

"Ferociously moving." — THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

NEW-YORK-TIMES BESTSELLER

THE

MOTHERS

NOVEL

BRIT

BENNETT

## ONE

We didn't believe when we first heard because you know how church folk can gossip.

Like the time we all thought First John, our head usher, was messing around on his wife because Betty, the pastor's secretary, caught him cozying up at brunch with another woman. A young, fashionable woman at that, one who switched her hips when she walked even though she had no business switching anything in front of a man married forty years. You could forgive a man for stepping out on his wife once, but to romance that young woman over buttered croissants at a sidewalk café? Now, that was a whole other thing. But before we could correct First John, he showed up at Upper Room Chapel that Sunday with his wife and the young, hip-switching woman—a great-niece visiting from Fort Worth—and that was that.

When we first heard, we thought it might be that type of secret, although, we have to admit, it had felt different. Tasted different too.

All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season. But we didn't. We shared this sour secret, a secret that began the spring Nadia Turner got knocked up by the pastor's son and went to the abortion clinic downtown to take care of it.

She was seventeen then. She lived with her father, a Marine, and without her mother, who had killed herself six months earlier. Since then, the girl had earned a wild reputation—she was young and scared and trying to hide her scared in her pretiness. And she was pretty, beautiful even, with amber skin, silky long hair, and eyes swirled brown and gray and gold. Like most girls, she'd already learned that pretty exposes you and pretty hides you and like most girls, she hadn't yet learned how to navigate the difference. So we heard all about her sojourns across the border to dance clubs in Tijuana, the water bottle she carried around Oceanside High filled with vodka, the Saturdays she spent on base playing pool with Marines, nights that ended with her heels pressed against some man's foggy window. Just tales, maybe, except for one we now know is true: she spent her senior year of high school rolling around in bed with Luke Sheppard and come springtime, his baby was growing inside her.

LUKE SHEPPARD WAITED TABLES at Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack, a restaurant off the pier known for its fresh food, live music, and family-friendly atmosphere. At least that's what the ad in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* said, if you were fool enough to believe it. If you'd been around Oceanside long enough, you'd know that the

promised fresh food was day-old fish and chips stewing under heat lamps, and the live music, when delivered, usually consisted of ragtag teenagers in ripped jeans with safety pins poking through their lips. Nadia Turner also knew things about Fat Charlie's that didn't fit on a newspaper ad, like the fact that a platter of Charlie's Cheesy Nachos was the perfect drunk snack or that the head cook sold the best weed north of the border. She knew that inside, yellow life preservers hung above the bar, so after long shifts, the three black waiters called it a slave ship. She knew secret things about Fat Charlie's because Luke had told her.

"What about the fish sticks?" she would ask.

"Soggy as shit."

"The seafood pasta?"

"Don't fuck with that."

"What could be so bad about pasta?"

"You know how they make that shit? Take some fish that's been sitting around and stuff it in ravioli."

"Fine, the bread, then."

"If you don't finish your bread, we just give it to another table. You about to touch the same bread as some dude that's been digging in his nuts all day."

The winter her mother killed herself, Luke saved Nadia from ordering the crab bites. (Imitation crab deep-fried in lard.) She'd begun disappearing after school, riding buses and hopping off wherever they took her. Sometimes she rode east to Camp Pendleton, where she watched a movie or bowled at Stars and Strikes or played pool with Marines. The young ones were the loneliest, so she always found a pack of privates, awkward with their shorn heads and big boots, and by the end of the night, she usually ended up kissing one of them until

kissing made her feel like crying. Other days she rode north, past Upper Room Chapel, where the coast became frontier: South, and she hit more beach, better beaches, beaches with sand as white as the people who lay on it, beaches with boardwalks and roller coasters, beaches behind gates. She couldn't ride west. West was the ocean.

She rode buses away from her old life, where after school, she'd lingered with her friends in the parking lot before driver's ed or climbed the bleachers to watch the football team practice or caravanned to In-N-Out. She'd goofed around at Jojo's Juicery with her coworkers and danced at bonfires and climbed the jerry when dared because she always pretended to be unafraid. She was startled by how rarely she had been alone back then. Her days felt like being handed from person to person like a baton, her calculus teacher passing her to her Spanish teacher to her chemistry teacher to her friends and back home to her parents. Then one day, her mother's hand was gone and she'd fallen, clattering to the floor.

She couldn't stand to be around anyone now—her teachers, who excused her late work with patient smiles; her friends, who stopped joking when she sat down at lunch, as if their happiness were offensive to her. In AP Government, when Mr. Thomas assigned partner work, her friends quickly paired off with each other, and she was left to work with the other quiet, friendless girl in the class: Aubrey Evans, who skirted off to Christian Club meetings at lunch, not to pad her college resume (she hadn't raised her hand when Mr. Thomas asked who had turned in applications) but because she thought God cared if she spent her free period inside a classroom planning canned food drives. Aubrey Evans, who wore a plain gold purity ring that she twisted around her finger when she talked, who always attended service at Upper Room by herself, probably the poor holy child of

devout atheists who was working hard to lead them into the light. After their first time working together, Aubrey had leaned closer to her, dropping her voice.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry," she said. "We've all been praying for you."

She seemed sincere, but what did that matter? Nadia hadn't been to church since her mother's funeral. Instead, she rode buses. One afternoon, she climbed off downtown in front of the I Taiky Punky. She was certain someone would stop her—she even looked like a kid with her backpack—but the bouncer perched on a stool near the door barely glanced up from his phone when she ducked inside. At three on a Tuesday, the strip club was dead, empty silver tables dulled under the stage lights. Black shades pulled in front of the windows blocked the plastic sunlight; in the man-made darkness, fat white men with baseball caps pulled low slouched in chairs facing the stage. Under the spotlight, a flabby white girl danced, her breasts swinging like pendulums.

In the darkness of the club, you could be alone with your grief. Her father had flung himself into Upper Room. He went to both services on Sunday mornings, to Wednesday night Bible study, to Thursday night choir practice although he did not sing, although practices were closed but nobody had the heart to turn him away. Her father propped his sadness on a pew, but she put her sad in places no one could see. The bartender shrugged at her fake ID and mixed her a drink and she sat in dark corners, sipping rum-and-Cokes and watching women with bear bodies spin onstage. Never the skinny, young girls—the club saved them for weekends or nights—just older women thinking about grocery lists and child care, their bodies stretched and pitted from age. Her mother would've been horrified at

the thought—her in a strip club, in the light of day—but Nadia stayed, sipping the watery drinks slowly. Her third time in the club, an old black man pulled up a chair beside her. He wore a red plaid shirt under suspenders, gray tufts peeking out from under his Pacific Coast Bait & Tackle cap.

"What you drinkin'?" he asked.

"What're *you* drinkin'?" she said.

He laughed. "Naw. This a grown man drink. Not for a little thing like you. I'll get you somethin' sweet. You like that, honey? You look like you got a sweet tooth."

He smiled and slid a hand onto her thigh. His fingernails curled dark and long against her jeans. Before she could move, a black woman in her forties wearing a glittery magenta bra and thong appeared at the table. Light brown streaked across her stomach like tiger stripes.

"You leave her be, Lester," the woman said. Then to Nadia:

"Come on, I'll freshen you up."

"Aw, Cici, I was just talkin' to her," the old man said.

"Please," Cici said. "That child ain't even as old as your watch."

She led Nadia back to the bar and tossed what was left of her drink down the drain. Then she slipped into a white coat and beckoned for Nadia to follow her outside. Against the slate gray sky, the flat outline of the Hanky Panky seemed even more depressing. Further along the building, two white girls were smoking and they each threw up a hand when Cici and Nadia stepped outside. Cici returned the lazy greeting and lit a cigarette.

"You got a nice face," Cici said. "Those your real eyes? You mixed?"

"No," she said. "I mean, they're my eyes but I'm not mixed."

"Look mixed to me." Cici blew a sideways stream of smoke. "You

a runaway? Oh, don't look at me like that. I won't report you. I see you girls come through here all the time, looking to make a little money. Ain't legal but Bernie don't mind. Bernie'll give you a little stage time, see what you can do. Don't expect no warm welcome, though. Hard enough fighting those blonde bitches for tips—wait till the girls see your light-bright ass."

"I don't want to dance," Nadia said.

"Well, I don't know what you're looking for but you ain't gonna find it here." Cici leaned in closer. "You know you got see-through eyes? Feels like I can see right through them. Nothin' but sad on the other side." She dug into her pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled ones. "This ain't no place for you. Go on down to Fat Charlie's and get you something to eat. Go on."

Nadia hesitated, but Cici dropped the bills into Nadia's palm and curled her fingers into a fist. Maybe she could do this, pretend she was a runaway, or maybe in a way, she was. Her father never asked where she'd been. She returned home at night and found him in his recliner, watching television in a darkened living room. He always looked surprised when she unlocked the front door, like he hadn't even noticed that she'd been gone.

IN FAT CHARLIE'S, Nadia had been sitting in a booth toward the back, flipping through a menu, when Luke Sheppard stepped out of the kitchen, white apron slung across his hips, black Fat Charlie's T-shirt stretched across his muscular chest. He looked as handsome as she'd remembered from Sunday School, except he was a man now, bronzed and broad-shouldered, his hard jaw covered in stubble. And he was limping now, slightly favoring his left leg, but the gimppiness

of his walk, its uneven pace and tenderness, only made her want him more. Her mother had died a month ago and she was drawn to anyone who wore their pain outwardly, the way she couldn't. She hadn't even cried at the funeral. At the repast, a parade of guests had told her how well she'd done and her father placed an arm around her shoulder. He'd hunched over the pew during the service, his shoulders quietly shaking, manly crying but crying still, and for the first time, she'd wondered if she might be stronger than him.

An inside hurt was supposed to stay inside. How strange it must be to hurt in an outside way you couldn't hide. She played with the menu flap as Luke limped his way over to her booth. She, and everyone at Upper Room, had watched his promising sophomore season end last year. A routine kick return, a bad tackle, and his leg broke, the bone cutting clear through the skin. The commentators had said he'd be lucky if he walked normal again, let alone played another down, so no one had been surprised when San Diego State pulled his scholarship. But she hadn't seen Luke since he'd gotten out of the hospital. In her mind, he was still in a cot, surrounded by doting nurses, his bandaged leg propped toward the ceiling.

"What're you doing here?" she asked.

"I work here," he said, then laughed, but his laugh sounded hard, like a chair suddenly scraped against the floor. "How you been?"

He didn't look at her, shuffling through his notepad, so she knew he'd heard about her mother.

"I'm hungry," she said.

"That's how you been? Hungry?"

"Can I get the crab bites?"

"You better not." He guided her finger down the laminated menu to the nachos. "There. Try that."

His hand curved soft over hers like he was teaching her to read, moving her finger under unfamiliar words. He always made her feel impossibly young, like two days later, when she returned to his section and tried to order a margarita. He laughed, tilting her fake ID toward him.

"Come on," he said. "Aren't you, like, twelve?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Oh fuck you," she said, "I'm seventeen." But she'd said it a little too proudly and Luke laughed again. Even eighteen—which she wouldn't turn until late August—would seem young to him. She was still in high school. He was twenty-one and had already gone to college, a real university, not the community college where everyone loafed around a few months after graduation before finding jobs. She had applied to five universities and while she waited to hear back, she asked Luke questions about college life, like were dorm showers as gross as she imagined and did people actually stick socks on door handles when they wanted privacy? He told her about undie runs and foam parties, how to maximize your meal plan, how to get extra time on tests by pretending you had a learning problem. He knew things and he knew girls, college girls, girls who wore high heels to class, not sneakers, and carried satchels instead of backpacks, and spent their summers interning at Qualcomm or California Bank & Trust, not making juice at the pier. She imagined herself in college, one of those sophisticated girls, Luke driving to see her, or if she went out of state, flying to visit her over spring break. He would laugh if he knew how she imagined him in her life. He teased her often, like when she began doing her homework in Fat Charlie's.

"Shit," he said, flipping through her calculus book. "You a nerd." She wasn't, really, but learning came easily to her. (Her mother used to tease her about that—must be nice, she'd say, when Nadia

brought home an aced test she only studied for the night before.) She thought her advanced classes might scare Luke off, but he liked that she was smart. See this girl right here, he'd tell a passing waiter, first black lady president, just watch. Every black girl who was even slightly gifted was told this. But she liked listening to Luke brag and she liked it even more when he teased her for studying. He didn't treat her like everyone at school, who either sidestepped her or spoke to her like she was some fragile thing one harsh word away from breaking.

One February night, Luke drove her home and she invited him inside. Her father was gone for the weekend at the Men's Advance, so the house was dark and silent when they arrived. She wanted to offer Luke a drink—that's what women did in the movies, handed a man a boxy glass, filled with something dark and masculine—but moonlight glinted off glass cabinets emptied of liquor and Luke pressed her against the wall and kissed her. She hadn't told him it was her first time but he knew. In her bed, he asked three times if she wanted to stop. Each time she told him no. Sex would hurt and she wanted it to. She wanted Luke to be her outside hurt.

By spring, she knew what time Luke got off work, when to meet him in the deserted corner of the parking lot, where two people could be alone. She knew which nights he had off, nights she listened for his car crawling up her street and tiptoed past her father's shut bedroom. She knew the days he went to work late, days she slipped him inside the house before her father came home from work. How Luke wore his Fat Charlie's T-shirt a size too small because it helped him earn more tips. How when he dropped to the edge of her bed without saying much, he was dreading a long shift, so she didn't say much either, tugging his too-tight shirt over his head and running her hands over the expanse of his shoulders. She knew that being on his

feet all day hurt his leg more than he ever admitted and sometimes, while he slept, she stared at the thin scar climbing toward his knee. Bones, like anything else, strong until they weren't.

She also knew that Fat Charlie's was dead between lunch and happy hour, so after her pregnancy test returned positive, she rode the bus over to tell Luke.

"Fuck" was the first thing he said.

Then, "Are you sure?"

Then, "But are you *sure* sure?"

Then, "Fuck."

