Ed Miller, bare breasts bobbing in the cold with his open robe, ready and waiting to provide further news bytes for the Claymore Gazette.

She didn't remember the sirens screaming across town in the ambulance, the new set of attendants hauling her out of the silvery shiny doors, nor being parked conspicuously in the Claymore County Hospital hallway while awaiting triage. She hadn't heard the chatty conversation of the attending physician and assistants—two of whom were flirting about one's recent weight loss and the other's new-to-him BMW—while they pumped her stomach clean of Xanax, Pinot Grigio, and apple pie. She didn't remember mumbling, as the chunks gurgled into a silver bowl, her heart's deepest desire—repeatedly, in between heaves—to a roomful of strangers.

“What it amounted to,” Dr. Palmer said after clearing his throat once more, “was you asked if they would please leave you alone. To leave you alone so you could die.”

The last word fell silently on JoBeth's consciousness and she looked at her fingers, folding and unfolding the thin blue blanket. “Really?” she asked mildly. “I said that?”

He nodded. “It's in your file.”

“How odd,” she said.

“Odd that you said it, or odd that you wanted to die?”

“Both, I suppose. And odd that I have file.” She kept the student files at the school, neat manila folders with permission slips and test scores and discipline issues. She knew that somewhere, probably in the principal's office, there was a file that detailed her work history, her home address and emergency contacts. But the idea of adding such a quotation to it—”Please
leave me alone so I can die”—seemed strange. And, as her mother might once have said, beyond
the pale. Back before she renewed her faith and began enthusiastically proclaiming that no one—
absolutely no one—is beyond the reach of the good Lord almighty. Even those who might or
might not have stomach pump breath.

“Do you think you wanted to die?” Dr. Palmer asked. His face held that impassionate yet
concerned look, the kind cultivated by counselors and police officers. She was familiar with
both—the two women at the high school who mostly dealt with angry parents and scheduling
concerns had both offered their services to JoBeth, in case she “needed an ear.” And then there
was the police officer at the scene of the fire, a man whose bulky mass was oddly graceful as he
kneel, arched on his toes in a squatty pliét, to take her statement while she wept and snotted all
over a fire-department issue shock blanket.

“Is that what you were trying to do? To die?” Dr. Palmer asked again. His stance,
smallish feet encased in soft-soled shoe with fringed tassels, bespoke of infinite patience. He
didn't seem hurried at all, or irritated by her lack of conversation, or the way she had drifted in
and out of listening. He wore a slim gold band on his left hand. She imagined he made a faithful,
if somewhat boring, husband.

“I…I don't know,” she finally said.

He nodded. “Yes?”

“It's all a little blurry.” Since the fire, she had worked so hard to act, to be, normal,
whatever that was—they don't offer handbooks on how to appear normal when your house and
husband go up in flames. The fire itself, the sounds the smells, were in Technicolor. It was the
moments following—Cole picking her up from the curb, wrapping her tighter in the blanket.
Ushering her to his truck, and then to their mother's house where she was in the kitchen rolling
pie crust, in the middle of the night, crying as she worked the dough. “As if pie could help this,” she said, slinging the oven door shut with a hip. The long night blurred to dawn and then day and then night again. Hour after hour in her mother's guest bedroom, watching the clock on the bookshelf, an antique with brassy hands, tick tick tick. Moments passing with no further answers to her biggest question: Why?

“It's hard to make sense of it,” she told Dr. Palmer.

“I imagine it is,” he agreed delicately. “Your parents were here shortly after you were admitted through our emergency intake. Do you recall seeing them?”

She had faint snapshots, the kind she couldn't see but rather sensed, like a distant memory or a favored dream. Her mother—the sound of clicking knitting needles, the sound of her mother waiting—and her father arguing on the phone saying, no, baby, Tammigirl, you're not needed at the hospital. Had he said that, or had she wished it?

It was too painful to think of, how her parents must have heard the news, how frightened they must have been entering the hospital, not knowing what went wrong. How they might have done something differently to help her, when Lord knew, they couldn't have. Ultimately, she didn't know what was reality and what was fantasy, so she gratefully let the snapshot fade away.

“A little. I couldn't say if I actually remember, or if it's something I imagined.”

“That's not so important, right now. Sometimes our memories, or lack thereof, are for our own protection. The mind is a wonderful thing in that way—how it will protect us when we don't even know we need protection.” Dr. Palmer said. “What is important is that you know why you're here and that you understand what the next few days will entail.”
She had gotten momentarily caught on the image of her mind protecting her, a brain in a sort of prophylactic enclosure, keeping the most potent of thoughts from impregnating her psyche. “Okay,” she said, focusing. “Tell me about the next few days.”

“The official terminology,” he explained, “is that you are in involuntary lockdown for the next 72-hours because you are at risk for harming yourself.” He spoke this as if reading from a manual, breezing over “involuntary lockdown” in the same way commercials selling drugs sped over the distasteful side effects. “Since the authorities were called and brought you in, you have been classified as an attempted suicide which is not only potentially fatal, but a misdemeanor offense.”

Attempted suicide. Such an impersonal phrase for something so intensely personal. At school, they held suicide prevention weeks, the “It Gets Better” campaign for kids who were bullied for their sexuality, the Depression Awareness posters, always in gritty black and white with a teenager staring into the distance. They each had phone numbers, websites, and instructions on what to do. She'd heard testimonies, at football pep rallies, no less, from teen advocates and suicide survivors. None of which had come to her mind (wearing the memory condom?) when she parked in front of her former home, climbed rickety stairs and consumed enough controlled substances to fell a Clydesdale.

She hadn't thought she was depressed, or suicidal. But, then again, was there any other way to look at what she'd done?

“That's the scary part, in all the official terms,” Dr. Palmer said. “The good part is that it didn't work.” His mustache twitched and curved up at each end, revealing a friendly row of imperfect teeth. “You're still here. Which means you, and we, have another chance.”
She was here, it hadn't worked. No matter the doctor's kindness or the relief curling up from some hidden part of her spleen that she wasn't dead, a part of her was more than a little pissed. Her prayers had gone unanswered. Yes, she still prayed, but her After prayers were different from the ones Before.

Before, in Sunday school, at meals, in the comfortable pews at church, she prayed for other people's problems, for sick grandparents and husbands without jobs. She asked God to keep American soldiers safe and to help her friends through pregnancies. She prayed for the kids at school, for teachers, and even her principal. She prayed for Doug, for her family, and to be more diligent with her diet and exercise.

After, watching the antique clock tick, tick, tick and hearing the voices downstairs planning her life, she prayed for death. Asked God to come quickly—if Jesus really was going to come riding on a cloud and whisk her away at the resurrection, she'd rather it be sooner than later.

“I understand you've been through a difficult time. A severe loss,” Dr. Palmer said.

Surprisingly, when JoBeth met his eyes, she did see a glimmer of understanding there. A relief after all those moist hands and moist eyes, drippy voices claiming, “I know just how you feel.” Nobody knew just how she felt. She hardly knew how she felt. But Dr. Palmer's acknowledgement of “a severe loss” felt genuine.

He went on, “We see those types of situations fairly frequently with our incoming patients, but for all its frequency, that doesn't diminish the amount of pain you're feeling. To lose a home, and a loved one, is an extreme experience. Sometimes human nature is to pull away in extreme ways, rather than turn to the support of others, or to the comfort of faith.”
At the funeral, when others said they'd be praying for her comfort, she thanked them and reminded God, silently, what kind of comfort she wanted. She sat in the second pew of her church, the very church she and Doug had gotten married in seven years ago. When she had dieted and run and counted calories to squeeze into a size eight dress, Rhonda and Cassie standing up for her at the end of the aisle. She was powdered and perfumed, massaged and painted, her hair spun into fine gold curls. As she walked down the aisle, the diamond heavy on her hand, pinching the handle of her bouquet with a nervous grip, she knew, without a doubt, that this was the most beautiful she would look in her entire life.

At the funeral, 20 pounds heavier with Spanx cutting a permanent vice into her midsection, she looked awful. Eyes red, the underside of her nose chapped from wiping snot, dark blue circles under her eyes no matter how many times Rhonda layered the concealer. The makeup always came off with the crying, and when she wiped it in the soft cotton handkerchief that her father had given her it left flesh-colored streaks, as if she were rubbing herself away. She liked that her father, for all his trailer-living, AA spewing, skirt-chasing ways, was still the type of man to carry a cotton handkerchief. She borrowed a black dress from her mother. It was too small and had unflattering cap sleeves, but it was better than going shopping. Cassie had brought her the black heels—her feet were two sizes bigger than her mother's and she owned nothing but the leopard-print flats she wore the night of the fire, the ones that had slapped a pattern, every fifth step, as she ran. *My house is on fire my house is on fire my house is on fire.*

“Keep 'em,” Cassie said of the shoes. “They were on clearance at Marshall's.” It was just like Cassie to do such a thing. JoBeth checked the tag—they still cost more than any shoes she had in her closet. Before.
So she'd sat, in the same church where she had gotten married. Wearing something old, something new, something borrowed, and something new, in front of the simple urn that held her husband. His photograph, enlarged in black and white, a close up from the couple shot they used for the church directory. The crinkles at his eyes, his even smile with just a hint of laughter, the fine cut of his jaw. To her, he was the most handsome man that she had ever seen, and had only gotten more so over the years while she was always more than a little dumbstruck that he'd chosen her.