In the empty Fat Charlie's, Nadia drowned her fries in a pool of ketchup until they were limp and soggy. Of course she was sure. She wouldn't have worried him if she weren't already sure. For days, she'd willed herself to bleed, begging for a drop, a trickle even, but instead, she only saw the perfect whiteness of her panties. So that morning, she rode the bus to the free pregnancy center outside of town, a squat gray building in the middle of a strip mall. In the lobby, a row of fake plants nearly blocked the receptionist, who pointed Nadia to the waiting area. She joined a handful of black girls who barely glanced up at her as she sat between a chubby girl popping purple gum and a girl in overall shorts who played Tetris on her phone. A fat white counselor named Dolores led Nadia to the back, where they squeezed inside a cubicle so cramped, their knees touched.

"Now, do you have a reason to think you might be pregnant?"

Dolores asked.

She wore a lumpy gray sweater covered in cotton sheep and spoke like a kindergarten teacher, smiling, her sentences ending in a gentle

lit. She must've thought Nadia was an idiot—another black girl too dumb to insist on a condom. But they had used condoms, at least most times, and Nadia felt stupid for how comfortable she had felt with their mostly safe sex. She was supposed to be the smart one. She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her. She had known pregnant girls. She had seen them waddling around school in tight tank tops and sweatshirts that hugged their bellies. She never saw the boys who had gotten them that way—their names were enshrouded in mystery, as wispy as rumor itself—but she could never unsee the girls, big and blooming in front of her. Of all people, she should have known better. She was her mother's mistake.

Across the booth, Luke hunched over the table, flexing his fingers like he used to when he was on the sidelines at a game. Her freshman year, she'd spent more time watching Luke than watching the team on the field. What would those hands feel like touching her?

"I thought you were hungry," he said.

She tossed another fry onto the pile. She hadn't eaten anything all day—her mouth felt salty, the way it did before she puked. She slipped out of her flip-flops, resting her bare feet against his thigh.

"I feel like shit," she said.

"Want something different?"

"I don't know."

He pushed away from the table. "Let me get you something else—"

"I can't keep it," she said.

Luke stopped, halfway out his seat.

"What?" he said.

"I can't keep a baby," she said. "I can't be someone's fucking mother, I'm going to college and my dad is gonna—"

She couldn't bring herself to say out loud what she wanted—the word *abortion* felt ugly and mechanical—but Luke understood, didn't he? He'd been the first person she told when she received her acceptance e-mail from the University of Michigan—he'd swept her into a hug before she even finished her sentence, nearly crushing her in his arms. He had to understand that she couldn't pass this up, her one chance to leave home, to leave her silent father whose smile hadn't even reached his eyes when she showed him the e-mail, but who she knew would be happier with her gone, without her there to remind him of what he'd lost. She couldn't let this baby nail her life in place when she'd just been given a chance to escape.

If Luke understood, he didn't say so. He didn't say anything at first, sinking back into the booth, his body suddenly slow and heavy. In that moment, he looked even older to her, his stubbled face tired and haggard. He reached for her bare feet and cradled them in his lap.

"Okay," he said, then softer, "okay. Tell me what to do."

He didn't try to change her mind. She appreciated that, although part of her had hoped he might do something old-fashioned and romantic, like offer to marry her. She never would've agreed but it would've been nice if he'd tried. Instead, he asked how much money she needed. She felt stupid—she hadn't even thought of something as practical as paying for the surgery—but he promised he'd come up with the cash. When he handed her the envelope the next day, she asked him not to wait with her at the clinic. He rubbed the back of her neck.

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "Just pick me up after."

She'd feel worse if she had an audience. Vulnerable. Luke had seen her naked—he had slipped inside her own body—but somehow, his seeing her afraid was an intimacy she could not bear.

THE MORNING OF HER APPOINTMENT, Nadia rode the bus to the abortion clinic downtown. She had driven past it dozens of times—an unremarkable tan building, slunk in the shadows of a Bank of America—but she had never imagined what it might look like inside. As the bus wound its way toward the beach, she stared out the window, envisioning sterile white walls, sharp tools on trays, fat receptionists in baggy sweaters herding crying girls into waiting rooms. Instead, the lobby was open and bright, the walls painted a creamy color that had some fancy name like *taupe* or *adobe*, and on the oak tables, beside stacks of magazines, there were blue vases filled with seashells. In a chair farthest from the door, Nadia pretended to read a *National Geographic*. Next to her, a redhead mumbled as she struggled with a crossword puzzle; her boyfriend slumped beside her, staring at his cell phone. He was the only man in the room, so maybe the redhead felt superior—more loved—since her boyfriend had joined her, even though he didn't seem like a good boyfriend, even though he wasn't even talking to her or holding her hand, like Luke would have done. Across the room, a black girl sniffled into her jean jacket sleeve. Her mother, a heavy woman with a purple rose tattooed on her arm, sat beside her, arms folded across her chest. She was angry or maybe just worried. The girl looked fourteen, and the louder she sniffled, the harder everyone tried not to look at her.

Nadia thought about texting Luke. *I'm here. I'm okay*. But he'd just started his shift and he was probably worried enough as it was. She flipped through the magazine slowly, her eyes gliding off the pages to the blonde receptionist smiling into her headset, the traffic outside,

the blue vase of seashells beside her. Her mother had hated the actual beach—messy sand and cigarette butts everywhere—but she loved shells, so whenever they went, she always spent the afternoon padding along the shore, bending to peel shells out of the damp sand.

"They calm me," she'd said once. She'd clutched Nadia on her lap and turned a shell carefully, flashing its shiny insides. In her hand, the shell had glimmered lavender and green.

"Turner?"

In the doorway, a black nurse with graying dreadlocks read her name off a metal clipboard. As Nadia gathered her purse, she felt the nurse give her a once-over, eyes drifting past her red blouse, skinny jeans, black pumps.

"Should've worn something more comfortable," the nurse said.

"I am comfortable," Nadia said. She felt thirteen again, standing in the vice-principal's office as he lectured her on the dress code.

"Sweatpants," the nurse said. "Someone should've told you that when you called."

"They did."

The nurse shook her head, starting back down the hall. She seemed weary, unlike the chipper white nurses squeaking down the hallways in pink scrubs and rubber shoes. Like she'd seen so much that nothing surprised her anymore, not even a girl with a sassy mouth wearing a silly outfit, a girl so alone, she couldn't find one person to sit with her in the waiting room. No, there was nothing special about a girl like this—not her good grades, not her prettiness. She was just another black girl who'd found herself in trouble and was finding her way out of it.

In the sonogram room, a technician asked Nadia if she wanted to see the screen. Optional, he said, but it gave some women closure.

She told him no. She'd heard once about a sixteen-year-old girl from her high school who'd given birth and left her baby on the beach. The girl was arrested when she doubled back to tell a cop she'd seen a baby and he discovered that she was the mother. How could he tell, Nadia had always wondered. Maybe, in the floodlights of his patrol car, he'd spotted blood streaking the insides of her thighs or smelled fresh milk spotting her nipples. Or maybe it was something else entirely. The ginger way she'd handed the baby over, the carefulness in her eyes when he brushed sand off its downy hair. Maybe he saw, even as he backed away, the maternal love that stretched like a golden thread from her to the abandoned baby. Something had given the girl away, but Nadia wouldn't make the same mistake. Double back. She wouldn't hesitate and allow herself to love the baby or even know him.

"Just do it already," she said.

"What about multiples?" the technician asked, rolling toward her on his stool. "You know, twins, triplets . . ."

"Why would I want to know that?"

He shrugged. "Some women do."

She already knew too much about the baby, like the fact that it was a boy. It was too early to actually tell, but she felt his foreignness in her body, something that was her and wasn't her. A male presence. A boy child who would have Luke's thick curls and squinty-eyed smile. No, she couldn't think about that either. She couldn't allow herself to love the baby because of Luke. So when the technician swirled the sensor in the blue goo on her stomach, she turned her head away.

After a few moments, the technician stopped, pausing the sensor over her belly button.

"Huh," he said.

"What?" she said. "What happened?"

Maybe she wasn't actually pregnant. That could happen, couldn't it? Maybe the test had been wrong or maybe the baby had sensed he wasn't wanted. Maybe he had given up on his own. She couldn't help it—she turned toward the monitor. The screen filled with a wedge of grainy white light, and in the center, a black oval punctuated by a single white splotch.

"Your womb's a perfect sphere," the technician said.

"So? What does that mean?"

"I don't know," he said. "That you're a superhero, maybe."

He chuckled, swirling the sensor around the gel. She didn't know what she expected to see in the sonogram—the sloping of a forehead, maybe, the outline of a belly. Not this, white and bean-shaped and small enough to cover with her thumb. How could this tiny light be a life? How could something this small bring hers to an end?

When she returned to the waiting room, the girl in the jean jacket was sobbing. No one looked at her, not even the heavy woman, who was now sitting one seat over. Nadia had been wrong—this woman couldn't be the girl's mother. A mother would move toward a crying child, not away. Her mother would've held her and absorbed her tears into her own body. She would've rocked her and not let go until the nurse called her name again. But this woman reached over and pinched the crying girl's thigh.

"Cut all that out," she said. "You wanted to be grown? Well, now you grown."

THE PROCEDURE only takes ten minutes, the dreadlocked nurse told her. Less than an episode of television.

In the chilly operating room, Nadia stared at the monitor that

hung in front of her flashing pictures from beaches around the world. Overhead, speakers played a meditation CD—classical guitar over crashing waves—and she knew she was supposed to pretend she was lying on a tropical island, pressed against grains of white sand. But when the nurse fit the anesthesia mask on her face and told her to count to a hundred, she could only think about the girl abandoning her baby in the sand. Maybe the beach was a more natural place to leave a baby you couldn't care for. Nestle him in the sand and hope someone found him—an old couple on a midnight stroll, a patrol cop sweeping his flashlight over beer cases. But if they didn't, if no one stumbled upon him, he'd return to his first home, an ocean like the one inside of her. Water would break onto the shore, sweep him up in its arms, and rock him back to sleep.

WHEN IT WAS OVER, Luke never came for her.

An hour after she'd called him, she was the only girl still waiting in the recovery room, curled in an overstuffed pink recliner, clutching a heat pad against her cramping stomach. For an hour, she'd stared into the dimness of the room, unable to make out the faces of the others but imagining they looked as blank as hers. Maybe the girl in the yellow dress had cried into the arms of her recliner. Or maybe the redhead had just continued her crossword puzzle. Maybe she'd been through this before or she already had children and couldn't take another. Was it easier if you already had a child, like politely declining seconds because you were already full?

Now the others were gone and she had pulled out her phone to call Luke a third time when the dreadlocked nurse dragged over a metal chair. She was carrying a paper plate of crackers and an apple juice box.

"Camps'll be bad for a while," she said. "Just put some heat on 'em, they'll go away. You got a heat pad at home?"

"No."

"Just heat you up a towel. Works just as fine."

Nadia had hoped she might get a different nurse. She'd watched the others swish through the room to dote on their girls, offering smiles, squeezing hands. But the dreadlocked nurse just shook the plate at her.

"I'm not hungry," Nadia said.

"You need to eat. Can't let you go until you do."

Nadia sighed, taking a cracker. Where was Luke? She was tired of this nurse, with her wrinkled skin and steady eyes. She wanted to be in her own bed, wrapped in her comforter, her head on Luke's chest. He would make her soup and play movies on his laptop until she fell asleep. He would kiss her and tell her that she had been brave. The nurse uncrossed, then recrossed her legs.

"Heard from your friend yet?" she asked.

"Not yet, but he's coming," Nadia said.

"You got someone else to call?"

"I don't need someone else, he's coming."

"He's not coming, baby," the nurse said. "Do you have someone else to call?"

Nadia glanced up, startled by the nurse's confidence that Luke would not show, but even more jolted by her use of the word *baby*. A cotton-soft *baby* that seemed to surprise the nurse herself, like it had tripped off her tongue. Just like how after the surgery, in her delirium, Nadia had looked into the nurse's blurred face and said "Mommy?" with such sweetness, the nurse had almost answered yes.

## TWO

IF Nadia Turner had asked, we would've warned her to stay away from him.

You know what they say about pastors' kids. In Sunday School, they're running around the sanctuary, hollering, smearing crayons on the pews; in middle school, a pastor's son chases girls, flipping up their dresses, while his sister smears on bright lipstick that makes her look like a harlot; by high school, the son is smoking reefer in the church parking lot and the daughter is being felt up in a bathroom stall by the deacon's son, who is quietly unrolling the panty hose her mother insisted she wear because ladies don't show their bare legs in church.

Luke Sheppard, bold and brash with wispy curls, football-built shoulders, and that squinty-eyed smile. Oh, any of us could've told her to stay away from him. She wouldn't have listened, of course. What did the church mothers know anyway? Not how Luke held

her hand while they slept or played with her hair when they cuddled or how after she'd told him about the pregnancy test, he cradled her bare feet in his lap. A man who laced his fingers through yours all night and held your feet when you were sad had to love you, at least a little bit. Besides, what did a bunch of old ladies know?

We would've told her that all together, we got centuries on her. If we laid all our lives toes to heel, we were born before the Depression, the Civil War, even America itself. In all that living, we have known men. Oh girl, we have known littlebit love. That littlebit of honey left in an empty jar that traps the sweetness in your mouth long enough to mask your hunger. We have run tongues over teeth to savor that last littlebit as long as we could, and in all our living, nothing has starved us more.

TEN YEARS BEFORE Nadia Turner's appointment, we'd already made our first visit to the abortion clinic downtown. Oh, not the way you're thinking. By the time that clinic was built, we would've laughed like Sarah at the thought of having babies, unwanted or otherwise. Besides, we were already mothers then, some by heart and some by womb. We rocked grandbabies left in our care and taught the neighborhood kids piano and baked pies for the sick and shut-in. We all mothered somebody, and more than that, we all mothered Upper Room Chapel, so when the church started a protest out front, we joined too. Not like Upper Room was the type of church to fuss at every little thing it didn't like. Shake fists at rated-R movies or buy armloads of rap CDs just to crush them or write letters to Sacramento to ensure the state's list of banned books stayed long and current. In fact, the church had only protested once before, back in the seventies,

when Oceanside's first strip club was built. A strip club, minutes from the beach where children swam and played. What next, a brothel on the pier? Why not turn the harbor into a red-light district? Well, the Hanky Panky opened and even though it was a blight to the community, everyone agreed that the new abortion clinic was much worse. A sign of the times, really. An abortion clinic going up downtown just as easy as a donut shop.

So the morning of the protest, the congregation gathered in front of the unbuilt clinic. Second John, who had driven the carless in the church van, and Sister Willis, who had instructed her Sunday School students to help color in the protest signs, and even Magdalena Price, who could hardly be bothered to do anything around Upper Room that required her to step out from behind her piano bench, had come down to the protest to, as she put it, see what all the fuss was about. All of us had circled around the pastor and the first lady and their son—a boy then, kicking dirt clods onto the sidewalk—while the pastor prayed for the souls of innocents.

Our protest only lasted three days. (Not because of our wavering convictions but because of the militants who joined us, the type of crazed white people who would end up on the news someday for bombing clinics or stabbing doctors. The last place any of us wanted to be was near the scene when one went off the deep end.) All three days, Robert Turner drove downtown at six a.m. to deliver a new batch of picket signs from the church. He and his wife were not the protesting type, he told the pastor, but he'd figured that transporting the signs was the least he could do, truck and all.

This was ten years before he would be known around Upper Room as the man with the truck, a black Chevy pickup that had become Upper Room's truck because of how often Robert was seen

driving from church, an arm hanging out the window, the truck bed filled with food baskets or donated clothes or metal chairs. He wasn't the only member with a truck, of course, but he was the only one willing to lend his at any moment. He kept a calendar by the phone and whenever anyone from Upper Room called, he carefully scheduled them in with a tiny golf pencil. Sometimes he joked that he should add the truck to his answering machine greeting because the truck would earn more messages than he did anyway. A joke, although he wondered if it was true, if the truck was the only reason he was invited to picnics and potlucks, if the true guest was the truck, needed to haul speakers and tables and folding chairs, but no one minded if he tagged along too. Why else would he receive such warm greetings when he stepped into Upper Room each Sunday? The ushers clapping his back and the ladies at the welcome table smiling at him and the pastor mentioning, once, in passing, that he wouldn't be shocked if Robert's good stewardship landed him on the elders board one day.

The truck, Robert believed, had turned things around for him. But there was also his daughter. People are always tenderhearted toward single fathers, especially single fathers raising girls, and folks would have cared for Robert Turner still, even if that terrible thing hadn't happened with his wife, even if she had just packed a suitcase and left, which to some, it seemed like she did anyway.

THAT EVENING, when her father pulled his truck into the garage, Nadia was curled in bed, clutching her twisting stomach. "The cramps might be bad," the dreadlocked nurse had told her. "Expect them a few hours or so. Call the emergency number if they're severe." The

nurse didn't explain the difference between bad cramps and severe ones, but she'd handed Nadia a white bag curled at the top like a sack lunch. "For the pain. Two every four hours." A clinic volunteer offered to drive Nadia home, and when she climbed into the white girl's dusty Sentra, she glanced out the window at the nurse, who watched them drive off. The volunteer—blonde, twentyish, earnest—charted nervously the whole drive, fiddling with the radio dials. She was a junior at Cal State San Marcos, she said, volunteering at the clinic as part of her feminist studies major. She looked like the type of girl who could go to college, major in something like feminist studies, and still expect to be taken seriously. She asked if Nadia planned to go to college and seemed surprised by her response. "Oh, Michigan's a good school," she said, as if Nadia didn't already know this.

That was two hours ago. Nadia clenched her eyes, passing through the cold center of the pain into its warmer edges. She wanted to take another pill even though she knew she should wait, but when she heard the garage door rumble, she shoved the orange vial into the white bag, everything inside her nightstand drawer. Anything unusual might tip her father off, even that nondescript bag. Since she discovered that she was pregnant, she'd been sure that her father would notice something was wrong with her. Her mother had been able to tell when she'd had a bad day at school moments after she climbed into the car. What happened? her mother used to ask, even before Nadia had said hello. Her father had never been that perceptive, but a pregnancy wasn't a bad day at school—he would notice that she was panicking, he would have to. She was grateful so far that he hadn't, but it scared her, how you could return home in a different body, how something big could be happening inside you and no one even knew it.

Her father knocked three times and nudged her bedroom door open. He wore his service khakis today, which seemed like a second skin, how naturally he fit within sharp pleats, a row of badges across his chest. Her friends used to be surprised that her father was a Marine. He didn't seem like the boys they'd grown up seeing around town, cocky and buff and horsing around in front of the Regal, flirting with passing girls. Maybe her father had been like that when he was younger but she couldn't imagine it. He was quiet and intense, a tall, wiry man who never seemed to relax, like a guard dog on his haunches, his ears always perked up. He leaned in her doorway, bending to unlace his shiny black boots.

"You don't look so good," he said. "You sick?"

"Just cramps," she said.

"Oh. Your . . ." He gestured to his stomach. "Need anything?"

"No," she said. "Wait. Can I use your truck later?"

"For what?"

"To drive."

"Where are you going, I mean."

"You can't do that."

"Do what?"

"Ask where I'm going. I'm almost eighteen."

"I can't ask where you're taking my truck?"

"Where do you think I'm taking it?" she said. "The border?"

Her father never cared about where she went, except when she asked to borrow his precious truck. He spent evenings circling the truck in the driveway, dipping a red velvet square into a tub of wax until the paint shone like glass. Then as soon as someone from Upper Room called for a favor, he jogged out the door, always running to his truck, as if it were the only child, needy and demanding of his

love. Her father sighed, running a hand over the graying hair she cut every two weeks, the way her mother used to, her father sitting in the backyard with a towel draped around his neck, her hands guiding the clippers. Cutting his hair was the only time she felt close to him.

"Downtown, okay?" she said. "Can I borrow your truck, please?"

Another wave of cramps gripped her, and she flinched, pulling her blanket tighter around herself. Her father lingered in the doorway a moment before dropping his keys on her dresser.

"I can make you some tea," he said. "It's supposed to—your aunts, they'd drink it, you know, when—"

"You can just leave the keys," she said.

THE DAY AFTER she was accepted into Michigan, Luke brought Nadia to the Wave Waterpark, where they rode inner tubes down the Slide Tower and the Flow Rider until they were soaked and tired. At first, she'd worried that he'd suggested a water park because he thought she was childish. But he had as much fun as she did, yelping as they splashed into pools, or dragging her to the next ride, water beads clinging to his chest, his wet sideburns glinting in the sun. After, they ate corn dogs and churros at the tables outside Rip-pity's Rainforest, where kids too small for the slides padded in floaties. She licked cinnamon sugar off her fingers, sun-heavy and happy, the type of happiness that before might have felt ordinary, but now seemed fragile, like if she stood too quickly, it might slide off her shoulders and break.

She hadn't expected a gift from Luke, not when her father had barely congratulated her. Look at that, he'd said when she showed him the e-mail, offering her a side hug. Then he'd passed her in the

kitchen later that night, eyes glazing over her as if she were a once-interesting piece of furniture he'd since tired of. She tried not to take it personally—he wasn't happy about anything these days—but she still teared up in the bathroom while brushing her teeth. The next morning, she awoke to a congratulations card on her nightstand with twenty dollars folded inside. *I'm sorry*, her father had written, *I'm trying*. Trying what? Trying to love her?

She stretched her legs across Luke's lap and he kneaded the smooth skin near her ankles while he finished his corn dog. He'd never seen her like this before—hair wet and kinky, her face clean of makeup—but she felt pretty as he smiled at her across the table, touching her ankle, and she wondered if his gentle touch meant more, if he might even be in love with her a little bit. Before they left, she tried to take a picture of the two of them but Luke cupped his hand around her phone. He wanted to keep their relationship a secret.

"Not a secret," he said. "Just private."

"That's the same thing," she said.

"It's not. I just think we should be low-key about this. That's all."

"Why?"

"I mean, the age thing."

"I'm almost eighteen."

"Almost ain't eighteen."

"I wouldn't get you in trouble. Don't you know that?"

"It's not just that," he said. "You don't know how it is. You're not a pastor's kid. The whole church in my business all the time. They'll be up in your business too. Let's just be smart, that's all I'm saying." Maybe there was a difference. You hid a secret relationship out of shame, but you might keep a relationship private for any number of

reasons. All relationships, in some way, were private—why did anyone else need to know as long as you were happy? So she learned how to be private. She didn't reach for his hand in public or post photos of them online. She even stopped going to Fat Charlie's after school every day, in case one of his coworkers began to wonder about them. But after Luke had left her at the abortion clinic, she forgot about being private and drove her father's truck to Fat Charlie's. She knew he closed on Thursday nights, but when she arrived, she didn't see him on the floor. At the bar, she waved down Pepe, a burly Mexican bartender with a graying ponytail. He glanced up from drying a glass with a brown rag.

"Go ahead and put that cheap-ass fake away," he said. "You know I ain't serving you."

"Where's Luke?" she asked.

"Hell if I know."

"Doesn't he get off soon?"

"I ain't in charge of his schedule."

"Well, have you seen him?"

"You okay?"

"Did you see him earlier?"

"Why don't you just call him?"

"He's not answering," she said. "I'm worried."

It wasn't like Luke to disappear like this, to not answer his phone, to promise he'd be somewhere, then not show. Especially on a day like today when she needed him, when he knew she needed him. She was worried that something bad had happened to him, or even worse, that nothing had. What if he had abandoned her at that clinic because he'd simply chosen to? No, he would never do that—but she thought about him at the water park, clamping his hand over her

phone, that brief moment when she had felt safe and loved right before Luke had pulled away.

Pepe sighed, setting the glass on the bar. He had four daughters, Luke had told her once, and she wondered if this was why Pepe always refused her fake ID, always shooed away men who hit on her, always asked her how she was getting home.

"Look, hon," he said. "You know Sheppard. Probably just wanted to go out with his buddies. I'm sure he'll call you tomorrow. Just go home, won't you?"

IN THE END, she found Luke at a party.

Not just any party but a high school party, although Cody Richardson would've been offended to hear his parties referred to as such. He had graduated ten years ago, after all, but his parties would always be high school parties because Nadia, and everyone else at Oceanside High, had spent countless weekends partying at his house. He was a sandy-haired skater, the type of white boy she had nothing in common with. But even though she normally hated white boy parties—the repetitive techno music, the smothering Abercrombie and Fitch cologne, the terrible dancing—she had gone to Cody Richardson's parties because everyone did. She had piled inside his beach bungalow every weekend, where you never worried about anyone's parents coming back to town early or the cops shutting the party down, and now his floor plan read like a map of her teenage firsts: the balcony where she'd first smoked weed, hacking into the beach air; the corner of the kitchen where she'd broken up with her first boyfriend; the hallway in front of the bathroom where she had drunk-cried the weekend after they buried her mother.

She hadn't been back to Cody's since. The yellow house already felt like something she'd outgrown and once she'd graduated, she promised herself that she would never return. She had always been bothered by how many people did, how everyone seemed stuck in time, the years since high school collapsing as soon as they stepped through the door. Still, Cody's house was the only place she could think to find Luke after she'd driven past his parents' house and seen his truck missing from the driveway. Somehow, she knew he would be at Cody's. She felt him as she walked, lovesick and angry, across the damp beach sand. She followed the footprint trail leading to the beach house, wondering if she might find the footprints that belonged to Luke, her feet stepping inside his the entire time.

Techno pulsed through the open door in green waves as she padded up the lopsided driftwood steps. Bass rumbled through wooden floors sticky with beer, and she paused in the doorway, her eyes adjusting to the dimness. She wouldn't have noticed Luke at first if it weren't for his walk. Past the crowd of white kids thrashing together, past kitchen counters covered in half-empty bottles of liquor and two triangles of cups from an abandoned game of beer pong, she caught Luke's silhouette crossing the darkened room. That slight limp, subtle enough for most to ignore it but as familiar to her as his voice. He looked drunk, a near-empty pint of Jim Beam dangling from his hand. When she neared, he swayed a little, as if the sight of her was enough to knock him off balance.

"Nadia," he said. "What're you doing here?"

"What the fuck are you doing here?" she said. "I called you a hundred fucking times."

"You shouldn't be here. You should be in bed or something—"

"Where were you?" she said. "I waited for hours."

"Some shit came up, okay? I knew you were gonna find a way home."

But he stared at the ground when he said it and she knew he was lying.

"You left me," she said.

He finally looked up at her, and it startled her, how he looked the same as he always had. Shouldn't someone look different once you've caught them in a lie, once you've seen them truthfully for the first time?

"Look, this shit was supposed to be fun," he said, "not all this fucking drama. I got you the money. What else do you want from me?"

Then he brushed past her, pushing through the crowd and lurching unevenly toward the door. She should've known. She should've known when he'd brought her an envelope with six hundred dollars that the money was his part, the rest hers. He'd slipped her the money, and now she was a problem that he'd already dealt with. In a way, she had known this—or at least suspected it—but she'd wanted to believe in Luke, in love, in people who did not leave. She squeezed into the kitchen, past a group of giddy high schoolers playing flip cup, and reached for a bottle of Jose Cuervo on the counter. The dreadlocked nurse had told her no alcohol for forty-eight hours—thins the blood, increases the bleeding—but she poured a shot of tequila anyway. She felt a hand on her waist and when she turned, Devon Jackson lingered behind her, a joint pressed between his fingertips. She hadn't spoken to him since they fooled around once her freshman year; he looked the same, almost delicate, tall and lean with long eyelashes except his skin was now covered in tattoos. Even his neck was darkened with ink, a fleur-de-lis stretching up his throat.

"Jesus," she said. "You're stained now."

He laughed. "Where the fuck you been?"

Nowhere. Everywhere. He passed her the joint and she felt fifteen again, smoking with a boy who had fingered her once at the top of a Ferris wheel, gently, the car swaying like it was rocking them to sleep. The last she'd heard, Devon was modeling now, mostly on gay websites. Two years ago, a friend had sent her a link to a photo spread where Devon stretched out along white sheets in nothing but his briefs, a blond man's face inches from his crotch.

"I heard you're famous now," she said, passing the joint.