The funeral was a bit like regular services at her church, with the music and the sermon and the rising and the sitting. The wooden pews with the purple cushions, the banners hanging from the rafters for advent—already!—and poinsettias perched in the sanctuary's deep windowsills. The difference, of course, was the presence of a dead person.

She made it through, then shook hands with what seemed like an endless stream of mourners, each one wanting to tell her what Doug meant to them. It felt so strange, to be the center of all that attention. When all she'd wanted was to live a happy life, work her job, go back to school, and, perhaps eventually, make babies. None of which seemed possible, as the mournful sounds of Amazing Grace, together with the church's bombastic organ, thumped through her long after the service was over. Even surrounded by her family and friends, she'd never felt so alone.

After the funeral, as she peeled off her pantyhose and left them in a black puddle on the bathroom floor, she wondered at it. Rather than living in ashes, how much sweeter would it be to just be gone? Just to stop. Dr. Palmer might say that was pulling away in an extreme way, but to JoBeth it seemed the simplest path. How much longer could she bear her misery contaminating the very air around her, the people to whom she was supposed to be relying upon for comfort?
As for faith, she felt severely disappointed. When Jesus didn't come for her in the rapture, and when she continued to wake day after day in her mother's house, with papers to sign and casseroles to eat and sickly condolence cards to read, she decided to make her own plan. She thought about it constantly, with little interruption, because nobody really wants to talk to the grieving widow, it's all so uncomfortable. Feigning naps, she plotted. Not in her mother's house. That would be the height of rudeness and cruelty to leave her body for her mother to find. You just don’t kill yourself when you're staying in another person's home, even if she is your mother. She did feel badly about eating all her mother's Xanax. It set a bad example, and prescription drug abuse was no joke. And of course, the EMT with the broken bones. She hadn't thought that through. She'd have to send along a card. When they let her out.

She realized she'd missed a rather considerable bulk of Dr. Palmer's explanations when she finally tuned back in. For now, according to Dr. Palmer, she had another two and a half days to go before they would release her. Plenty of unwanted time to think about what was said and what her imagination spun in all-too-real detail. “We need to keep you here for observation,” he said. “Just keep an eye on you, maybe work on some of what you're going through in a way that's both manageable and productive.”

Keep an eye on her. That was funny. It was as if the whole town had an eye on her already, waiting for the sparks from the inferno that was her life to land willy nilly on their own vulnerable houses. She'd seen it at the funeral, felt their shaking fear when they hugged her, that some of her monstrous bad fortune would seep into their Sunday finest, go home with them and hide in dark corners, only to strike when they least expected it.
“And it's possible we'll recommend continued in-patient care if you're interested,” Dr. Palmer continued. “We'll definitely follow up with outpatient care if you are successful while you're here and we release you.”

“What constitutes success?” she asked. Doug had hung a poster in his weight room with pictures of running athletes with the equation “Sacrifice + Sweat = Success.” She had the first part down, easy. Yet—did it count as a sacrifice if you didn't really mean to give it?

“A good question. Mostly, we consider success your openness to the work,” he said. “We measure it through your participation, your response to the activities and the group work, and the evaluations from the therapists. We hope to build a sense of trust that you're beyond that critical window where you might be a harm to yourself.”

“How big is the window?”

“That's something we'll have to figure out together. You might have already passed it. What do you think?”

She thought about the gaping window behind the plywood door she peeled off. So big, it didn't have glass anymore. The hole in the floor, gobbling her foot. The house, its loss, trying to consume her.

“I don't know.” She thought of the furry throw, left behind and soured with her drool. Her niece's Ariel cup, and the way it would never be innocent again, innocuously filled with orange juice or milk. How what she had done defiled it past the realm of childhood and turned it into something lowly and mean.

Dr. Palmer didn't seem uncomfortable with her sudden tears, or the half snort she uttered trying to contain them. He was probably a person who saw a lot of crying.
“That's okay,” he said, handing her a grainy tissue. “We don't expect you to have the answers right now. It's our job to keep you stabilized and make those decisions as they come. Of course, after the 72-hours,” he said, “you have the option if you would like to stay. We'll release you to our in-patient care program where you'll have therapy and daily group work. It's a safe place to take a look at what brought you to us. You might find that you actually enjoy it and learn a little bit about yourself along the way.”

She decided to believe him because his voice was as kind as his eyes, and later that day, she saw him walking down the hall carrying a sack lunch. She hoped it was filled with boxes of raisins and baby carrots, and a paper napkin folded by his wife who packed it each morning. And maybe, just maybe, homemade oatmeal cookies.
Chapter 3

Records

It was both a comfort and a consternation that she could see her own car—Doug's car, that is—parked in front of the in-patient treatment facility. The day was overcast and cold, but that wasn't why her hand shook as she signed herself in at the intake counter of Quest Mental Health. Various members of her family had offered to drop her off, but she needed to feel that this was voluntary. A deliberate choice after having so many choices taken away.

She was glad now, that they weren't here to see this. A man with an unbuttoned shirt drooling in the hallway, a woman rocking in the waiting room, holding a grungy stuffed rabbit. Did Dr. Palmer think she was like this? Were these her peers?

Though she was afraid, she decided to stay. After all, she had no place to go and leaving meant more awkward conversations, more explanations, and more visits from grieving visitors who really didn't want to come, and more “we've got to move forward, Bethie,” lectures from her brother.

The inpatient facility had marked differences from the emergency 72-hour lockdown. First of all, she entered through the lobby instead of on a gurney, and this time she was conscious. She also had a rolling suitcase tucked beside her, and one of her mother's quilts folded tightly into a pillow case. The receiving nurse, a plump woman with long wavy hair tucked in a black headband, leaving a shock of blonde bangs, looked like an aged Alice in Wonderland and was presumably happy to see her. “Just fill these out, sugar,” she said. “My name's Rayleen. Some of the residents call me Ms. Poteet, on account of my last name's Poteet, but I don't mind to be called Rayleen. Honest.” She pointed at the desk behind her that had a small Christmas tree
propped on it with multi-color blinking lights. It had a plaque beside it that read, in emphatic lettering, JESUS IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON. “I'll be right over here if you have any questions.”

JoBeth, wearing new jeans and a sweater from a shopping spree at Wal-Mart, sat on a green pleather chair and filled out page after page, checking her insurance card from the school for the numbers and codes. She paused over one paragraph, whose language basically told her once she signed she relinquished her rights to deciding whether or not she could be medically released from the facility. As in, her car was parked outside, but she would no longer have the authority to choose whether or not she could get in it and drive away. She hummed the chorus of Hotel California and scribbled out her signature. After all, what else in her life could possibly go wrong?

Rayleen flicked through the papers with calm efficiency. “Looks like you've dotted all your I's and crossed your t's. Let's go find you a room.” This, said with the enthusiasm of someone attending an egg hunt. The hallway, painted a light tan and hung with the occasional artwork—mostly pastoral scenes, a few houses tucked in forests—was quieter than that of the lockdown ward. It featured less moaning and outright crying, fewer clattering of bedpans as angry overnighters clamored for release.

Some of the patient rooms had Christmas wreaths decorating the front, but JoBeth hadn't brought anything by way of decoration. If she had her way, she would skip Christmas altogether. With everything else going on in her life, she had no room for a holiday. She'd left the bags of Christmas presents in her mother's closet at home, unable to bear looking through them again.

Her room, fourth one on the right, lacked the medical equipment and the moveable beds, and the tension-charged air. Her new room was something like a college dorm, with two shallow
beds and one window. A ceiling fan, a little crooked but on constant rotation, knocked gently overhead in spite of the cold outside. It was nice. JoBeth liked to go to sleep to the creaking of a fan. The furniture was pale pine, and the empty bed had sheets and a plain green blanket. The room also boasted two nightstands, a small bookshelf, and a dresser.

“You can get acquainted here for a bit, and we'll call you for group work in about an hour,” Rayleen said. She turned, her soft nurse shoes squishing competently down the hall.

JoBeth unrolled the quilt from the pillowcase and spread it over the bed nearest the window. Fluffed her pillow and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at her own feet. Trying to figure out what to be thankful for, in this moment. In the psych ward, they had encouraged her to look at the positive things in her life, and to be thankful for them, no matter how small.

As she unpacked, she sang a little song from one of her mother's favorite CDs. Let everything that, everything that, everything that has breath praise the Lord. It sounded hollow, even to her, so she stopped. She lined her socks, her t-shirts, her pants in the drawers. All new, all from Wal-Mart. The bottom of the suitcase held a special treasure—a teddy bear from Bitsy and Emma. The bear was missing an eye and smelled of the girls' strawberry shampoo. JoBeth had wept when Cole stoically handed it over, and now she pulled it tight to her chest. It made her feel better than the song.

“I am thankful for my nieces. For my brother. For a safe place to sleep,” she whispered to the bear. “I am thankful to be alive.” This was mostly true. She looked at her tennis shoes, with one untied shoelace. “I am thankful for shoelaces.”

Back in the psychiatric ward, before she was released, her shoelaces had appeared on her bed, out of nowhere. Now, with great care and enthusiasm, she made a little bow, like her mother.
had taught her. Make a loop, the rabbit goes around and through. Never again would she take shoelaces for granted.