She didn't mean to get drunk. She poured herself another drink because Devon asked why her cup was empty, what, did she become a nun or something? She poured a shot of tequila into a cup of lemonade, then another shot, then another, then she let Devon pull her onto the dance floor. Not because she wanted to dance but because dancing was an excuse to be close, to touch, to be comforted by the press and pull of Devon's body against hers without having to talk. And the drinks made her feel nice, although the room was warm and she felt disgusted by Devon's swampy T-shirt as she draped an arm around his waist. Her blood was probably thinning as she danced, but how nice it was to feel drunk and relaxed and warm and touched and touching.

Devon kissed her neck, squeezing her ass with both hands.

"You're so fuckin' fine," he said, breath hot against her ear.

He grinded against her, biting his lip in that serious way of anyone trying hard to be sexy. She giggled. He laughed too, squeezing her again.

"What?" he said.

"I thought you like boys now," she said.

"Who the fuck told you that?"

"People."

"Does this feel like I like boys?"

He pressed her hand against his bulge and she wrested her wrist out of his grasp, pushing him away. She felt trapped, suddenly, like she was suffocating. Blurry-eyed, she felt along the wall, past bodies bumping into her, the frenetic rhythms pumping out the speakers, through the sticky humidity to the back door. On the other end of the balcony, Cody Richardson leaned against the wooden railing. He was taller, thinner now, his dirty blond hair shaggier, his plaid shirt hanging off his angular shoulders. He smiled, flashing his silver lip ring, and she eased toward him, gripping the rail.

"Don't you think it's weird?" he said.

"What?"

He pointed over her shoulder. Beyond the lavender roofs of other beach houses, she could see the top of the San Onofre nuclear power plant, two white domes that kids on the school bus used to call "the boobs" when they drove past on field trips.

"Any minute—boom." Cody's eyes widened, his hands exploding away from each other. "Just like that. I mean, all it takes is a storm and we all blow up."

Nadia rested her head on the railing, closing her eyes.

"That's how I wanna go someday," she said.

"Really?"

"Boom."

THIS IS HOW she imagined it:

Her mother driving around town, her husband's service pistol in her lap. A curve, then another curve, the morning light as pink as a

baby girl's nightgown. She was groggy or maybe cleanheaded, as clear as she'd ever been. She thought first about driving to the beach because it'd be a good place to die. Warm enough. A dying place ought to be warm—enough coldness waiting in the afterlife. But it was too late. Surfers were already padding across the sand and dying should be private, like humming a little song only you can hear.

So she drove on, half a mile up the hill from Upper Room where her car was shielded by branches. She shut off her engine and picked up the gun. She had never shot anything before but she'd seen animals die, pigs squealing as they bled out, chickens flapping as her mother wrung their necks. You could coax out life or you could end it at once. A slow death might seem gentler but a sudden death was kinder. Merciful, even.

She would be merciful to herself, this once.

WHEN HER FATHER ASKED, Nadia told him she hadn't seen the tree. In the darkness, the tree in front of their house was nearly impossible to see, so she'd made too sharp a turn. It was nearly four a.m., and they were both stranding in the driveway, her father in his green plaid robe and slippers, her leaning against the truck door, her shoes in her hands. She had planned to sneak back inside the house, but her father had run outside as soon as he heard the crash. Now he crouched in front of his dented bumper, feeling the jagged metal.

"Why the heck weren't your headlights on?" he said.

"They were!" she said. "I just—I looked down to shut them off and then I looked up and then the tree."

She swayed a little. Her father frowned, straightening.

"Are you drunk?" he said.

"No," she said.

"I can smell it on you from here."

"No—"

"And you drove home?"

He stepped toward her and the sudden movement made her drop everything in her hands, her purse and shoes and keys clattering to the driveway. She jutted her arms out before he could come closer. He stopped, his jaw clenched, and she couldn't tell whether he wanted to slap her or hug her. Both hurt, his anger and his love, as they stood together in the dark driveway, his heart beating against her hands.

### THREE

*We pray.*

Not without ceasing, as Paul instructs, but often enough. On Sundays and Wednesdays, we gather in the prayer room and slip off jackets, leave shoes at the door and walk around in stocking feet, sliding a little, like girls playing on waxed floors. We sit in a ring of white chairs in the center of the room and one of us reaches into the wooden box by the door stuffed with prayer request cards. Then we pray: for Earl Vernon, who wants his crackhead daughter to come home; Cindy Harris's husband, who is leaving her because he'd caught her sending nasty photographs to her boss; Tracy Robinson, who has taken to drinking again, hard liquor at that; Saul Young, who is struggling to help his wife through the final days of her dementia. We read the request cards and we pray, for new jobs, new houses, new husbands, better health, better-behaved children, more faith, more patience, less temptation.

"I don't think of ourselves as 'prayer warriors.' A man must've picked up with that term—men think anything difficult is war. But prayer is more delicate than battle, especially intercessory prayer. More than just a notion, taking up the burdens of someone else, often someone you don't even know. You close your eyes and listen to a request. Then you have to slip inside their body. You are Tracy Robinson, burning for whiskey. You are Cindy Harris's husband, searching your wife's phone. You are Earl Vernon, washing dirty knots out of your strung-out daughter's hair.

If you don't become them, even for a second, a prayer is nothing but words.

That's why it didn't take us long to figure out what had happened to Robert Turner's truck. Ordinarily waxed and gleaming, the truck hobbled into the Upper Room parking lot on Sunday with a dented front bumper and cracked headlight. In the lobby, we heard young folks joking about how drunk Nadia Turner had been at some beach party. Then we became young again, or that is to say, we became her. Dancing all night with a bottle of vodka in hand, staggering out the door. A careless drive home weaving between lanes. The crunch of metal. How, when Robert smelled the liquor, he must have hit her or maybe hugged her. How she was probably deserving of both.

The truck was the first sign that something wasn't right that summer, but none of us saw it that way. The banged-up truck only meant one thing to us then.

"Look what she done."

"Who done?"

"That Turner girl."

"Which one is that?"

"You know the one."

"Redbone, clear-eyes like."

"Oh, that girl?"

"What other Turner girl is there?"

"Don't she look—"

"Sure do."

"Like she spit her out."

"Y'all see his—"

"Wim."

"How much you think that costs to fix?"

"Why she do that?"

"She wild."

"Poor Robert."

"She wild wild."

We only felt sorry for Robert Turner. He'd already been through too much. Half a year earlier, his wife had stolen his gun and blown her head clean off her body. A little past sunrise, she'd parked her blue Tercel along some back road and sent her car rocking from the gun blast. A jogger had found her an hour later. Robert had driven the Tercel home from the police station, the headrest still darkened with his wife's blood. No one knew what had happened to that car. Rumor was that after combing it for the rest of his wife's things—her pocketbook, overdue library paperbacks, a ruby red hair clip he'd bought her, years ago, from Mexico—he'd put a brick on the gas pedal and sent it right into the San Luis Rey River. But a man as sensible as Robert had probably sold it for parts, and sometimes we wondered if a passing car had Elise Turner's muffler, if her turn signal blinked at us from the next lane.

All of that, and now a reckless daughter too. No wonder Robert looked so troubled.

That evening, we found a prayer card with his name on it in the wooden box outside the door. In the center, in all lowercase, the words *pray for her*. We didn't know which *her* he meant—his dead wife or his reckless daughter—so we prayed for both. It's more than just a notion, you know. Praying for someone dead. When there's no body to slip into, you can only try to find their spirit, and who wants to chase down Elise Turner's, wherever it's hiding?

Later that night, when we left the prayer room, we felt something in Upper Room shift. Couldn't explain it, something just felt different. Off. We knew the walls of Upper Room like the walls of our own homes. We'd soft-stepped down hallways as the choir practiced, noticing that corner in front of the instrument closet where the paint had chipped, or the tile in the ladies' room that had been laid crooked. We'd spent decades studying the splotch that looked like an elephant's ear on the ceiling above the water fountain. And we knew the exact spot on the sanctuary carpet where Elise Turner had knelt the night before she killed herself. (The more spiritual of us even swore they could still see the indented curve from her knees.) Sometimes we joked that when we died, we'd all become part of these walls, pressed down flat like wallpaper. Near the stained-glass windows in the sanctuary or in a corner of the Sunday School room or even attached to the ceiling in the prayer room, where we met every Sunday and Wednesday to intercede.

We didn't know then that the banged-up truck had knotted Nadia Turner's future to our own, that we would watch her come and go over the years, each time tugging that knot a little tighter.

ON SUNDAY NIGHT, the Turners received a visitor.

Nadia had spent most of the weekend in bed, not because her stomach still hurt but because she had nowhere else to go. She wasn't pregnant anymore but she had wrecked her father's truck. What if it took weeks to fix? How would he stand it, no truck to turn to, no errands to run, only work and home? He loved one thing, her father, and she had ruined it. Worse, her father hadn't even yelled at her. She wished he would rage when he was angry—it'd be easier that way, quicker—but instead, he coiled up tight inside himself, moving silently around her in the kitchen or avoiding her altogether. She felt herself disappearing into the silence until she heard two high-pitched notes stepping through the air, so light she thought she dreamed them. Then she heard three knocks and a brief stab ran through her. Luke. She jumped up, finger combing her hair into a ponytail, tucking her bra strap under her tank top, adjusting her shorts. She padded barefoot across the cold tile and opened the door.

"Oh," she said. "Hi."

Pastor Sheppard smiled from the doorstep. She had never seen him look this casual before, not in his church robes or a three-piece suit but a polo shirt and jeans and black sneakers with special soles he wore, Luke said, because his knees were bad. She'd always imagined pastors as mousy old men in sweaters and glasses but Pastor Sheppard looked more like the bouncers she sweet-talked outside of clubs, tall and wide, his shiny mahogany head nearly touching the door-frame. He seemed even larger on Sunday mornings, stalking across the altar in his long black robe, his voice booming to the rafters. But

in his polo shirt, standing on her front steps, he looked relaxed. Kind, even. He smiled at her and she saw Luke for a second, a fragment of him, like a vein of light through smashed glass.

"Hi honey," the pastor said. "Is your dad around?"

"In the yard."

She backed up, letting him inside. He filled the entrance, gazing around the living room, and she wondered what he made of her house. He probably visited so many homes, he could read them as soon as he stepped inside. Some houses filled with sickness, some with sin, others with sorrow. But hers? It probably just seemed empty. The silent, uncluttered rooms, the whole house open like a wound that would never scab over. She led the pastor to the backyard, where her father was bench-pressing on the concrete slab. He racked his weights with a loud clink.

"Pastor." He wiped his face with his gray USMC T-shirt. "Didn't know you were stopping by."

She slid the screen door shut and started back down the hallway. As she turned, she felt the pastor watching her and she wondered, for a second, if he knew. Maybe his calling had imbued him with divine knowledge and he could see it hanging off her shoulders, the heaviness of her secrets. Or even if he had no holy power, maybe he just sensed it. Maybe he could feel the once-connection between the two of them, and as soon as she'd turned, he'd reached up to touch its frayed edges.

She tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom and perched on the toilet lid, listening through the cracked window.

"I was in the area," the pastor was saying. "Saw your truck earlier. Everything okay?"

"It'll be fine," her father said. "Just needs a little bodywork. Sorry about the picnic—I know I said I'd haul those chairs—"

"We'll manage." The pastor paused. "Folks are saying your girl crashed it."

She gripped her knees tighter on the toilet lid.

"Were we that crazy when we were young?" her father said.

"Crazier, maybe. She okay?"

"She's a smart girl," her father said. "A lot smarter than me, that's for sure. Going off to college soon. She should know better. That's what worries me."

"You know how these kids are—they just want to push the limits. Think they're invincible."

"She wasn't like this before," her father said. "Or maybe she was. Maybe I just didn't know her before. Elise was always there to . . . they were so close, I couldn't get between them and didn't hardly want to. Mothers are selfish. You know she wouldn't even let me hold Nadia at first? Not until the doctor made her rest. You can't get between no mother and child. I don't know, Pastor. I'm trying to raise her right. Maybe I just don't know how."

She eased back down the hallway. She didn't want to hear more. She hated hearing her father blame himself for her mistakes, even though she knew she blamed him too. After all, she had been the one who held it together. She'd answered the door when the Mothers visited with food, while her father disappeared into the darkness of his bedroom. She had eaten the food the Mothers brought until she sickened of it, until she felt she could taste exactly who'd made what. Mother Hartie had brought the macaroni and cheese, so rich that butter pooled in the corner of the pan. Mother Agnes, rail

thin, had made the apple pie, its lattices straight and ruler made. For weeks Nadia ate donated food, each bite soured by grief, until she grew tired of the old ladies, their kindly smiles masks for nosiness. So one day, she left their dishes on the front steps and ignored the doorbell. Then she drove her father's truck to the grocery store and for dinner, she cooked meadloaf. It came out dry and brick-like, suspended in a pan of brown gel, but her father ate it anyway.

After the pastor left, she carried her mother's clippers to the living room, where her father was watching a cowboy movie. Though it was their usual time, she thought he might ignore her, but he stood silently and stepped into the backyard. They could talk this way, over the buzz of the clippers, not having to look at each other.

"Pastor asked about you," her father said.

The sky was filmy and light, like lavender silk rippling above her. She guided the clippers across his hair, clumps of black and gray wool falling to his shoulders.

"Okay," she said.

"The first lady needs an assistant," he said. "Just for the summer. Nothing fancy, but it's money and you'll learn some good skills."

"I can't work there," she said.

"Why not?"

"I just can't," she said. "I'll find something else."

"It's a good job—"

"I don't care, I'll find something else—"

"You'll pay to fix my truck and everything else will go to your books and schooling," he said. "It's a good job and it'll be good for you. Spending some time at Upper Room. It'll help you. God will—you have to trust Him, see? You trust Him and stay in His presence and He'll carry you through like He's carrying me."

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself this was a good idea. As if by spending enough time in church, she might absorb holiness into her bones. She sighed, brushing hair off his shoulders. What did her father know about what would be good for her? What did he know about her at all?

ON HER FIRST morning of work, she slumped against the window as her father guided his heavier car up the hill toward Upper Room. The church—tan, with a tall steeple—rose in hills of wild brush, the worst place to be in a county that burned. Out-of-towners never ventured this far north. Anyone visiting a beach town wanted sparkling oceans and cool breezes, so they stayed downtown, strolling across the long wooden pier where fishers lounged in metal chairs, poles propped over the edge, and children skipped with red pails to the Dairy Queen. But north of the beach was miles of coastal sagebrush that became kindling during wildfire season. In springtime, fires were distant from everyone's mind, but as her father drove, she stared out the window at black stumps jutting out of the charred ground. Even though Upper Room sat in a nest of kindling, even though it would only take a gust of wind carrying a single ember to its steps, the church had never burned. A sign, the congregation often said, of divine favor. God so loved Upper Room, He spared them from the flames.

These were the stories people told themselves. She'd heard, time and time again, her mother's own story about how God had led her to Upper Room. She had been a young mother then, a military wife new to California and lonely. She didn't even have a high school diploma, so she cleaned rooms at the Days Inn downtown, a job her supervisor, an older black woman, told her she was lucky to have.

"Used to be a way for us to make a living," she said. "But nowa-days? They only want to hire those Mexicans. Can't speak a drop of English but dirt cheap. Pay them right under the table. You speak Spanish?"

"No," her mother had said.

"That's all right. You'll learn."

She did, over time. Basic phrases, like *How are you* or *Can you pass me that* and all the swear words. Sometimes, when her child care fell through, she brought Nadia to work with her and the other ladies cooed over her, singing Spanish lullabies as they rocked her on balconies overlooking the beach. Her mother could barely understand the songs herself but she had heard on *Oprah* that it was good to expose a baby's brain to different languages. That, she would later say, was how Nadia got to be so smart. How she'd read her first book before kindergarten, stumping the other parents so much that one mother had brought in her own book to test her, convinced she had just memorized the story. But Nadia's mother remembered the Mexican women circling around her, cocooning her in Spanish, her brain sopping up words until it hung heavy and full.

Her own patchy Spanish only took her so far. Her husband had been deployed to the Persian Gulf, and even though she had lived in Oceanside for a year, she had not made a true friend. So in her loneliness, she'd sought out a church home. She hadn't been sure where to begin looking. Besides the Catholic churches, dutifully named after saints, most of the San Diego churches bore nautical names like Coastline Baptist or Seacoast Community Church. With names like that, she imagined congregations filing into pews wearing swim trunks, a minister who climbed the altar with a surfboard under his arm. She tried Calvary Chapel and Emmanuel Faith, but neither felt

right. Emmanuel Faith had a woman pastor who had gone to Harvard, which she'd mentioned three times in the sermon. At Calvary Chapel, a woman behind her had gotten filled with the spirit and started flailing, nearly knocking everyone in the head. For years, she bounced from church to church, each one too small or too big, too modern or too traditional. Then one afternoon, she was emptying a room's trash can when a bulletin from Upper Room Chapel fluttered onto her foot.

"It was my Goldilocks church," she used to tell Nadia. "I knew it as soon as I walked in. Everything about it, just right."

On Sunday mornings, Upper Room Chapel crowded and bustled, men in suits pulling each other into rough hugs, ladies planting cheek kisses before scribbling brunch dates on scrap paper sticking out of Bibles, toddlers skirting around flowerpots in makeshift games of tag, and the Mothers, strutting past in colorful hats crowned with feathered plumes. Her first time in Upper Room, Nadia had watched from behind her mother's knee, mystified, as their feathers bobbed up and down past her. White gloves were pulled up to their elbows, their tambourines jingled as they walked, and she'd wondered if jingling came with age, if one day, when she was wrinkled and gray, her own steps would make music. Her mother had laughed at the question.

"Oh, your body'll make some sounds all right," she'd said, wrapping her hand around Nadia's.

That first Sunday, her father had not been with them. Her mother had apologized for his absence to the pastor after service when she shook his hand in the receiving line.

"My husband, he just got back from overseas," she'd said. "And he's not much the churchy type."

Nadia's father had arrived home a week ago. She was four then

and she barely remembered him, although she was old enough to understand that was a shameful thing to admit. In the months counting down to his return, her mother had gathered Nadia into her lap and pulled out a photo album, flipping slowly past pictures of her father holding her as a baby. In one, she was curled up like a kitten against his chest and her father, young and strapping in dress blues, smiled into the camera. He had a mole by his nose and short dark hair that looked plushy, like the bristles on her mother's makeup brush. She studied his face, searching for features that were also hers. People had always said she looked exactly like her mother.

She had been wary around him at first, shy even. He'd knelt to hug her outside of the terminal and she had drawn back, startled by this man in camouflage hefting a giant duffel bag, his face darkened by desert sun. The time she'd spent studying his photographs had not prepared her for the reality of him, his size and smell. He frowned.

"She don't remember me?" he said to her mother.

"Well, she was nothin' but a baby when you left." Her mother gave her a little push. "Go on and hug your daddy. Go on."

She took a few steps forward and her father pulled her into a hug. His chest felt hard. She smiled at him, even though the hug hurt. Her father held her in his lap on the drive back home, while her mother complained that she ought to be in a car seat.

"She ought to be getting used to me," he said.

"It just takes a little time, Robert," her mother said.

"I don't care," he'd said. "I don't care how long it takes. She's gonna love me."

Now her father paused at an intersection, before turning onto the road that led to the church. She hadn't been on this ride since the morning of her mother's funeral. That drive had been a blur—she'd

felt like she'd been cast in a play she hadn't tried out for and was suddenly expected to know all the lines. Would she have to speak at the service? What did anyone expect her to say? That one day, she'd had a mother, and the next, she didn't? That the only tragic circumstance that had befallen her mother was her own self? In the backseat of the hearse, she'd found a run in her panty hose and quietly picked at it until it became a gaping hole, finding peace in the unraveling.

"I need you to take this seriously," her father said. "Nice thing Mrs. Sheppard is doing for you."

Maybe, but she didn't understand why the first lady had felt inclined to help her at all. Luke's mother hated her, ever since the seventh grade when she'd caught Nadia kissing Deacon Lou's nephew behind the church. He was the type of boy she'd liked then—tall and rangy, draped in a T-shirt three times too big—and she'd traced his zigzag cornrows, pressing him against the side of the church as they panted into each other's mouths. She'd never kissed a boy before, really kissed him. Earlier that year she'd dated a boy for three weeks, but they'd only kissed once after a circle of their friends dared them, so it didn't really count. But this kiss was a real kiss. She felt it burning through her as he slipped his hand up her shirt and rubbed her through her training bra, and she thought he might have felt it too when he suddenly pulled away, as if he'd touched something hot. Then she followed his gaze over her shoulder to where the first lady stood. She'd snatched Nadia by the arm and dragged her back into the church, shaking her wrist as she fussed at her.

"I've never seen such a thing in my life! Carrying on like that behind the church!" Mrs. Sheppard gave her wrist another good shaking, leaning her face close to hers. "Don't you know nice girls don't do that? Don't you know that?"

She still remembered the way the first lady's face had suddenly loomed close to hers. She had one brown eye and one blue eye, and in that moment, both became a disorienting blur. She'd dragged Nadia back to Sister Willis's class. For the rest of Sunday School, Sister Willis made Nadia sit in the back of the room by herself, writing *My body is a temple of God* a hundred times before she could be dismissed. Her mother hadn't said much on the ride home, but when they pulled into the garage, she'd quietly shut off the engine and sat in the car a minute, still holding the steering wheel.

"My mama tried to keep me away from boys," she said. "Obviously it didn't work, so I won't tell you that. You just gotta be smart and you gotta be careful. Boys, they can go around careless their whole lives. But you can either be careful now or careful later. That's your only choice, really. You got big things ahead of you. Don't you give that up for nobody."

"But it's just kissing," Nadia said.

"Don't let it be more than that," her mother said. "Don't end up like I did. That's the only thing you could do that would break your daddy's heart."

Her father was a Marine, stoic and tough with a chest so hardened with muscle that his hugs even hurt. She'd never thought herself capable of breaking anyone's heart, let alone his. But her mother was seventeen when she'd gotten pregnant. She must've known from experience how that had hurt her own parents. And if getting pregnant was the most harmful thing Nadia could do, then how much pain had her unexpected arrival caused? How much had she ruined her mother's life, if her mother told her that a baby was the worst thing that could happen to her?

Nadia had told Luke the kissing story once and he'd laughed into his pillow.

"It's not funny," she said.

"Aw, come on," he said. "That shit was so long ago. And how you think she hates you? You never even talk to her."

"I can tell by the way she looks at me."

"She looks at everyone like that. That's just how she looks."

He'd rolled over in bed, burying his face in her neck, but she twisted out of his arms, feeling under the covers for her panties. She never stayed long when she visited him. It was thrilling at first—fucking in a pastor's house—but after, the thrill faded into panic and she imagined footsteps outside the door, keys jingling, cars pulling into the driveway. Luke's mother dragging her naked out of the bed, shaking her wrist. Luke thought her paranoia was funny but she didn't want to give his mother another reason to hate her. She had hoped someday that Luke might bring her home, not sneak her in his bedroom when his parents were gone, but invite her to dinner. He would introduce her as his girlfriend and his mother would drape an arm across her shoulders and guide her to the table.

Her father turned the silver Chevy Malibu into the parking lot, cruising toward the church entrance. She felt her stomach thrum.

"I could find another job," she said. "If you just give me a little time—"

"Go on," her father said, unlocking the door. "You don't want to be late."

She had never been in Upper Room during the week, and as soon as she pushed open the heavy double doors, she felt like she was trespassing. The church, crowded and bustling on Sunday morning, was

now wrapped in quiet, the halls darkened, the main foyer, with its sprawling blue carpet, empty. She felt almost disappointed by how plain the unoccupied building seemed, like how once at Disneyland, Space Mountain had stopped mid-ride and the lights flashed on, revealing that she was only in a gray warehouse, riding along a track with tiny drops that had only seemed exciting in the haze of special effects. She followed a dark corridor toward the back of the building, past the Sunday School room where she had reported, dutifully, from kindergarten to the eighth grade, past the choir room and the pastor's office, down to the first lady's office at the end of the hall. The room spread regally in front of her, mahogany furniture gleaming under the sunlight, tiny potted palm trees sprouting out of every corner. Mrs. Sheppard leaned against the desk, her arms folded. She was tall—at least six feet—and in her red skirt suit and matching high heels, she towered over Nadia.

"Well, come on in," she said. "Don't just stand there."

She had always seemed intimidating, if not because of her height or her title or the way she walked slowly as she talked, like a panther stalking its prey, then because of her odd eyes. One brown and one blue, the coldness of that blue eye forcing Nadia to stare at the ground whenever the first lady passed her in the church lobby.

"How old are you, honey?" Mrs. Sheppard asked.

"Seventeen," Nadia said softly.

"Seventeen." Mrs. Sheppard paused, glancing in the doorway as if she expected a better girl to walk through it. "And you going off to school somewhere in the fall?"

"Michigan," she said, but her response felt bare, so she added, "ma'am."

"Studying whar?"

"I don't know yet. But I want to go to law school."

"Well, college girl like you must be smart. You ever work in an office?"

"No ma'am."

"But you worked before. Right?"

"Of course."

"Doing whar?"

"I was a cashier once, in the mall. And I also worked at Jojo's Juicery."

"Jojo's Juicery," Mrs. Sheppard pursed her lips. "Well, look. I never had an assistant and I never needed one. But my husband seems to think I could use some help. So let's find you something to do, okay?"

She sent Nadia to bring her a cup of coffee from the pastor's office. As she headed down the hall, Nadia glanced out the window overlooking the parking lot. On the lawn in front of the church, little children played tag in the grass. Summer day camp, she figured, but she still paused, squinting, as she spotted, in the midst of the chaos, Aubrey Evans. Of course Aubrey would spend her summer at church—of course she had nothing better to do. She was wearing a stupid safari hat and baggy cargo shorts, and she loped slowly toward kids who scattered as soon as she drew near. She let most escape her grasp, but in the end, she caught a slow one, sweeping him into her arms as he squealed, kicking his little legs in the air. In another life, maybe, Nadia could have been like her. Playing in the summer morning, scooping up a child who smiled, grateful to be caught by her.

Her first weeks working at Upper Room, Nadia and her father fell into a routine: wake early, eat silently, and climb into the loaner

can. He would drop her off on his way to work. On the drive over, her father would complain about the different steering or how he hated sitting this low in traffic, but she knew he only missed his truck because while it was in the shop, he couldn't serve Upper Room. After work, he lingered in the kitchen, patting his pockets like he'd stepped inside a stranger's house and didn't know what to do with himself. Should he leave his shoes by the door? Where was the bathroom? He eventually filed outside to lift weights in the backyard, like a prisoner quietly biding his time.

At work, Nadia did the tasks Mrs. Sheppard assigned her: calling caterers for the Ladies Auxiliary luncheon, proofreading the church bulletin, scheduling toy donations at the children's hospital, photocopying registration forms for the summer day camp. She tried to do everything perfectly because when she made a mistake, Mrs. Sheppard gave her a look. Eyes narrowed, lips pursed somewhere between a frown and a smirk, as if to say, look what I have to put up with.

"Honey, you need to do this again," she would say, waving Nadia over. Or, "Come on, now, pay attention. Isn't that what we hired you for?"

To be honest, Nadia wasn't exactly sure why the pastor and his wife had hired her. They pitied her, she knew, but who didn't? At her mother's funeral, in the front pew, she'd felt pity radiating toward her, along with a quiet anger that everyone was too polite to express, though she'd felt its heat tickling the back of her neck. "Who is in a position to condemn? Only God," the pastor had said, opening his eulogy. But the fact that he'd led with that scripture only meant that the congregation had already condemned her mother, or worse, that he felt her mother had done something deserving of condemnation. At the repast, Sister Willis had pulled her into a hug and said, "I just

can't believe she did that to you," as if her mother had shot Nadia, not herself.

On the Sunday mornings that followed, her father never gave up knocking on her door but Nadia always turned away in bed, pretending to be asleep. He wouldn't force her to go to church with him. He didn't force her to do anything. Asking her already required enough energy. Sometimes she thought that she ought to join him; it would make him happy if she did. But then she remembered Sister Willis whispering into her ear and her stomach turned cold. How dare anyone at that church judge her mother? No one knew why she'd wanted to die. The worst part was that Upper Room's judgment had made Nadia start to judge her mother too. Sometimes when she heard Sister Willis's voice in her head, a part of her thought, I can't believe she did that to me either.