While she was contemplating the benefits of a double-knot, the sounds of Rayleen's squishy shoes came down the hall with another, heavier, footfall. “We'll put you in here,” she was saying with a twang. “You two can get settled on in together.”

At that her former roommate, she of the mismatched socks and gentle snore, walked in.

She was bigger than JoBeth remembered, when she lay on her side in the hospital. Today she wore orange sweatpants straining to maximum capacity and a yellow men's long-sleeved Henley with the buttons undone, most likely to make room for her impressive breasts. Between them was a coin-shaped pendant, gold, surrounded with gemstones of various Easter-toned colors. Bubble-gum pink and lavender, aquamarine, and sea-foam green. More impressive than her bustline or her jewelry was the puckered wound surrounding her right eye. The bandages were gone and the newly-revealed scar was shiny pink, and stood in raw contrast to her dark brown skin. It made the back of JoBeth's legs ache to look at it.

The woman's hair was pulled back in a neat bun, and when she smiled it was big enough to show a missing tooth, also on the right side. “Got your shoelaces back, huh?”

“Looks like it,” JoBeth agreed.

She woman clapped lightly. “Way to go, kid.” JoBeth found it odd the woman called her kid, as they seemed to be the same age.

“Although I don't know how someone could actually hurt themselves with shoelaces.” JoBeth ran the cotton through her fingers. Fingers now clean of the ashes. She scrubbed herself twice daily in the little shower from the psych ward, with spare slivers of soap that looked like they came from the type of motels her family used to stay in on vacations. Before she was
married and Doug explained to her the difference between a motel and a hotel. After she was married, it was hotels from then on. “Don't they look kind of flimsy to you?”

“You'd be surprised. I had a cousin who hung himself in prison using the elastic band from his drawers. 'Course, he'd always been real creative. Won the third-grade science fair for making a toy car that'd run on electricity from a potato.” The woman hauled a duffle bag with the words “Claymore Junior High Track and Field” stenciled on the side in yellow letters, inside the room. “I'm bunking with you again, looks like.”

“Welcome.” She had no room for a holiday, but, she realized, she did have a place for a roommate. It would be nice not to be alone. After waking up in a shared room at the hospital, she had been transferred to a single for the remainder of her 72-hours. Even with the small group work, she had never seen her former roommate again.

“Don't know if you remember—my name's Maybelline.” She offered a hand, and JoBeth grasped it, in the way her father taught her. “You were pretty out of it,” Maybelline added.

JoBeth thought about pots and kettles, and Maybelline's consistent snores. But she only said, “JoBeth. Pleased to meet you.”

The bed's springs groaned as Maybelline sat down. She picked up a pillow and sniffed it, plumped it to her satisfaction, and laid it down again. “Is it just me, or doesn’t everything smell like Lysol in here? Like it don't smell like nobody or nothing, just chemicals?”

“I guess so,” JoBeth said and returned her attention to her shoes. She decided the laces should start from the bottom and move up through the grommets. She poked the aglet through the bottom rung. “I hadn't thought about it.”

“See, my house? I got two kids so it mostly smells like junk food and dirty socks, but also what I'm cooking. You like to cook?” Maybelline didn't pause for an answer, which was fine
with JoBeth, as she didn't seem to need an answer. “Probably you do. I find most folks either love to cook or hate it, ain't much in between.”

JoBeth made an indeterminate murmur. The last things JoBeth had cooked were perfect: the butter basted turkey, the sausage-sage stuffing, cinnamon pecan pie. She would never eat any of those things again. She might never cook again. She would be fine if the rest of her meals came on cafeteria trays, from little frozen boxes, or drive-through windows. Fine if she never again saw the bottom of a “so sorry your life went up in flames” casserole. No more potholders or big spoons, or wooden rolling pins handed down from her grandmother.

“Yeah, it smell like cooking,” Maybelline continued. “Not like the mess they serve up in these hospitals. Chicken salad look like cat vomit. Taste about like it, too.” Maybelline shook her head. “Don't you think chicken salad should have some kind of oomph to it? You know, raisins or walnuts or little bits of apple? Something crunchy to remind a person she got some teeth and know how to use 'em.”

“My mom makes pretty good chicken salad,” JoBeth offered. “She adds mustard to it, so it kind of tastes like deviled eggs.”

“Mustard?” Maybelline pulled back her lip, as if this was an abomination not to be borne. “No offense to your mama, but chicken salad don't need no mustard. When they serving lunch up in here?”

“The schedule up front said 12:30. There's supposed to be a buffet line and a salad bar.”

“You think they got soup?” Again, no pause for an answer. Maybelline tugged at the pendant, sliding it up and down the chain as she talked. “In winter, I like a good soup. I make the good stuff—not from a can—so our place smell real nice. 'Cept for our cat. Don't know why we got it. Just showed up one day and my littlest says 'Can we keep him, ma?' and ever since his
daddy forgot Christmas and that child ain't got nothing but two matchbox cars for presents under a tree that done lost its leaves I said, yeah. But I hate that cat. It always looking at me, jumping out from underneath my couch. My boy named it Steve, Lord knows why.” The pendant dropped. “How 'bout you? You got any animals make your house smell bad?”

It was an odd question, but the woman seemed to want to build a friendship so JoBeth considered it. She swallowed, thinking of Before and After. “We've got a dog, Edgar. But he mostly stays outside. Or,” she swallowed. “He did. He's at my mom's house. He smells okay—he got burned in a fire, so he has this medicine that's got kind of a minty smell. It's not too bad.”

“Steve never been burned,” Maybelline said. “Got his tail broke, though, so it kind of crooked. Gotta take a potty break,” she announced. “Gonna be a while. You got a magazine?”

JoBeth laughed. “Just a Home & Gardens, from my mom.” She handed it over and Maybelline disappeared into the bathroom.

Alone once more, JoBeth thought of Edgar, who had not given her away when she'd snuck out for her midnight adventure. She had brought the dog home three years ago, after a particularly inspirational episode of “The Dog Whisperer,” when she'd gone to the Claymore pound and rescued him. At the pound, he'd been behind the chain-link gate in his own little kennel, with two red bowls upheaved on the floor. He had one toy that was half-mauled: a purple cow with little nubby horns. He was the height of her knee and had a white fuzzy coat with irregular black spots, black ears and chocolate-brown eyes. One black ear stayed perked up and the other flopped over on itself, halfway down. His tongue, pink with black spots, was the size of a sneaker sole. When she approached, Edgar had placed both fat paws on the gates, tongue flapping, and tilted his speckled head to one side. As if he were saying, “You ready to take me home, or what?” He hadn't looked desperate or depressed, like those poor children with flies
crawling all over their faces in Africa. He looked like fun, and like he should belong to her. So, she paid from her own special checking account, “fun money,” she and Doug called it, and took him home.

Surprisingly, Doug had been delighted with her choice, and said he'd always wanted a dog, but his father was allergic. He scuffed the dog on the neck and even let Edgar lick him on the face. That was before Edgar had eaten through one of Doug's leather loafers and peed on his briefs. Legal, not underwear. The dog had also torn the leg off the ottoman and ripped through the back screen door. Worse, Doug seemed to have inherited his father's allergies. One morning, after he'd wrestled Edgar in the bathtub to scrub him from the squirrel poop he'd managed to coat himself in, he pleaded with JoBeth. Through puffy eyes and a reddened nose, he apologized. “I'm sorry, Jo, but I'm not sure I can do this.”

“It doesn't seem fair to make him an outside dog,” Doug said. “You think the shelter will take him back?” They both knew, however, that it wouldn't.

JoBeth had insisted that she would care for the dog herself, and that she'd make him cozy in the yard. Lots of owners did it that way. And hadn't God made dogs with fur so they could withstand the elements?

They started out playing with him in the backyard, throwing the ball around, sometimes taking him on walks through the neighborhood, proudly strolling by eerily similar wood houses, nodding to neighbors they'd never met, pretending that they had a real community and weren't simply living in a place where people knew each other's cars but not each other's names.

But then Doug got so busy with the office and JoBeth's own life grew with other interests and responsibilities. The leash gathered dust on its hook in the garage, and the empty backyard was lined with worn-through patches in the grass where Edgar patrolled the perimeter of the
fence. He had his own igloo-shaped doghouse that promised to be warm and cozy, even when temperatures dropped below freezing. JoBeth wanted to let him inside more often than she did, but Doug was right: the dog smelled bad from spending so much time out of doors and it was such a hassle to bathe him or take him to the groomer.

Since the fire, Edgar lived with Gloria who no doubt sponge-bathed him with organic suds and lined his bed with lavender petals. They seemed a happy pair.

“You know what we need?” Maybelline said, slamming the door behind her. “A candle—something to make this place smell like a house. You got any candles?”

“No. Sorry. I do like them though. Back home, I had this candle that smelled like oranges and vanilla. It was kind of fancy so I usually only burned it when guests came over, but that was my favorite.” Fancy to JoBeth meant more than ten dollars for a candle. The candle came in a little green box with a pointed roof, and the ingredients were spelled in English and French. Doug gave her one for every birthday, and sometimes on their anniversary. She thought she might like to try the other fragrances, like sandalwood or eucalyptus, but Doug had settled that that was her favorite, so orange and vanilla was what she got.

“Maybe we can get it from your house—somebody bring it up on visitor's day.”

“Oh—I'm not sure that's a good idea,” JoBeth said.

“Don't expect they'd give us no lighters, anyway.” Maybelline sighed. “You can do a lot of damage with a lighter. I had a cousin one time played with a lighter out in Bastrop? Caught fire during a drought and burned down fifty houses. They wanted to try him on arson, but he was only twelve, thirteen maybe, so they let it go. Probably on his record though. Don't matter if he mean to or not, a black kid burn down fifty houses somebody wants it in his permanent record. You got a record?”
“Not that I know of.” The worst crime JoBeth had ever committed was stealing fancy bras and panties from a Dillard's department store when she was in college. A friend had dared her to do it, and they had each brought piles of lacy lingerie sets into the dressing room at an understaffed section of the store, and crowded into one room, giggling and shushing each other, they put them on, layer after layer, tags scratching against her lower back, her armpits. They put their clothes back on and walked out. She'd waited for the security bells to ring, or an employee to chase after them, but they hadn't and she'd walked out, hundreds of dollars richer in lingerie, but with a conscience that drove her crazy. She'd quit hanging out with that friend, had heard that she'd later gotten tangled up with a boyfriend in a band and dropped out. But she'd held onto the underwear and secretly delighted in its expense, the taupe lace and the red ribbons, the shocking ebony thong with matching push-up bra that she wore until they either wore out or got too small. She'd never bought herself anything that nice again, and had almost forgotten about the theft until her lingerie shower before marrying Doug, when many of the gifts bore the same designer label as the ones she'd stolen so many years before. She'd never told Doug about that, or anyone else. No, she didn't have a record, but she couldn't help but wonder if someone, somewhere, was keeping count.

Maybelline, it turned out, did have a record. Two counts of forgery, one count of theft under $2,000, one count driving under the influence. She spoke of her law breaking in the same unceremonious manner she unpacked her suitcase: dumping it all on the bed and randomly shoving clothing into the remaining empty dresser. Her wardrobe was a colorful assortment of sweatpants and socks, shiny panties that floated like miniature parachutes, and bras that could serve as dens for a large family of rabbits. Her blanket was fuzzy blue acrylic, the kind with satin edging on the top and bottom, and she rubbed the silky part between her fingers as she told
JoBeth her story, her clothes piled haphazardly around her, in the way they would lay in some manifestation or other, over the next few weeks.

Maybelline Easley had tried to kill herself by throwing herself from Claymore's single overpass, which was unfortunate because it ran over a thoroughfare traditionally used by cross-state travelers and farm trucks, and she ended up landing on a passing truck full of harvested cotton. “You read about it in the paper?” Maybelline asked.

JoBeth said she hadn't, which was true, because she'd spent that week reading nothing but her childhood books and the numbers on the clock.

Maybelline was in debt to credit cards by $60,000 and had served a stint in the army checking car trunks in Baghdad—”Talk about a job that'll make a sane woman twitchy—” and had hoped her death would relieve her of debt and would somehow bring veteran benefits to her kids, ages 13 and seven, who were now staying with her mother, a woman with a good job managing the tire department at Sears. Maybelline was not only not dead, but had severe facial lacerations and might lose eyesight in her left eye. The VA was paying for her inpatient care, but she'd been flagged for potential insurance fraud. She confessed an unfortunate addiction to QVC jewelry, which explained the sparkly pendant nestled in her bosom. “I'm saving it for my girl,” she explained. “What you call a family heirloom. Gotta start with that heirloom business somewhere. Lord know my mama won't leave me two pieces of poo to rub together. Sure she got nice things, but my sister in her good graces more than me. I guess you could say I'm not exactly on the nice list with my mama.”

JoBeth's family heirlooms were melted or broken—but entirely and irrevocably gone. What she had now, other than the pile of shopping bags in her mother's house, was the quilt, the stuffed bear, and all-new clothes from Wal-Mart. Between the emergency room and Quest,
Gloria had taken her shopping for a new wardrobe, fighting Christmas crowds to do so. They had piled their cart full of staples: bras, underwear, socks, jeans, sweaters, shoes, even a Christmas sweatshirt with real jingle bells on a green Christmas tree. “Maybe you can wear it to work,” Gloria had said. “For the tacky Christmas sweater contest.”

“I'm not going back,” JoBeth had said, putting her new pink toothbrush on the basket next to a box of tampons and a bottle of hair spray.

“Maybe not yet. It'll keep,” Gloria said, tucking the sweatshirt in the cart. “My treat.”

When they'd gone to pay, the checkout clerk had whistled. “This all for you?” she asked JoBeth, who nodded.

“Your mom's buying you all this stuff four weeks afore Christmas? You're a lucky girl.”

“Yes,” JoBeth had agreed. “I'm a lucky girl.”

At Quest, the overhead announcement came on that it was time for group work and that new patients should meet in the common room to get assigned to their small groups.

“You ready for this?” Maybelline said.

“Not really,” JoBeth admitted. “You?”

“I just hope they don’t stick me in a group of idiots. Got no patience for idiots.”

Maybelline said, headed out the doorway.

The hallway was chilly, so the common room probably was as well. After a moment's hesitation, JoBeth opened her drawer and pulled the Christmas sweatshirt from the pile. She yanked off the tags and stuck the sweatshirt under her arm, anxious about meeting the people she'd be with for the rest of December, her holiday, the season of Advent.
Chapter 4

Quest

The chairs formed a circle and the walls were decorated with their various art projects. The room was lined with bookshelves, full of religious materials and self-help books. The Big Book, the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, a well-worn I Hate You, Don’t Leave Me guide to bipolar disorder. It also had (benign) novels for those who liked to read fiction. A few tattered romances, several Agatha Christie collections, John Grisham, and the entire Twilight series. The walls were painted a calculated green, and the first-floor windows looked out onto a little courtyard where people visited, smoked, and sometimes cried. The older patients, and those recovering from severe addictions or suffering physical handicaps, napped in their wheelchairs next to the barren crepe myrtles, whose thin white branches reached with bare vulnerability toward the indifferent sky. Younger patients stretched out on the stone benches. The benches featured small gold plaques on the rims of the seats from various benefactors who had allegedly made it through in-patient care and were out living productive, responsible lives.

JoBeth liked to read the names and wonder where they went, sometimes made up little stories in her head as to why they were there in the first place and what happened to them. Hal Ruskell overcame his anger and became a parenting guru. Terry Redilla swapped tequila for tennis and now coached a girls’ team in Waxahachie. Amber Beets received healing from her third miscarriage and instead of starving herself to ease the pain, gained thirty pounds and adopted two girls from Kazakhstan.

She wondered how many of them had lost everything, as she had, and if they had responded any better to their situation than downing cheap Californian white wine and Xanax-
laden apple pies. It struck her how American her attempt had been, and wondered if this said anything about her culture.

The people in her small group were a menagerie of sorts, attending in-patient care for a variety of reasons. Their group leader was a woman in her mid-sixties with a wispy white pageboy, a cuff ring on her right ear. She liked to wear skirts and oversized cardigans, with thick socks tucked into sensible shoes. Instead of crossing her legs at the knees or ankles, she kept hers firmly planted on the carpet with her hands on her knees. She introduced herself each session, exactly the same, even if no one new had joined the group. “Welcome. My name is Carol. I'm here to help you on your journey toward health and wholeness.” She usually asked them to sit in a circle, even if the chairs were already assembled exactly that way, and JoBeth chose a seat closest to the window with a spot for Maybelline on her right. At first she'd been surprised they didn't separate the groups into sexes, but after a while she got used to it.

“What I'd like you to do,” Carol had said that first day, “is introduce yourselves and share a bit as to why you're here. You don't have to go into detail if you're not ready. You might start with the phrase, 'I'm here to get help with…' and fill in the blank yourself. First names are fine.”

They went by their first names, and if they had any knowledge of them outside of inpatient care, they pretended not to know it. Such was the delicate requirement of small-town mental health care.

Guenda—“With a u, not a w” she apologized in greeting—was a middle-aged woman with unnaturally red curls, a soft voice, and creamy brown skin and dark eyes that bespoke of Hispanic heritage. She tended to wear sweatshirts with sports logos on them—she was a big Dallas Mavericks fan—and carry wadded tissues which she shredded into little piles while she talked. The tissues ended up sticking to her jeans in little squares that dried off and trailed, like
Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs, down the hallway when she walked. Her alcoholic husband had abused her so badly he'd cracked three ribs and aborted their first child by kicking her repeatedly in her abdomen on Valentine's Day. “It wasn't all his fault,” Guenda explained. “I got this card, for Valentine's? It was signed secret admirer and he thought I was cheating on him. Turned out it was from my nephew.” When she wasn't shredding tissues she tugged at patches in her hair, and had a little pale spot of scalp showing just above her temple, surrounded by fiery red. When Guenda had shared the story about the kicking, and the way she'd curled around an old iron floor lamp to try to protect the baby, JoBeth had a nearly uncontrollable urge to kiss Guenda on that little pale spot.

Sam was a short, blond-haired and blue-eyed man with a smile that was too quick to be genuine. He wore a red ballcap backwards, up high on his head, to give his stature that few crucial inches to make him taller than a smallish woman. He spent at least two hours a day in the inpatient exercise facility and liked to slam his weights down after particularly vigorous pulls. His arms were the size of an athlete's thighs, and when he walked bounced on the edge of his toes, whether to reveal a pep in his step or gain a few more inches, JoBeth wasn't sure. Either way, it showed off his calves, bumpy, swollen things that appeared suspiciously round, like breast implants, but covered in a reddish-blonde coat of hair. He had a severe sweating problem, and other patients in the center constantly asked him to wipe down his machines when he was done.