At Upper Room, Nadia tried not to think about the funeral. Instead, she focused on the little jobs assigned to her. And they were all little because Mrs. Sheppard, brusque and businesslike, was the type of person who'd rather do something herself than show you how. (The type who would prefer to give a man a fish not only because she could catch a better one herself, but because she felt important being the only thing standing between that man and starvation.) Nadia hated how much time she spent studying Mrs. Sheppard and anticipating her desires. In the mornings, Nadia stood in front of her closet, searching for an outfit the older woman would like. No jeans, no shorts, no tank tops. Only slacks and blouses and modest dresses. As a California girl who rarely wore anything that didn't show her legs or shoulders, Nadia didn't own many outfits that met Mrs. Sheppard's standards. But she hadn't been paid yet and she couldn't bring herself to ask her father for money, so a few nights a week she

hunched over the bathroom sink, dabbing at the deodorant stains on the armpits with a wet towel. If Mrs. Sheppard noticed the repeated outfits, she didn't say anything. Most days, she barely acknowledged Nadia at all, and Nadia couldn't decide which was worse, the criticism or the indifference. She saw the way the first lady looked at Aubrey Evans—softly, as if a hard look might break her. What made that other girl so special?

Nadia had run into Aubrey one morning outside the bathroom, both girls jolting at the sight of each other. "Hi," Aubrey said. "What're you doing here?" She was still wearing that floppy hat and baggy cargo shorts that made her look like a mailman.

"Working," Nadia said. "For Mrs. Sheppard. I do her bitch work, basically."

"Oh." Aubrey had smiled but she seemed skittish, like a delicate bird landing on your knee. Too loud a motion, too wild a gesture, and she'd be sent flapping back into the trees. Her yellow flip-flops had sunflowers in the center, as if they were blooming from between her toes. Watching her flounce around in them, Nadia wanted to rip the flowers off. How dare she enjoy something so stupid? She imagined Aubrey Evans in the shoe store, passing rows of sensible black sandals and plucking that sunflower pair off the shelf instead. As if she believed herself deserving of every flourish.

One afternoon, when the campers had gone home, Mrs. Sheppard hugged Aubrey and guided her into her office for tea. What would it be like to sit in there? Not drop envelopes on the desk or duck her head in the doorway to ask a question but to sit. Did the pink curtains look more purple? Were the photos of Luke on the desk angled so that she might be able to see his smile from the couch?

Nadia tried to refocus then on the envelopes she was stuffing, but it was too late. Her mind was flooded. Luke, the boy, squeezing between his parents in the front pew and tugging at his tie, or sitting in front of her in Sunday School, where she studied him instead of the Bible, memorizing the swirl of his curly hair. Luke clomping around in cleats after football practice, or ripping through the church parking lot blasting music that made the old folks clasp hands over their ears. Her stomach leapt, like she'd missed a strair. Grief was not a line, carrying you infinitely further from loss. You never knew when you would be sling-shot backward into its grip.

THAT NIGHT, before falling asleep, Nadia opened her nightstand and felt around for the baby feet. A gift, if you could call it that, from the free pregnancy center after she'd learned her test was positive. The counselor Dolores gave her a plastic bag full of pamphlets with titles like "Caring for Your Preborn Baby," "Secrets of the Abortion Industry," and "Can the Pill Kill You?" Under a handout titled "True Love Waits," the counselor had tucked a purple Precious Milestones card, explaining the stages of a baby's development, week by week. Attached to the card was a lapel pin, a pair of tiny golden feet in the exact shape and size, Dolores told her, as those of her own eight-week-old baby.

Before leaving, Nadia had thrown up quietly inside the clinic bathroom. Then she'd dumped the pamphlets in the trash, showing all of them through the narrow slot until she reached the card on the bottom, the one attached to the baby feet. She had never seen such a thing before—a pair of disembodied feet—and maybe the sheer oddness compelled her to keep the pin. Or maybe she had known

then that she would have an abortion. She had felt her choices strung in a tight balance, and when she hadn't been able to throw the pin away, she knew that there would be no baby, that this pin was all that would remain. She had hidden the lapel pin in the back of her drawer, past old notebooks and hair ties and an empty jewelry box her father had bought her years ago. Every night before bed, she dug through the drawer for the pin and held it in her palm, stroking the bottom of golden feet still glinting in the dark.

IN LATE SPRING, Oceanside was blanketed in so much mist, the locals called it *May Gray*. When darkened skies lasted into summer, it became *June Gloom*. No *Sky July*. Fogust. That spring, the fog was so thick, the beaches were empty until noon, surfers, unable to see ten feet in front of them, abandoning the coast. The type of thick, billowing fog that rolled fat and lazy, so much fog that the ladies at Upper Room covered their hair in hats and scarves to protect press-and-curls on their way into the church. The fog had brought with it news: the first lady had hired a new assistant and her name was Nadia Turner.

Latrice Sheppard had never had an assistant before and everyone doubted she would be able to keep one. She was tall and demanding, not some meek wife who sat in the front pew, silent and smiling. When the elders, and sometimes her husband, suggested she had too much on her plate, she said that she had not been called to sit, but to serve. And she served with the homeless ministry, the children's ministry, the sick and shut-in ministry, the drug recovery ministry, and the women's ministry, where she personally led outreach to the battered women's shelter. She'd grown used to the chaos of her life, running around Upper Room from meeting to meeting, stuffing clothes

donations for the homeless into the trunk of her car, hopping on the freeway to bring toys to the children's hospital. To the battered women's shelter, to the youth detention center, to everywhere that needed going until she ended up back home to cook dinner for her husband. But she'd never had an assistant and she didn't want one now.

"I just don't like the look of her," she told her husband one morning.

"You don't like the look of a lot of folks," he said.

"And am I wrong?"

"It isn't a reason to fire someone."

Behind his desk, John sipped his coffee and Latrice sighed, pouring herself another cup. Out the window, she could see the fog rolling into the church parking lot. Enough to make her about sick of it. She was from Macon, Georgia. She knew rain and she knew humidity, but she hated this strange in-between, especially since springtime in Georgia was when azaleas and peach blossoms and magnolias bloomed and the weather was perfect for barbecues and porch-sitting and driving with the windows down. But here, she could barely see out to the road. It was enough to make her more frustrated than she already was.

"Honey, we all like Brother Turner," she said, "but I don't need some fast-tailed, know-nothing girl following me around all summer!"

"Latrice, the Word says that the good shepherd leaves the ninety-nine—"

"Oh, I know what the Word says. Don't you preach at me like I'm some little woman in your congregation."

John slipped his glasses off his face, the way he always did when he wanted to make a point. Maybe some things were easier for him to say once she was blurred, out of focus.

"We owe her," he said.

She scoffed, turning in front of the window. She refused to be indebted to anyone, let alone a girl she'd done nothing but help. She had been the only one quick enough to act. That morning, her son had sat slumped over the kitchen table, his head in his hands, while her husband paced across the kitchen floor. Both her son's stillness and her husband's constant movement irritated her. She had barely woken up, hadn't even taken the rollers out of her hair. A pregnant girl before she drank her morning coffee.

"You couldn't have found you a girl who didn't go to Upper Room?" she'd finally asked.

"Mama—"

"Don't Mama me. You know it's yours? Who knows how many of these boys she been with?"

"It's mine," he said. "I know it."

"A high school girl," she said. "Is she even eighteen?"

"Almost," he said softly.

"After everything we taught you," John said, "after we raised you up in the Word, after we told you about living in sin, you go out and do something as dumb as this?"

She had witnessed this scene dozens of times before, her husband yelling at Luke. For joyriding with his friends, theater-hopping, sneaking beer onto the beach in old Coke bottles, smoking reefer in Buddy Todd Park, goading Marines into fights. He wasn't a bad kid but he was reckless. Black boys couldn't afford to be reckless, she had tried to tell him. Reckless white boys became politicians and bankers, reckless black boys became dead. How many times had she told Luke to be careful? But he'd messed around with a girl who was not even legal yet—what would Robert think? He would be angry, of

course, but how angry? Angry enough to haul Luke to the police station?

"She wants to get rid of it," Luke said.

He looked defeated, brushing tears from the corner of his eye. She hadn't seen him cry in years. Her boy, like all boys, had long outgrown her mothering. She'd watched Luke's growth spurts, the stretch marks on his shoulders from summers of weight lifting, and the more manish he became, the less he felt like her son. He was someone else now, a furtive and cagey person who disappeared behind closed doors and stopped talking on the phone when she entered the room. In elementary school, he'd wrestled with his friends on the living room rug, but in high school, she'd seen him shove a friend into a wall so hard, a picture fell off its hook. What bothered her most was the surprise on his face when she'd yelled at him to stop, as if roughness came so naturally, he was startled to find it a problem.

A daughter grows older and draws nearer to her mother, until she gradually overlaps her like a sewing pattern. But a son becomes some irreparably separate thing. So even though she hated to see her son cry, she was grateful for the chance to mother him again. She pulled him to her shoulder, stroking his hair.

"Shh now," she said. "Mama's taking care of it."

At the bank, she withdrew six hundred dollars, and slid the cash in an envelope for Luke to give the girl. John hadn't slept that night, tossing in bed, then pacing across the bedroom floor.

"We shouldn't have done this," he said. "My spirit-man is grieved."

But Latrice refused to feel guilty about it. They hadn't forced the girl to do anything she didn't already want to do. A girl who didn't want a baby would find a way to not have one. The good thing

to do—the Christian thing—would be to make it a little easier on her. Now the girl could go off to college and leave their lives. It wasn't a perfect solution, but thank God it wasn't the disaster it could have been.

Still, John felt grieved, and when Robert Turner had arrived at church on Sunday, his wrecked truck already felt like a sign, the beginning of a long judgment. So John had gone to Robert's house and offered the girl a pity job without even consulting Larrice first. Now the girl would be all under her this summer, only because John wanted to atone for undeserved grief.

"I don't owe her a thing," she said. "I'm all paid up."

## FOUR

At Elise Turner's funeral, the whole church arrived early, spilling out of the pews.

We have known hard deaths before. Sammy Watkins, who'd been stabbed outside a bar, his body crumpled and wedged between two trash cans. Moses Brewer, who'd been found in Buddy Todd Park, bludgeoned to death. Kayla Dean, a fourteen-year-old shot by Mexican Bloods because she'd been wearing her boyfriend's bright blue jacket. For a week, her high school had erupted in brawls between blacks and Mexicans until police arrived in riot gear and sheriff's helicopters circled overhead. All the while, Upper Room remained a source of calm, Pastor Sheppard urging sense in a situation that made none. To be killed over a jacket. A child, waiting for fish tacos outside Alberto's, who'd borrowed a jacket because she was cold, because her mother had fussed at her for coming home without one and tempting sickness. At Kayla Dean's funeral, Upper Room had encircled the

wailing mother and held her up, soundlessly, because hard deaths resist words. A soft death can be swallowed with *Called home to be with the Lord* or *We'll see her again in glory*, but hard deaths get caught in the teeth like gristle.

We have known hard deaths, but the difference was that Elise Turner had chosen one. Not a handful of pills to stretch sleep, not a running motor in a closed garage, but a pistol to the head. How could she choose to destroy herself so violently? We'd all squeezed into pews, not knowing what to expect. What would the pastor say? Not the usual funeral scriptures, those would not do. We wouldn't see her again in glory because what glory awaited a woman who'd sent a bullet into her own head? She had not been called home to be with the Lord—she had simply chosen to leave. Imagine, having the gall to choose when so many had that choice taken away from them. How dare she opt for a hard death when the rest of us were trying to manage the hard lives we'd been given?

We have never understood it, although maybe we should. We are, after all, the last ones to have seen Elise Turner alive. The morning she killed herself, we'd gone to Upper Room early to get started on our praying. At first, when we'd peeked through the sanctuary doors, we only saw a person wrapped in a down coat, slumped forward in front of the altar in what looked like prayer or sleep. A bum, probably. We stumbled across them sometimes in the mornings, sleeping across the pews.

"All right now," Betty said, "you got to go. We won't tell nobody we seen you but you got to go on now."

No response. Probably a drunk bum. Lord, now those we couldn't deal with. Passed out drunk after mistaking the offering basket for a toilet, leaving broken beer bottles around for the babies to cut their feet.

"Okay," Hattie said, "now why don't you hop on up? We don't wanna have to call the police."

We edged closer, noticing, for the first time, past the fur collar, long, dark hair swept up away from a slender yellow neck. A neck that looked too clean for a bum's, too delicate for a man's. Agnes touched the strange woman's back.

"Elise! What you doin' in here?"

"I . . . I came in here last night and . . ." Elise looked dazed as Flora helped pull her to her feet.

"Girl, it's morning already," Agnes said. "You better get on home to your child."

"My child?"

"Yes, honey. What you doin' sleepin' in here all night?"

"Robert probably worried sick," Hattie said. "Get on home, then. Go on."

At the time, we'd laughed as we watched Elise head through the morning fog to her car. Oh, wait till we told the ladies at bingo about this. Elise Turner, asleep in the church like an ordinary bum. They would have a field day with that one. She had always seemed a little strange to us anyway—dreary, like her mind was a balloon on a long string and she forgot to reel it in sometimes.

For years, we've fixated on that final conversation. Elise had hesitated before going out to her car, a pause that varies in length throughout our memories; Betty says it was a long moment, Flora, a brief hitch. Should we have known Elise would drive off and shoot herself? Was there any way of knowing? No, nobody could've predicted it, not if Robert hadn't even known. Elise Turner was beautiful. She had a child and a husband with a good government job. She had gone from cleaning white folks' toilets to styling hair at the salon on base.

A pretty black woman living as fine as any white woman. What did she have to complain about?

THAT SUMMER, Nadia Turner haunted us.