JoBeth normally wouldn't be aware of the goings on of any gym, but since being in Quest she'd taken to riding the stationary bike while reading. She wore headphones to ward off potential conversation, and her view behind her magazine or paperback was stealthy enough that she could observe what was going on without too much notice. She'd never been one for much
exercise, but the hours in Quest tended to stretch into emptiness between sessions, and the bike was better than being alone with her thoughts. The television in the main gathering room was another option, but it was free access for all the residents, even the ones who scared JoBeth with their severe brokenness. Napping was another option for downtime, but Maybelline liked to hang out in their room and work on friendship bracelets woven from embroidery thread, and didn't usually take the hint that JoBeth would rather sleep than offer advice on whether the orange or yellow should go closest to the hot pink. It was selfish, perhaps, this habit of isolating herself. A selfishness she was acutely reminded of when Maybelline gifted her with a dazzling friendship bracelet—“Twelve colors—it took forever, girl!”

Sam was married, a real-estate agent, a Baptist, and a graduate of Sam Houston State University. He checked himself in and out of treatment with yearly regularity. Sam shared that his grapples with depression made him more thoughtful than his family members, especially his wife. He conducted frequent affairs, which he told his wife about with candor, an honesty which he felt deserved him a sense of absolution, and respect even, instead of hiding them.

“As you all already know, I'm Sam,” he said, his pumping his knees in place, up and down as he sat in his chair in the circle. No matter the weather, or the arctic air conditioning in the facility, he wore khaki shorts. Some of them had fancy designs on the back pockets, like crosses or a fleur de lis. Today's were plain. “I'm here 'cause I'm trying to figure it all out, you know? As in, I'm just not cutting it out here, and I need to take a break. Get away from all the noise and the competition and crapola. My wife's insurance pays for it, so why not take advantage? No shame in getting help, right?”

“Damn straight,” Maybelline said.
“But there's this….whaddyacallit?” Sam snapped his fingers, searching. “Astigmatism when you check yourself into the psych ward, you know. Like I'm some sort of creep who hangs out in my closet hacking at my wrists with an Xacto knife.”

A younger boy in the group, reed thin with a mop of black hair and homemade tattoos on his forefingers that read HOPE/LESS, folded up on himself as if he wished to disappear. He was new and hadn't said a word in the group so far, and JoBeth was surprised that Carol let him stay quiet.

“Isn't astigmatism for eyes? Like short sighted?” Guenda looked around the circle for confirmation. Her tissues were already scattered on the floor around her, like a personalized snow storm.

“I believe what Sam means is the stigma,” Carol said. “A kind of social reproach, especially as it relates to those with mental health issues. Which is exactly the type of thing we're working against, to educate ourselves and others. Mental pain can manifest in a variety of ways, including self-mutilation. We have no judgments in here,” she reminded the group. It was one of her favorite phrases. “We're all here for different reasons, no one better and no one worse than another. Some of us may have wounded ourselves, physically, or emotionally, and others have taken more drastic steps, even potentially fatal ones. But it amounts to the same root issue: we're all trying to avoid, or to end, some kind of pain. And this type of pain, whatever its manifestation, is nothing to make fun of, even in a sarcastic way.” She settled a calm gaze on Sam. “When we're tempted to make fun, or jest at the expense of others, isn't it in some way a deflection of our own inner hurts, a way to avoid being singled out ourselves?”
“My bad,” Sam said, holding his palms up in the universal sign for I'm-a-jerk-but-can't-help-it. “Believe it or not, I understand about dark places. About wanting to give up. Even in a spectacular way.” He winked at Maybelline.

If JoBeth's news hadn't quite reached the majority of the group, Maybelline's definitely had. Her flight from Claymore's one overpass had been documented by a group of teenagers with an iPhone, and had played relentlessly on YouTube and reposted on countless Facebook pages. JoBeth had seen it on Sam's iPhone during lunch: Maybelline crawling inelegantly over the cement railing, straddling it for a moment like it was a pony set to run away, then easing her foot over the side. One shoe—a flip-flop—fell, and she stood there, seemingly paralyzed, and watched it tumble to the street below. An eighteen-wheeler ran over it, the truck's horn blasting like an out-of-water-whale. In the next moment, Maybelline didn't so much jump as simply let her great weight succumb to gravity's embrace and she dove, solid, to the pavement below, only to be caught by the flat-bed truck hauling cotton. That she survived was a miracle, the press reported, glossy lipped reporters gasping in premeditated surprise as they rolled the footage again and again.

“At least you had the balls to go for it,” Sam complimented.

This earned him a smile from Maybelline. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“And it's not that I couldn't, or wouldn't,” he assured them, eyes blinking furiously.

“That's just not my thing, you know?”

JoBeth wondered if it was a tick, or just leftover nervous energy from all the steroids. She'd heard steroids did things to a man's...thing. Sam wore his shorts so loose that it was hard to tell.
“To be honest, I've thought about it. I tell my wife and she says that's a spineless way to deal with life, just to check out. But I think there may be something honorable in it, you know. Not to drag everybody down with me.”

“Let's talk about that,” Carol began, her broad hands resting on her knees. “Would leaving—and let's be honest here and call it what it is—dying, be a relief to those who love us, or would it create more of a burden?”

“Burden.” JoBeth said, without thinking. “Even if you don't mean it that way.”

“How so?” Carol asked.

“It's easy for the one that's going,” JoBeth continued. “They just go to sleep and wake up in heaven, or the afterlife, or whatever you believe in. And everybody else is left to deal with it. All the mess you left behind. The people, the family, who are suddenly alone and wonder what happened and what they could have done differently to stop it? The ones who have to pick out coffins and plan music and open up a gazillion sympathy cards. Trust me, it's not fun.”

She thought once more about pots and kettles. Fires and Xanax and apple pie.

“So you're talking about loss.” Carol nodded. “A recent loss for you. Do you want to go further?”

“How much further are you looking for?” JoBeth said, angry. Carol probably already knew everything from her file. She didn't like to be goaded, even by a woman whose physical presence made you want to crawl in her lap and tell her your deepest secrets. Something about the pinkness in her cheeks, the accepting in her wide blue eyes, the knowledge that settled in pleasing lines around her eyes and mouth. “Yes, I'm talking about a loss.”

“And what, or who, did you lose?” Carol prompted.
“I lost everything,” she said in a whisper, wishing for a tissue to shred. For calf muscles to bounce. For a hair-pulling twitch that would relieve her from this moment.

“Metaphorically?” Guenda said. “Like it feels like you've lost everything?”

“No, I mean it's gone.” She offered a half-laugh, snot stinging her nose. “Like my house and my husband, all my stuff. Basically my whole life.”

“When you say gone, you mean your husband….” Guenda didn't finish the thought.

“Toast.” Again, without thinking.

Sam snickered, and, realizing, bile rose in JoBeth's throat. “That's awful. I'm not a terrible person. Of course I didn't mean….”

“Course it's not like that,” Maybelline interrupted. “It's a common expression,” she said to the group, her chin thrusting out bullishly. Daring anyone to contradict her.

JoBeth shot her a grateful look.

“Now me,” Maybelline went on, closing the lid on the can of worms that threatened to swarm out from JoBeth's racing heart. “I was thinking about my kids. Them making their own food, bringing me Ovaltine in bed because I couldn't get up. The smell of my own sheets because I don't have no energy to change 'em, let alone wash. What kind of mother does that? They better off with my mama. She perfect. Or at least she think she is.”

“Do you really believe that? That they're better off with your mother?” Carol asked. “Or are they better off with a parent who makes time for herself, makes the choices and decisions to get healthy? To get up and wash those sheets, and make Ovaltine not only for herself, but for her children?”

“Truth is,” Maybelline said, “I hate Ovaltine. Buy it for the kids for vitamins. They suck that mess down.”
JoBeth joined in the laughter and when it subsided she said, “But what about all that with the cooking? The chicken salad and the walnuts and the raisins? Wasn't that true?”

“Oh, girl,” Maybelline said, wiping her good eye. “Once upon a time it was. You know, before?”

“Yes, I know.” And she did.

“I guess my question is,” Sam said, bringing the conversation back to himself, as was his habit, “why can't I just be normal like everyone else? Whatever normal means.”

“That's a good question,” Carol said. “What do you think it means to be normal?”

“Normal?” Maybelline said. “I don't care about no normal. I just want to live my life and be somebody my kids look up to. So they don't end up in a place like this, in a circle with a bunch of crazy ass people talking about how bad they life is and how they want whatever normal is. I wanna be better than normal.” She leaned back, crossing her arms.

“Better than normal. I like that.” Carol wrote Better than Normal, with a thick blue marker, on the big white tablet beside her. “But normal is a relative state. What's normal to you might seem strange to others, and vice versa. JoBeth, what do you think would be normal for you?”

Normal was easy. Normal was Before. “If I could get my life back, I suppose.”

Several people in the group nodded. It seemed a common goal.

“Yes, but what would that look like?”

A living husband, Doug, was out of the question. An impossibility. “A place to live. With things that are mine. I'd like to have clothes that are old and still mine.”

“Okay,” Carol said, nodding. “So those are things. What about people? In a normal JoBeth life, where do the people fit?”
“I don't know. They're…gone. He's gone. I don't know how it fits anymore.”

“So talk about what you do know. What you do want.”

“I want to have a life with history that's still there, that isn't all about starting over.” She took a breath, gaining speed. “The thing is, I don't want to start over at all. Nobody asked me if I wanted to do this. Nobody said, hey JoBeth, we think you're tough enough to handle all this. If anybody can do this, it's you. I didn't ask for this. I don't want this. I don't want to pull myself up from my bootstraps, or 'let go and let God.' What I want, most of all, is to go back.”

“Ah. But therein lies the rub, doesn't it?” Carol said, nodding. “Isn't that the root of where each of us is? The desire to go back to a past that seems somehow rosier, or better?” She swept a hand to the paintings decorating the room. The watercolor houses, the evergreen trees, the idealized suns with rays barreling relentlessly over stylized mamas and daddies and children with red half-moon smiles. “To a home or a place or a people or a life that is kinder than this one. What's the problem with that?”

Guenda spoke, her arm lightly cuddling her belly. “We can't go back. It's not there anymore.”

“It probably never was,” said the kid with the dark hair, who was still folded up on himself. He spoke it to his tennis shoes, dirty Converse with drawings on the canvas. A heart. A dragon. A lightning bolt.

Carol, with a silence that bespoke of experience, let the kid's first utterance settle upon the group for a full moment. Whether to underscore what he'd said or validate him for saying anything at all was indecipherable.

“Exactly,” she said at last. “Roth,” she said, beaming at the boy, “is correct. The only place we can go is into the future. Which can be scary, because we don't know what happens
there. We know what happens in the past, which makes it more manageable, more ideal. But the future, that's where all the mystery is. And the thing about a mystery is it can be good and bad, and most likely a mixture of both.”
Chapter 5

All for One

On visiting day, a Saturday, Cassie and Rhonda brought in Taco Casa for lunch. JoBeth met them in the Quest's back courtyard that was dotted with olive trees and blackberry bushes and had paths leading down to a small pond stocked with fish. The setup was supposed to create a sustainable food source for the patients, but the summer's drought had left the olive trees scraggly and the blackberry bushes burned in some spots. The pond had gotten so low many of the fish had overheated in their own feces and died. A troop of gardeners from a local halfway house hacked away at weeds and took extended smoke breaks in the unusually warm December day. They wore matching white t-shirts with white lettering—Property of Corrigan County, which seemed to imply the county was trafficking in slave labor. JoBeth wasn't sure how safe mixing recent ex-cons with mentally unstable patients was, but no one else seemed concerned.

The early afternoon was crisp and cool, and the sun felt good on her face as she walked, Rhonda and Cassie two steps ahead of her. She and her friends had fancied themselves the three musketeers, all those years ago in elementary school. Building forts out of pine needles and hanging dried locust shells on their shirts as badges of honor. When they had gummy bears, those worked better, stuck on their clothes with a bit of spit and the bright colors shone like jewels. But the locusts, albeit inedible for those with a picky palette, were easier to come by.

“I told you I had lunch. I don't know why you always think you need to pay,” Rhonda was complaining.

“I don't always need to pay,” Cassie said. “It's just you never have cash.”

“Debit cards are the same as cash.”
“Not really,” Cassie said. “Dave Ramsey says you spend 18% more when you put it on the debit card.”

“Could you cut it with the Dave Ramsey stuff? If I hear another conversation about envelopes, I'm going to kill myself.” Rhonda looked over her shoulder and winked, “Just kidding, Bethie. Gallows humor.”

“For God's sake, she's not headed to the gallows,” Cassie said. “Give it a rest.”

“I thought you were working on not taking the Lord's name in vain. I'm telling your Sunday School teacher.”

Rhonda's husband Frank was their Sunday School teacher. Had been for three years.

Equally pleasant as the sun warming her pale skin was the companionship of two old friends, women she'd known forever and who didn't expect her to be anything other than herself. Together they carried the greasy bags and Styrofoam cups to a horseshoe shaped wrought-iron bench, painted white and faintly peeling, beneath a Chinese pistachio whose leaves had turned blood red and a few were still hanging on, in direct defiance of the winter.

Cassie settled her roomy frame on the bench handed out the first round of tacos. “Deluxe for me, chicken fresco for Rho, and another deluxe for Jo. Everybody have napkins?”

JoBeth tore into the bright orange wrappers as if she'd been starving for weeks. Cassie and Rhonda had been her best friends since they'd been in girl scouts together, with JoBeth's mom as the overwrought den mother. Cassie had always been the tallest, with milky white skin that spoke of her Swedish heritage, and the steady build of a woman who feels too big for her size. She'd always been on the back row in homeroom pictures, her dirty-blonde hair cut in a crooked sheaf of bangs across her brow. She still wore the bangs, feathered now to better frame her broad features, but she'd grown into her height, and was even known to wear heels on
occasion. She'd been divorced for five years and had one child, a boy named Silas who was too quiet for nine years old, and who had the vocabulary of a Rhodes Scholar. Cassie worked as a pediatric nurse at a private doctor's office in Claymore and was always the first person Rhonda or JoBeth called when they felt a cold coming on or, in Rhonda's case, when she found a lump in her right breast that turned out to be benign.

Rhonda, short, dark-haired, and wiry, had been married to the same man, Frank, a Claymore police officer, since he'd gotten her pregnant on Prom night in the back of his father's F150. Rhonda's three kids echoed her diminutive physique which she said was a blessing since Frank had boasted a beer gut since ninth grade. She claimed the kids drove her crazy but she was the first one to whip out her phone and share the latest flurry of pictures taken between soccer stints and football tournaments. Rhonda was a stay-at-home mom who dabbled in pyramid-type person-to-person sales: powdered gourmet mixes, handwoven baskets, jewelry, candles, and in one particularly racy stint, sex toys. She'd made the most money on the toys, but enough women in the Claymore Ladies' Guild had grumbled to the powers that be that she gave it up, not wanting to hamper Frank's career climb on the cop ladder.

"Is that Sam McWhorter? The guy who used to go out with Jenny Bisbane?" Rhonda, mumbling through a mouth full of taco, pointed to the other side of the garden, where Sam, ballcap propped four inches too high, was quietly arguing with a woman wearing jeans and a dark green sweater. He had on his trademark cargo shorts and baggy sweatshirt, and when he pulled at the woman's shoulders to draw her into a hug, she tugged away.

Cassie grabbed Rhonda's pointed finger. "You're not invisible, Rho. He can see you."

"He was two grades ahead of us." Rhonda wiggled her fingers at Cassie for emphasis as if daring another rebuke. "Don't you remember? He got high at lunch one day and ate six
packages of powdered donuts. Won something like thirty dollars on a bet. Played soccer, I think.”

Which made sense, given the calves.

“What's he in for, Bethie?” Rhonda asked.

“That's probably confidential.” Cassie cast an apologetic look at JoBeth, a familiar expression when the three of them were together. “You don't have to tell us. And he isn't 'in for' anything. This isn't a prison.”

“At least not after the first 72 hours,” JoBeth offered. The woman who had been with Sam stalked away in the direction of the guest parking lot. Sam sat on his end of the bench and put his head in his hands.

“It's not like AA, where we have to be all secretive.” Rhonda countered. Her husband Frank had been a member of AA for years, which is how they eventually got JoBeth's dad to go. Rhonda delighted in informing JoBeth and Cassie which of Claymore's latest and greatest had shown up at the meetings for their day-one chips. Rhonda had absolutely no filter, which made her an entertaining, but a sometimes challenging friend. “Plus, it's not like he's invisible either. He still wears that stupid cap. Honestly, does he think he's still sixteen? Didn't he cheat on Jenny with somebody we knew?”

“Probably,” JoBeth said. “I gather he's got something of a history with that.” The minute she said it, her gut sloshed in what felt like a betrayal. It was either that or the chorizo.

“Oooh, juicy.” Rhonda bit into a taco and wiped the drip off of her North Face parka.

“Do tell.” Rhonda was a gym hound and tended to wear her workout clothes throughout the day, made easier ever since she “retired” from the plummeting marketing industry in Claymore to become a full-time mom. Her wiry body looked good in the stretchy outfits, a fact which she
acknowledged with her typical shrug and a grin. “You'd better be able to bounce a quarter off this ass,” she'd say. “I've spent enough time and money on it.” Actually, only JoBeth and Cassie knew how closely Rhonda danced with potential eating disorders: her months-long stretch their junior year where she only ate candy bars and drank diet coke, her binge-and-purge phase in college when she discovered that beer, while cheap and plentiful at parties, contained calories.

Cassie pinched her mouth and gave Rhonda a lipless “Stop it.” Aloud, she said, “But we don’t care about that, Rho. Right? We're here to support Jo. Not get the latest gossip on the Quack—” she caught herself. “On the goings on at Quest.”

Claymore residents had called the mental health facility the Quack Shack for as long as JoBeth could remember. Whether to implicate its doctoral staff as less than stellar for winding up in a small-town mental health facility to live out their medical futures or to highlight the craziness of those who submitted to its care, she didn't know. “It's okay, Cassie. I'm not personally offended if you still call it the Quack Shack.”

“It's not like you're a quack,” Cassie said, her face turning red. “Or any of the doctors. Down at Harris—” Harris was the hospital where Cassie's doctor had visiting privileges—"they've said this place is really improving…..”