She looked so much like her mother that folks around Upper Room started to feel like they'd seen Elise again. As if her restless spirit—and no one doubted it was restless—was roaming the place where it had last been seen. The girl, who haunted the church halls with her beauty and her sullenness, barely noticed the stares, until one evening, when Second John offered her a ride home from work in the church van. He pulled onto the street, and for a second, their eyes met in the rearview mirror.

"You look so much like your mama," he said. "Gives me chills to look at you."

He glanced away, bashful almost, like he'd said the wrong thing. At dinner that night, she mentioned his comment to her father and he glanced up, as if he'd needed to remind himself of what her face looked like.

"You do," he finally said, cutting his meat, his jaw set the way it always did whenever she tried to bring up her mother. Maybe that was why he always ran off to Upper Room, why he couldn't stand to be around her. Maybe he hated looking at her because she only reminded him of all that he'd lost.

The night before her mother died, Nadia had caught her staring out the kitchen window, arms deep in soap suds, so gone in her own mind that she hadn't noticed the sink almost overflowing. She'd laughed a little when Nadia shut off the water.

"Look at me," she'd said. "Off daydreaming again."

What had she been thinking about in that moment? Weren't your final hours supposed to be dramatic and meaningful? Shouldn't their last conversation have been emotional, even if it hadn't registered to her at the time? But there was nothing special about that last moment. She had laughed too and brushed past her mother to the refrigerator. The next morning, she'd woken to find her father sitting on the edge of her bed, his face in his hands, so quiet she hadn't even felt him sit on her mattress, weightless in his grief.

She still searched for clues, for strange things her mother had done or said, for signs that she should've noticed. At least then, her mother's death would make sense. But she couldn't think of any hints that her mother had wanted to die. Maybe she'd never really known her mother at all. And if you couldn't know the person whose body was your first home, then who could you ever know?

She was lonely. How could she be anything else? Each morning, her father dropped her off at Upper Room, and each afternoon, she sat on the church steps, waiting for him to pick her up. After work, she passed the hours in bed, watching old episodes of *Law & Order*, waiting for the next morning when she would awake and start her routine all over again. Sometimes she thought she could pass time like this, one day falling into another until autumn. The hot winds would arrive and she would blow out with them, on to a new school in a new state where she would start a new life. Other times, she felt so miserable, she thought about calling her old friends. But what would she say to them? She'd had a mother and now she didn't, and she'd been pregnant but now she wasn't. She'd thought with time the distance between her and her friends would narrow, but that gap had only widened and she couldn't find the energy to pretend otherwise. So she remained alone, working silently in the first lady's office all

morning, then shuffling outside at noon to eat lunch on the church steps. One afternoon, she was picking at her peanut butter sandwich when she noticed Aubrey Evans heading toward her. The girl smiled, clutching a sky blue lunch bag that matched her sundress. Nadia should have known she couldn't just bring a brown bag like everyone else.

"Can I sit here?" she asked.

Nadia shrugged. She didn't want to invite the girl to join her but she couldn't very well tell her not to. Aubrey squinted into the sunlight and lowered herself onto the step. Then she unzipped her bag and pulled out tiny plastic containers, carefully arranging them on the step beside her. Nadia stared at tubs filled with macaroni and cheese, slices of steak, potato salad.

"That's seriously your lunch?" she said. Of course it was. Of course Aubrey Evans's parents cooked her elaborate feasts for her lunch, because God forbid, she should have to eat something as normal as a sandwich.

Aubrey shrugged. "Want some?"

Nadia hesitated before reaching for the brownie and breaking off a corner. She chewed slowly, almost disappointed by how delicious it was.

"Wow," she said. "Your mom made this?"

Aubrey carefully zipped up her lunch bag. "I don't live with my mom," she said.

"So your dad, then."

"No," she said. "I live with my sister, Mo. And Kasey."

"Who's Kasey?"

"Mo's girlfriend. She's a really good cook."

"Your sister's gay?"

"So?" Aubrey said. "It's really not a big deal."

But she'd gotten prickly, so Nadia knew that it was. She still remembered how years ago, the congregation had been convinced that Sister Janice's daughter had been turned into a lesbian because she'd started playing rugby at the junior college. For weeks, the old folks had whispered about how no girl should be playing football—it just wasn't *right*—until she showed up on Easter Sunday holding hands with a shy boy and that was that. At Upper Room, a gay sister was a big deal and she wondered how she'd never heard about Aubrey's. Maybe because Aubrey didn't want anybody to know. Nadia couldn't help it, she was surprised. The life she'd imagined for Aubrey—a stay-at-home mother, a doting father—was melting away into something murkier. Why did Aubrey live with her sister, not her parents? Had something terrible happened to them? She felt a sudden kinship with a girl who didn't live with her mother either. A girl who was also a keeper of secrets. Aubrey tilted the brownie toward her and Nadia silently broke off another piece.

THIS IS WHAT SHE KNEW about Aubrey Evans:

She'd appeared one Sunday morning, a strange girl wandering into Upper Room with nothing but a small handbag, not even a Bible. She'd started crying before the pastor asked who needed prayer and she'd cried even harder as she rose and walked to the altar. She was saved at sixteen, and since then, she'd attended church services each week and volunteered for the children's ministry, the homeless ministry, the bereavement committee. Babies, burns, grief. A hint about where she'd come from, maybe, although Nadia only knew

what most people did: that Aubrey had arrived at Upper Room suddenly and within a year, she'd seemed like she'd always belonged.

Now, each afternoon, the girls ate lunch together on the church steps. Each afternoon, Nadia learned more about Aubrey, like how she'd first visited Upper Room because she'd seen it on television. She was new to California then and camped out in front of the TV, watching the wildfire coverage. She had never heard of wildfire season and she had lived all over, so she thought she'd heard of everything. She'd spent two damp years in Portland, where she wrung rain out of her socks, then three years freezing in Milwaukee, another muggy year in Tallahassee. She'd dried out in Phoenix, then re-frosted in Boston. She felt like she'd been everywhere and nowhere at all, like she had flown to thousands of airports but never ventured outside of the terminal.

"Why'd you move so much?" Nadia asked. "Was it, like, a military thing?"

She had lived in Oceanside her whole life, unlike all the military kids from school who had followed a parent from Marine base to Marine base until they'd ended up at Camp Pendleton. She had never lived outside of California, never gone on exciting vacations, never left the country. Her life already seemed so singular and flat and dull, and she could only comfort herself with the fact that the good stuff was ahead.

"No," Aubrey said. "My mom would just meet a man. And he'd move somewhere, so we'd go too."

She had accompanied her mother as she followed boyfriends from state to state. A mechanic she'd loved in Cincinnati, a grocery store manager in Jackson, a truck driver in Dallas. She had never married although she'd wanted to. In Denver, she'd dated a cop named Paul

for three years. One Christmas, he gave her a small velvet box and her hands shook while opening it. It was just a bracelet, and even though she cried later in the bathroom, she still wore it around her wrist. Aubrey never mentioned her father. She told one or two stories about her mother, but only stories that had happened years ago and Nadia began to wonder if her mother was even still alive.

"Did she—I mean, your mom isn't—" But Nadia stopped herself before she could finish. She barely knew this girl. She couldn't ask if her mother was dead too. But Aubrey understood and quickly shook her head.

"No, no, nothing like that," she said. "I just—we don't get along, that's all."

Could you do that? Leave your mother because you two fought sometimes? Who didn't fight with her mother? But Aubrey said nothing more and her reticence only made Nadia even more intrigued. She imagined the lovesick mother chasing men from state to state, how, when each affair ended, the mother would have cursed and cried, flinging clothes into a suitcase; how Aubrey and her sister must have known that when love left, they would have to leave too.

"WHAT WERE YOU LIKE," Nadia asked once, "as a little kid?"

She was sitting in the passenger's seat of Aubrey's Jeep, her bare feet warming on the dashboard. They were stuck in the perpetually long drive-thru line at In-N-Out, behind a brown minivan full of jostling kids. Earlier, Aubrey had suggested they go somewhere for lunch—Del Taco or Carl's Jr. or even Fat Charlie's. Luke Sheppard worked there and maybe he'd recognize them from church and offer a discount. But Nadia had shaken her head and said that she hated seafood.

"What was I like?" Aubrey smiled, her fingers dancing on the steering wheel. She always did that, repeated the question. Like she was stumped in a job interview and needed to buy time.

"Yeah, you know, as a little kid. I was a brat. No one could tell me shit. Surprise, right?"

She laughed, then Aubrey laughed. Another one of her habits, waiting for someone else to laugh before she joined in.

"I was . . . I don't know. I played soccer. I had a lot of friends." Aubrey shrugged. "My best friend had this trampoline. We'd jump on it for hours. My mom told me not to—she said I'd break my neck. So I always lied to her."

"What a badass."

"One time," Aubrey said, "we were super hungry, so we brought out this leftover cornbread to eat. It was really crumbly, though, but we kept jumping and eating and all the crumbs were flying up with us and we couldn't stop laughing."

She smiled, like she was still proud of this tiny childhood rebellion, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. Another thing she did all the time: smile when she didn't mean it.

When the fire season began, Aubrey had been living in California for three months. She had not known that wildfires could be a normal part of the calendar year, an event you expected as regularly as snow or rain, and the idea terrified her. Her sister told her that she shouldn't worry about wildfires, not in Oceanside at least. Along the coast, you were as safe as anyone could be. But she still followed the local news as reporters coughed in fields where flames licked behind them and helicopters swept over scorched ground, and that was how she first saw Upper Room. The church was serving as a temporary

evacuation site, and a reporter interviewed the pastor, a large, dark man named John Sheppard.

"We're just glad to help," he said. He had a deep, sonorous voice, like the type of man who might narrate a book-on-tape. "We're grateful God has placed us in a position where we can give back to our community. So if you've been forced out your home, come to Upper Room and let us be a home to you."

Later, she told Nadia, she realized that the pastor's plea had drawn her in. She was between homes then—she had been between homes her whole life—and she still felt like a guest in Mo and Kassey's house. Each time she did her laundry, she folded her clothes and returned them to her suitcase, afraid to fill the drawers. But no one made her leave Oceanside, so she'd visited Upper Room one Sunday and that was that.

That year had been the worst fire season Nadia could remember. The local news ran flashy graphics calling October "The Fire Siege" and even after the peak months had passed, fifteen wildfires burned throughout Southern California that winter. If you had to evacuate, the sheriff's office left an automatic phone call, but her mother had always said that if you waited for the call, it was already too late. A sheriff's call only gave you a fifteen-minute warning, so last fall, her mother had packed bags in advance and left them by the front door. "You think this is silly," she told Nadia, "but you always got to be prepared. Even for things you can't see."

She had grown up in Texas, in between tornado and hurricane country, so she knew how to prepare for disaster. Unlike you California girls, she used to tell Nadia, who never thought about earthquakes until the world started shaking right under them.

That winter, her mother's death would be an earthquake jolting her out of her sleep. But earlier, in September, Nadia had watched her mother pack bags of clothes, water jugs, and photo albums. Then they'd left for church, where a crying girl had appeared in a light blue dress that fit her too tightly around the middle, as if she had just put on weight. Her curly hair was tied back in a ponytail and she wore white canvas sneakers scuffed at the toes. She dressed like someone who had never been to church before imagined she ought to dress. The girl was mourning, and months later, in her own grief, whenever Nadia saw Aubrey at school, she envied how easily the girl had shown her sadness, how completely the church embraced her. Was that all it took, kneeling at the altar and asking for help? Or did you have to invite everyone in on your private sorrow to be saved?

Later, in the dying evening light, the girls swung gently in the ratty old hammock hanging in Nadia's backyard. Her father never used his hammock anymore—she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him relaxed enough to enjoy it—but Aubrey had wanted to lie in it as soon as she followed Nadia outside. "It feels like such a California thing to do," she'd said, so every evening that week, they'd swung in the hammock and talked as the sun lowered in the sky.

Nadia glanced at her father through the screen door. He'd cooked them dinner each night that week and hadn't complained about fixing Aubrey an extra plate. He seemed pleased to do it, almost. He smiled and tried to tell jokes about his day on base that would've been swallowed with mouthfuls of food had he and his daughter been alone. Maybe he was glad to have company again, or maybe there was something special about Aubrey that made him open up.

Across from her, Aubrey licked a dab of ice cream off her thumb and asked Nadia what her father was like.

"What do you mean?" Nadia said. "You know what he's like. You see him around."

"As a person. He's nice, but he doesn't talk much."

"I guess he's nice. I don't know. Serious. Likes to be by himself."

Why? What's your dad like?

"I don't know. He left when I was little."

"Fine. Your mom, then."

Aubrey chewed on her thumbnail. "We haven't talked in a while."

"How long is a while?"

"Almost a year."

Nadia had since grown used to the ebb and flow of their conversations, the opening up and shutting down, the ease forward, the retreat, so she just nodded and pretended to understand, the way she would pretend all her life when friends complained about their mothers. Rolling her eyes along with them while they ranted about mothers who disapproved of their jobs or their boyfriends, always sympathizing, always smiling, even though she hated them for complaining. She understood Aubrey even less. What did it feel like, she wondered, to be the one who'd left?

If you drove east from the beach, if you left behind the surf shacks and bait shops and ice cream parlors, the lean surfers, the rent-a-cops cruising along the harbor, you'd reach the Back Gate. The entry to Camp Pendleton was guarded by armed Marines, but outside its border was a not-bad, not-good neighborhood. Here's how you could tell: the fences were higher but the houses wore no metal gates over their windows; the Pizza Hut hid behind bulletproof glass but they stayed open late at night; and cops still patrolled, more than they did

in good neighborhoods, but more than they did in bad neighborhoods already abandoned to their own chaos. In this not-bad, not-good neighborhood, Aubrey lived with her sister and her sister's girlfriend in a little white house. The house itself was simple, but Aubrey's bedroom was surprisingly ornate. The walls were painted a dusty green with silver flowers, and white Christmas lights traced the ceiling. Silver curtains rippled in the windows and swaths of lace draped over the bed like a wedding veil. Her first visit, Nadia had wandered through the room slowly, her arms behind her back, afraid to touch anything, as if she were in a museum.

"I couldn't sleep when I first moved in," Aubrey said, pointing to a dream catcher that hung from the ceiling. "Kasey thought this might help."