“You're clearly not helping your case.” Rhonda leaned closer. “So what do you do all day? What's it like in here?”

JoBeth shrugged. “We talk mostly. We have group sessions, and I meet one-on-one with my doctor.” She'd grown to look forward to her time with Dr. Palmer, and was more than satisfied to see that, one day when she was a few minutes to his office, his sack lunch did have a little zip-lock baggie of oatmeal cookies. Cookies too irregularly formed to be store-bought.

“Is it helping?” Cassie asked.
“I think so. I like the people in here. Most of them.”

“Do you still want to, you know…” Rhonda drew her finger across her throat in such dramatic fashion that JoBeth couldn't help but laugh.

“Cut my throat?” JoBeth shook her head. “No. Too messy.”

Of course Rhonda and Cassie would have the complete details of exactly what went down that night, from her mother. They would have been the first people, after Cole and her father, who Gloria would have contacted. It hurt to wonder about their responses, the sound of the phone in the middle of the night that could only bring bad news. Her mother's voice, deliberately calm and collected to bring the least possible amount of alarm, relaying the facts to her hysterical friends. How they might have felt guilty for not doing more, or that they could have stopped her somehow. The thought of it made her tired.

“I'm serious,” Rhonda said. “What in hell were you thinking? You know you could have called one of us. We would have been there in a heartbeat.”

“It's hard to explain.” JoBeth said. “I know you would have been there. I just wanted to be alone.”

“Is that still how you feel?” Rhonda asked. “Do you still want to…be alone? In that way?”

“No, I don't think so. Really, it wasn't that I ever did. Just that everything else was, you know, so hard.”

“Doug,” Cassie said. It wasn't a question.

“Yeah, Doug.” She felt the tremors come up through her chest and into her throat. She was so tired of crying, of wiping the snot off her own nose, of the wads of moist tissues that threatened to choke her, spilling out of her pockets, her bedside table, overflowing trash cans.
She hadn't resorted to shredding them yet, like Guenda, but she could definitely see the appeal.

“Doug and everything else.”

“You know, we're so sorry,” Cassie said, her clear eyes clouding. “About Doug. And everything.”

“Yes, everyone is.” JoBeth said, hearing her own voice tightening. She knew Cassie and Rhonda had never particularly cared for Doug. Sure, they stood up for her in her wedding, wearing the obligatory bridesmaids' dresses in buttercup yellow with the cap sleeves and holding bouquets of copper-colored roses. They had each, separately so as to not appear to be ganging up on her, shared their reservations about her groom-to-be. Cassie had been more tactful—had brought up the subject after they'd seen a movie together, some chick flick with Sandra Bullock. They'd walked out, picking butter popcorn from their teeth and quoting favorite lines to each other when Cassie had asked, “Are you sure about all this? That Doug's the one?”

“Of course,” JoBeth replied, starting her car—a Pontiac Sunfire inherited from her father—in the parking lot. “Don't you?”

They sat, the engine running, for the next hour while Cassie gently built her case. Doug never seemed to put JoBeth first, didn't treat her the way Cassie thought he should, was way too caught up in his business.

“So, you think he's too good for me,” JoBeth countered.

“No honey,” Cassie had said. “You're too good for him.”

Rhonda had been less tactful. “No offense, my love, but that boy always looks like he's got a broomstick shoved up his nethers. And not in a fun way.”

JoBeth hadn't listened and the wedding was everything she had dreamed of, even down to the little bickering arguments she had with Gloria about flower arrangements and place settings.
Gloria and Cle Haskins, even pre-separation, didn't have the money to throw the kind of wedding JoBeth wanted so in the last semester of college she had borrowed absurd amounts of student loans to pay for it. Her mother had wanted simple twinkle lights and mason jars filled with daisies, her father's one request was an open bar. Doug's parents had flown in and stayed for less than 24-hours. Long enough to host a small rehearsal dinner with catered Mexican food (his mother had called it quaint), and to sit dry-eyed during the ceremony the next day. JoBeth wasn't even sure they stayed through the entire reception. The crowds of friends throwing birdseed were a blur.

She was still paying for it, in small, governmentally-approved amounts, all these years later. She'd never missed a payment, but had heard nightmare stories from friends who'd defaulted and had their paychecks garnished. She wondered if having a dead husband would give her a little breathing room, a sympathy card that would actually prove helpful. She doubted it.

“Do they know what happened yet, with the fire?” Rhonda lowered her voice when she said fire, as if it were AIDS or some other terminal illness. Which, in a way, it had been.

“No. Cole says they're working on it, and I get some updates in here. But contact is pretty limited…no cell phones and limited time with the computers.” She'd obeyed the cell-phone rule. Sam had snuck his in somehow—she didn't like to think of how he did it. Maybelline didn't have a cell phone. “It's kind of nice, not to know what people are saying.”

“You got that right, sister,” Rhonda said with a snort.

“Rho. Not the time,” Cassie said, shaking her head.

“What?” JoBeth asked. “Is it bad?”

“It's nothing,” Cassie said. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Who's talking?”
“Just a bunch of old biddies sticking their pointy beaks into other people's business,” Rhonda said. “Like anybody who knows you would think you could have anything to do with this. Even if Doug—”

“Rhonda.” Cassie cut her off. “Not now.”

“Do with this?” JoBeth said.

“The fire. For insurance money.” Rhonda rubbed her thumb and fingers together. “It's all very Lifetime movie of the week—fueled by your absence, no doubt. Total nonsense.”

“You mean people think that I—”

“It's gossip. Garbage. Not worth wasting brain power on,” Cassie said with an air of finality. “You should focus on your faith while you're in here. Figure out what God might be saying through all this. All of this—the fire, what you're going through—it can't be for no reason.”

“You think God had a reason for burning my house down?” JoBeth asked, incredulously.

“I'm not saying God burned your house down,” Cassie said. “I'm saying that God works through anything, and maybe he was trying to get your attention.”

“Like how he used Hurricane Katrina,” Rhonda said. “You know, to bring people back into the fold.”

“Even the dead ones?”

“The live ones,” Rhonda continued, blissfully unaware of JoBeth's sarcasm. “You know that family that opened the Cajun restaurant? Down on Ravenwood? That guy said Katrina did a real number on all of them. That he used to be kind of a thug, and after Katrina decided to start living right. Being a good dad and starting up a business.”
“Look, we don't need to talk politics or epic disasters,” Cassie said. “Just keep yourself open, maybe use some of your time here to really reflect. Don't worry about all the rest of it. You've got other things to think about. Like getting well.”

“And getting out of here,” Rhonda said. “When you're out, we'll plan something fun. Maybe a welcome home party.”

It was amazing how her friends had drifted from God's wrath in hurricanes and fires and settled on a welcome home party. It made JoBeth's head spin in confusion. “A welcome home party?”

“Yeah, you know, to get you settled back in. When you're better,” Rhonda said.

“Welcome home where?” JoBeth said.

The three were quiet. The leaves of the Chinese pistachio fluttered in a sudden gust of winter wind, and a few bright leaves fluttered away.

“You know you can stay with me,” Cassie said.

“Or us,” Rhonda added.

It had all been offered before. And while she would welcome the chance to permanently leave her mother's guest room, bunking with her friends sounded like the worst kind of sleepover. To bring all of this on their heads, into their homes. If the wrath of God had fallen upon her, she certainly didn't want to bring it into her best friend's houses. Plus, it felt strange that they saw things that way. That they somehow implied the fire, the loss of Doug, was her fault. That she'd done something wrong and might have deserved it. “I appreciate it. I don't know what I'm going to do, actually.”

“Was Doug insured?”

“Rhonda!” Cassie said.
“I'm serious. Because, sorry Bethie, but that house is totaled. It's going to take a big pile of cash to even get it livable. Frank and me went over there the other day, just to check on things. It's awful.”

“I don't want to,” JoBeth said, the figment of an idea sparking to life.

“Want to what?”

“Make it livable,” JoBeth said. “I don't want to live there anymore.”

“You could totally redo it, make it what you want,” Rhonda said, still on her own bent.

“We could get some of those decorator magazines, make an inspiration board. I saw it on a design makeover show. With fabric samples and little paint chips. Although, it's hard to tell with those little chips. I picked out our living room color off a chip and it looks like baby poop brown.”

“No, I don't want to redecorate. Or rebuild or redesign.” JoBeth turned to Rhonda. “And I like that color brown. It's more burnt ochre than baby poop. Anyway, when I get out, I'm starting over. I'm not going back. Because back's not there anymore.” She thought of her neighbors, the looks on their faces, the ashes swirling with the sparks and the heat. The truth of the boy, Roth, the one folded in on himself in sharp angles on the floor, who said that the past was never really there.

“You don't have to go back,” Cassie agreed. “You'll be in here a while, and there's no need to leap to a decision.” She gave Rhonda a significant look. Rhonda was known for her rash decisions, including the time she left Frank for the summer so she could work on a cruise ship as a fitness instructor. Rumors of an affair with the head chef on the ship had circulated when she came home to Claymore, but Rhonda insisted they were groundless.
“Just because you didn't lose your virginity until you were married doesn't mean other people are leapers,” Rhonda retorted.

“Leapers or lepers?” Cassie shot back.

“Ha ha. Miss Word play here has never gone on her gut a day in her life. I say go for it, Bethie. Start over. Make any kind of decisions you want, and we'll support you. It's your life, and the important part is that you're still here to live it. Right?” Rhonda's eyes brightened and the tip of her nose turned red. “Promise me, okay? I'll go with whatever hair-brained scheme you come up with, as long as it doesn't involve kicking the bucket before Jesus says it's time.”

JoBeth laughed, squeezed Rhonda's hand back. “I promise. I'm doing my best.”

“Just take it one step at a time,” Cassie said, helplessly offering the comfort of clichés.

“Yeah,” Rhonda said. “You know, the wisdom to know the difference and all that crap. You're not supposed to go more than one day at a time. That's what Frank says, and it's worked for him so far. Haven't found him passed out underneath the kitchen table in at least five years. But honestly, how would you anyway? Is it even possible to go more than one day at a time?”

“Life according to Valerie Bertinelli?” JoBeth asked.

“Leapers or lepers,” Rhonda nodded.

“One for all and all for one,” Cassie added, echoing their schoolyard refrain.

“And also,” Rhonda said, “you want us to bust you out any time, just say the word.”
JoBeth decided against breaking out and, after hugging her friends goodbye, made her way to small-group session. She was the last to arrive. The gang was all there, and had their familiar wooden chairs in an oval on the equally oval carpet. She'd spent a lot of time staring at that carpet—it reminded her of the one her grandparents used to have. She'd played cars on it as a girl with Cole, using the rug's patterns as streets for the cars to circle around and around. On one side the border had come loose, as though a cat had gotten after it. People were still chatting as the session hadn't started yet.

Carol sat in the middle of one of the long sides of the oval, wearing a loose black turtleneck and a stretchy gray skirt that pulled tight across her thighs. She wore ankle socks and sparkly red clogs, and an anklet made of fishing lures circled her left ankle. The bright pink of her scalp shone through the wispy whiteness of her hair. When she spoke, she smiled deeply before she uttered a word, as if it were pure joy to be able to communicate with such treasured friends. Her hands were small, but nimble, and she kept her fingernails clipped short. She had no wedding diamond, but wore two vastly different rings on her middle finger, stacked together. One was a square emerald in a rubbed gold setting, and the other was finely filigreed silver in the shape of a leaf. What kind of leaf, JoBeth didn't know. Her “readers” as Carol called them, she wore on a long chain around her neck, but JoBeth had never seen her put them on her face. As if she could see well enough without them, but wanted back up.

“I would like to begin this session by telling you a story,” Carol said. “And by giving you a gift.” She dug into a large totebag beside her and produced a gallon-sized bucket of what
looked like a giant booger, pale tan and malleable. “Playdough!” she announced the excitement of someone winning the lottery. “I made it myself, so it doesn't have any color yet. The color is for you to add, whichever you like. We might get a bit messy today, so it’s okay if you want to sit on the floor.”

Carol rarely gave direct orders, but fashioned her requests as an exciting opportunity. “You are welcome to take as much or as little of the playdough as you like, and you can add color as well.”

After a jumbling of chairs and an adjustment of limbs, the group was still loosely in an oval shape, but sitting on the floor. Carol's skirt made the adjustment nicely. The playdough booger was passed around the circle, and when it came to JoBeth she took a golfball-sized hunk. The food coloring came around next, and she added a few drops of green and worked the dough into a uniform color. It smelled like salt and flour. Roth took a huge hunk—softball size—rolled it between his HELP/LESS hands, and without comment Carol produced a second giant booger from the tote bag for those who were left without any.

“What I'd like you to do while we're visiting is work your playdough any way you like,” Carol said. “The idea is to bring back childhood and the simple joy of working with your hands. With playdough, you can make a shape and then erase it, start over and make something new.”

Maybelline was rolling her playdough—after adding a few red drops to produce a pale pink—into a long snake shape. Sam fashioned what looked like a blue penis with balls and covertly showed it to JoBeth who pretended not to notice. She decided on a frog: a squashed ball with two little rolls for eyes. She dug a fingernail into its face, trying to make a smile, but it looked lopsided. She smoothed the gash with her finger and tried again.
“The story,” Carol began, “is one I learned long ago, but it's a story that I think has deep meaning, even for today. A man once went to study with the Yaqui in Mexico—”

Guenda looked vaguely uncomfortable and waggled a hand in the air. “Is this story about mysticism?” She said mysticism in the way one might say bestiality. Her booger ball was still white and she had three bottles of food coloring in front of her in a row, like Orion's belt.

Roth shook his head. He'd gone from folding in on himself in a jagged pose to jumping in regularly to discussions, surprising JoBeth with his articulate opinions and maturity. He had added several colors to his dough, and it was now a slate gray that he flattened into a pancake. “Just because it's from a different culture doesn't automatically make it mysticism,” he said. “Technically, mysticism is a belief that the divine can be known through experience—which should fit into your Judeo-Christian ethos. Regardless, we might practice positivity—” an oft-repeated phrase of Carol's—”and hear out what Carol wants to say.”

Maybelline nodded vigorously. “Lord knows I'm tired hearing you people talk. Go on, Cee.” Only Maybelline called Carol this. Maybelline's pink snake was now in a coil, and it bore a striking resemblance to the rug upon which they were sitting.

Carol smiled in response, if possible, more deeply than before and settled her hands on her knees that signaled she was ready to begin. “True, this story is not rooted in the Christian tradition,” she said, “but it has a truth that might apply across religious boundaries. I agree with Roth—why don't we just listen, and see?”

If Carol weren't a therapist, JoBeth thought she would make a terrific kindergarten teacher. And not just because of the free playdough.

“Okay,” Guenda agreed. She picked up one of the bottles of food coloring—orange—and sniffed it.
“So, this man went to study with the Yaqui—”

“How do you spell that,” Sam asked, the blue balls abandoned and his pen poised over a spiral notebook. Dr. Palmer had told him he wasn't sure Sam was committed to the program and truly participating, so Sam had started taking copious notes at all the sessions. It was irritating, because of the frequent interruptions to spell or ask for clarifications.

“D-I-C—” Roth began.

Carol, usually not an interrupter, carefully spelled out the word before Roth could finish name calling. “So the seeker, a young man who had lost his way and was looking for the right path, went to the teacher to ask for direction. The teacher told him that it was important to always be seeing. Always be seeing. The seeker didn't quite understand what that meant and took it home as truth to puzzle over. A mantra, if you will.”

Carol was big on mantras. She was a fan of Dream Big but Start Small. Nourish Your Spirit to Nourish Your World. Walk Softly but Rest Soundly.

Maybelline was a fan of Carol's mantras, especially after it was explained to her that a mantra was not, in fact, the thing that hung above the fireplace. “How would I know?” she'd exclaimed. “I ain't never had a fireplace.”

“Always be seeing,” Carol said, breathy and firm at the same time. “Always be seeing.”

Some of the group echoed it back with her. JoBeth did not. Sam scribbled as he mouthed the words.

“So the seeker went home and thought about it, and came back to the teacher the next day. 'I understand,' he told the teacher, eager for the next lesson. 'No,' the teacher said. 'You will not ever be able to see until you break your promise.'“

“But teacher,' said the seeker, 'I have made no promise.'“
“'You have,' the teacher insisted. 'But you must break it in order to see.'"

“The seeker went home frustrated and confused and he lay on his pallet that night searching the heavens, the stars, and finally, the recesses of his own heart. What promise? What promise? He fell asleep and in the course of the night, the answer came to him in a dream. When he awoke, he remembered, and he eagerly rose with the morning sun to take his answer to the teacher.”

“The teacher was sitting on his porch, waiting. The seeker said, 'I did make a promise. When I was a young man, I was wild and headstrong. At school, I fought every day to show my strength and I always won. It didn't matter where I fought—in the play yard, behind the school, or even in the classroom—I would win my battles. One day I was fighting and I caused a chalkboard to fall. It fell on a younger boy who was watching the fight, and it broke his collarbone. He was a poor boy, and was not able to have the break set by a good doctor. The bone healed incorrectly, and the boy lost the use of his arm. I could not help the boy or his arm, but I knew my actions had caused him a great loss. I promised that boy that though I had no coin or healing power, I could give him my one gift. I would offer him my future victories. I promised that boy that I would never win again, and would honor this promise for the rest of my days. From that day, I have never sought to fight, or to win.'"

“'Ah,' said the teacher, 'what you have said is true. But this promise was the word of a child, and its bonds are no longer meant to hold you. In order to grow, in order to always be seeing, you must break that childhood promise. You must risk fighting again. You must risk seeking the victory. Then, and only then, will you always be seeing.'” Carol settled back, the last words falling heavily upon the quiet group.
Listening to the quiet, JoBeth focused on the weaves in the rug, the many colors twisted together in the coils. She wondered who had fashioned it. Whether it had been made with machines, or people's hands. Maybe people who had been in Quest before her with their own problems and hurts and ill-timed promises had sat on the rug, traced the colors with their eyes, their fingers, as they shared their fears and confessions. Maybe they had pondered the heavens and the ceilings and the recesses of their own hearts. Not on a pallet in Mexico, but on a twin-sized bed with a roommate snoring beside them, they perused their histories, their secrets, and the need to break childish bonds that held them back from finding victory.

JoBeth didn't know what to make of the story. What childhood promises had she made that might now be holding her back? She squished her frog into a ball, and started again.