Kasey was slender and lean like an alley cat, and she had long, dirty-blond hair she liked to rumple in the middle of conversations, as if to prove how little she cared about how her hair looked. She was a bartender downtown at the Flying Bridge and she liked telling stories about her regulars. A man who hated touching dry glass. A woman who was deathly afraid of pickles.

"You know, them big ones they give you with your sandwich? Scared shitless. Runs and screams if you bring one near her, even if it's still in a jar. Wild, huh?"

Kasey had traveled west eight years ago with her big brother, who was stationed at Camp Pendleton. She was lovesick over a straight girl and had fled to California to forget about her. On the long drive from Tennessee, she'd plucked the dream catcher off a shelf at a truck stop, wanting it for no other reason than the fact that she could want it. Now the dream catcher drifted inside a bedroom almost painful in

its effort. Aubrey said that her sister helped her decorate the room after she'd moved in.

"Mo thought we needed to do something together," she said. "We hadn't seen each other in a few years."

"Why not?" Nadia said.

"She left for college."

"And she just never came back?"

Aubrey shifted slowly, one foot to the other. "Well, she didn't like Paul."

"What was wrong with him?"

"He hit my mom," she said.

"Oh." Nadia paused in front of the bookshelf. "Did he hit you?"

"Sometimes."

Nadia couldn't imagine a grown man hitting her. Even when she'd misbehaved as a child, her father had always carried her to her mother, who did the spanking, as if discipline were something to be dealt with between women.

"Well, what'd your mom say?" she said.

"She's still with him." Aubrey shrugged, then hopped off the bed. "Come on. Let's go outside."

Nadia finally understood, why Aubrey had left and why her mother had let her, why her sister had helped her create a bedroom out of a Disney movie, why Mrs. Sheppard cherished her. In a way, Nadia almost felt lucky. At least her mother had been sick—at least she'd only tried to hurt herself. At least her mother wouldn't have ever let a man hit her child. Her mother was dead, but what could be worse than knowing that your mother was alive somewhere but she wanted a man who hit her more than she wanted you?

On the Fourth of July, Nadia sat on Aubrey's porch, watching the neighbors set up fireworks in the street. The city was hosting a fireworks show downtown at the pier, but it wasn't the Fourth of July without illegal fireworks, Kasey had said. She was appalled by the strictness of California fireworks law, so she cheered on the people who smuggled them over from Tijuana to set off in the neighborhood. What was the harm? It wasn't as if people were setting off bombs. She sipped her beer, wrapping an arm around Monique, who watched the neighbors in the street and shook her head.

"Someone's gonna blow a hand off," she said. "I just know it."

She was not a mother but she had a mother's gift of rushing to the worst possible outcome. She was a trauma nurse at Scripps Mercy Hospital, so she encountered the worst possible outcome daily. But even if she hadn't been a nurse, she was the type to worry. When she came home from work, she always asked if they had eaten. She reminded Aubrey to take her vitamins and called after her to grab a jacket, it gets chilly downtown, oh don't look at me like that, you know you always get cold. A man in the middle of the street squawked as a car swerving around the display nearly hit him. Monique shook her head again.

"You warm enough, babe?" she said.

Aubrey was sitting under a blanket with Nadia. She rolled her eyes a little.

"I'm not a baby, Mo," she said.

"You're *my* baby," her sister said.

Kasey laughed and Aubrey rolled her eyes again, but she didn't look upset, not really. It was the fake-annoyed look you give to someone who could never actually bother you. Sometimes Nadia envied

Aubrey, even though she felt guilty for considering the thought. Aubrey had lost her mother too, but she was loved by her sister and her sister's girlfriend and even the first lady, three women who cared for her only because they wanted to. Both girls had been abandoned in the sand. But only Aubrey had been found. Only Aubrey had been chosen.

Monique and Kasey's love for Aubrey hung in their eyes, and even though it wasn't meant for Nadia, she inched closer, holding her hands up to the warmth. In the street, the neighbors huddled around, giving directions in Spanglish. Teenage girls herded babies onto the grass, while old men in flannel shirts redirected traffic and boys on skateboards looked out for cops. Reggaeton and rap blasted out windows, rattling through cars parked in driveways. Soon, fireworks would illuminate the pier, but Nadia wanted to be nowhere else but here, in a house where everyone was wanted, with a family where anyone could leave but nobody ever did. A firecracker lit up the sky, and she jumped, delighted and a little surprised, at the first spark.

LATRICE SHEPPARD HAD GHOST EYES.

One brown and one blue, which meant, her granddaddy had told her, that she could see heaven and earth at the same time. Her mother had gasped the first time she'd held her—something must be wrong, the blue eye blinded, maybe, already filmy with disease—but the doctor had said it was too soon to tell. "Takes time for a baby's eyes to adjust to the world," he'd said. "Just pay attention. If the eyes squint or cloud, there may be cause for concern." So she'd spent the first years of her life with her mother's face always inches from hers,

studying her eyes. Maybe that was why she'd always felt there was something wrong with them, even though she could see fine. The brown eye seemed ugly next to the blue, the blue next to the brown, and she learned that it was better to just be one thing: to distill yourself into something as simple as you could. She had already begun her unending growth spurt—by the second grade, she was the first to line up in the school picture—and at lunch, she ate alone on the playground while the other girls double-Dutched to a rhyme they'd made up about her:

*Lattice, the beast  
She'll make you her feast  
Got two odd eyes and two big feet*

The height she couldn't hide, but the odd eyes, she tried to. She started wearing sunglasses whenever she could, in the grocery store, in her bedroom, even in the classroom, handing her teacher a fake note from her doctor describing her sensitivity to light. Later in life, she would consider her odd eyes a blessing. Not ghost eyes, but she had been gifted with a second sight nonetheless: she could look at a girl and tell if she'd been hit before. Forget bruises and scars—hit women learned to hide or explain those away. No need for stories about running into doorknobs or tripping down stairs—all she needed to do was lock her odd eyes onto theirs and she knew a woman surprised or outraged by pain from a woman who'd learned to expect it. She saw past flawless skin to diamond-shaped iron burns, gashes from golden belt buckles, necks nicked by streak knives, lips split by class rings, faces blooming purple and deep blue. She'd told Aubrey this the third

time she'd invited her for tea, and after, Aubrey had stared into the mirror, wondering what else the first lady saw. Was her entire past written on her skin? Could Mrs. Sheppard see everything that Paul had done to her? At least now she knew why Mrs. Sheppard had been so kind to her. Why, after the altar call, Mrs. Sheppard had found her in the church lobby and offered her a hug; why, the following Sunday, Mrs. Sheppard had given her a small Bible with a floral cover; and why, the Sunday after that, Mrs. Sheppard had invited her into her office for tea. Aubrey didn't even drink tea, but for months she'd sat on the other side of the gray striped settee, dropping sugar cubes into her cup. She took her tea sweet—sugar, honey, and cream.

"That's fine in here," Mrs. Sheppard had told her once, "but out in public, folks might think it's juvenile, a young lady doctoring up her tea with all those sweets." She'd corrected Aubrey gently, but Aubrey had felt so embarrassed that weeks later, she'd only added a single sugar cube to her tea.

One afternoon, she sipped the bitter tea and asked Mrs. Sheppard what had happened to Elise Turner. She lofted the question casually, as if she hadn't been wondering it for weeks—no, months, ever since Pastor Sheppard had somberly announced the news to the congregation. At the time, he hadn't offered a cause of death, which had raised suspicions the way only a sudden, unexplained death could. A woman Elise Turner's age didn't just die naturally; she hadn't seemed ill and if she hadn't suffered some terrible accident, then what could've happened to her?

"I just don't know," Sister Willis had said in the ladies' room after service. "Somethin' just don't sound right to me." And even though the other women around the sink had nodded, no one had expected

the news that trickled in, days later, that Elise Turner had shot herself in the head. The congregation had already imagined possible shameful tragedies—an accidental drug overdose, a drunk-driving accident, even a murder caused by circumstances the pastor had thought it best to obscure. Maybe Elise had taken a lover (she could do better than Robert, couldn't she?) and in the seedy motel room where they'd conducted their affair, the lover had killed her.

Despite the lurid speculation, no one had been prepared for the reality of Elise Turner's death, especially not Aubrey. She had never known Mrs. Turner but she'd felt as if she did, at least a little, the way you could know someone you'd only seen from a distance. On Sundays, she'd seen the Turners enter Upper Room—the husband stiff-backed in his suit, the wife smiling at the greeters in the lobby, the daughter a spitting image of the mother. They'd reminded her of a family out of television. The strong, manly father, the beautiful mother, and the daughter, who had somehow been blessed with beauty and smarts. In AP Government, Aubrey sat near the back, watching Nadia breeze into class with her friends, and whenever she slipped through the door after the bell rang, she appeared Mr. Thomas with a smile before he could write her up for detention. How could he punish her? Week after week, when he listed the top ten test-scorers, her name was on the whiteboard, as if it had been written in permanent marker. She was going to a big university someday, everyone knew it, while Aubrey would shuffle off to the community college with the rest of their class. On Sunday mornings, she watched this girl—this Nadia Turner—slide into the church pew beside her mother and her father, and she wondered what it would be like, to go to church with your family. Mo didn't believe in God. Kasey did, only abstractly, the way she believed in the universe's ability to right itself. Neither was

happy that Aubrey had started going to church, although they hadn't said so directly.

"Are you sure you want to spend so much time there?" Mo would say. "I mean . . . don't you think it's maybe a little too soon?"

Too soon for what, she'd never said, but she didn't have to. She worried that Aubrey had turned into some religious nut. That she would start seeing images of Jesus in burnt toast, or speaking in tongues mid-conversation, or picketing outside gay weddings. When Aubrey had seen the Turners on Sundays, she wondered what it would be like to be their child, to be smart and beautiful, to have a father and a mother who held your hands during prayer. She thought about the mother especially, who seemed nothing like her own. Elise Turner, young and energetic and beautiful, who laughed in the lobby before service, always greeted as soon as she stepped inside, who had spoken to Aubrey once before, when they'd passed each other before the Christmas play.

"You dropped something, honey," Elise Turner had said, pointing at Aubrey's program, which had fluttered to the carpet. Her voice was cool and silky, like milk.

How could a woman like that kill herself? Aubrey knew it was a stupid question—anyone could kill herself, if she wanted to badly enough. Mo said that it was physiological. Misfired synapses, unbalanced chemicals in the brain, the whole body a machine with a few tripped wires that had caused it to self-destruct. But people weren't just their bodies, right? The decision to kill yourself had to be more complicated than that. Across the couch, the first lady raised an eyebrow as she leaned forward to refill Aubrey's teacup.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Sheppard said. "You know what happened to her."

"I just know she shot herself."

"Well, that's all there is to it, honey."

"But why?" Aubrey said.

"The devil attacks all of us," Mrs. Sheppard said. "Some folks just aren't strong enough to fend him off."

She sounded matter-of-fact as she slowly stirred her tea, the spoon clanging against the cup. She was also nothing like Aubrey's mother—too assertive and steady and sure of herself. Her mother was one of the weak women Mrs. Sheppard would pity or scorn, depending on how much she knew. Right now, she didn't know much. Only that Aubrey had moved in with her sister because she and her mom hadn't gotten along. She hadn't told Mrs. Sheppard about Paul, who drank bottles of whiskey on weekends and sometimes hit them but always cried about it after because he didn't mean to, his job was so stressful, they just didn't know what it was like, being out on the streets all the time, not knowing if you'd make it home. He'd moved in a year before she'd left, and for a year, he had made nightly trips to her room, pushing her door open, then her legs, and for a year, she had told almost no one. Almost, because she'd told her mother after the first time it happened and her mother had shook her head tightly and said "No," as if she could will it to be untrue.

Across the couch, Mrs. Sheppard reached for a cookie.

"Now, why do you want to know about all this?" she asked.

"I don't know," Aubrey said. "Nadia never talks about it."

She couldn't exactly ask Nadia herself, although she thought about it often when they were together. Did Nadia know why her mother had killed herself? Was it even better to know?

"I see you two out there eating lunch all the time," Mrs. Sheppard

smiled, brushing sugar dust from her fingers onto a napkin. "I didn't know you got on like that."

"She's nice," Aubrey paused, taking a sip. "She's . . . I don't know. Funny. She makes me laugh. And she doesn't let people run over her. She's not afraid of anything."

"I just wouldn't get too attached if I was you," Mrs. Sheppard said.

Aubrey frowned. "Why?"

"Now, don't look at me like that. You know she's runnin' off to school in the fall. Making new friends in the dorms. Folks change, that's all. I just don't want you to get hurt, honey."

Mrs. Sheppard passed her the plate of shortbread cookies and Aubrey silently took one. The first time she'd visited Nadia's house, she'd spotted on her bookshelf a clay Noah's Ark statue small enough to fit in her palm. A white-haired Noah stood on the deck, tiny giraffe and chimp and elephant heads poking out the portholes. She'd reached for it but Nadia had grabbed her hand.

"Don't," she'd said. "My mom gave me that."

Aubrey had drawn her hand back, embarrassed for violating a rule she hadn't known existed. But she saw then that Nadia didn't speak about her mother because she wanted to preserve her, keep her for herself. Aubrey didn't speak about her mother because she wanted to forget that she'd ever had one. And it was easier to forget when she was with Nadia.

She didn't want to think about Nadia leaving for college. She felt at home in Nadia's motherless world. Later that evening, she drove her friend home. They went out in the backyard and rocked in Mr. Turner's hammock until the sky faded into black. Nadia stretched a long leg over the side and pushed her bare toes against the grass, careful not to upset their delicate balance.

## FIVE

*We were girls once. As hard as that is to believe.*

Oh, you can't see it now—our bodies have stretched and sagged, faces and necks drooping. That's what happens when you get old. Every part of you drops, as if the body is moving closer to where it's from and where it'll return. But we were girls once, which is to say, we have all loved an ain't-shit man. No Christian way of putting it. There are two types of men in the world: men who are and men who ain't about shit. As girls, we've lived all over. Sharecropping in the cotton fields of Louisiana until the humid air sucked our shirts to our backs. Shivering in freezing kitchens while packing lunches for daddies heading to Ford plants. Shuffling slowly over icy Harlem sidewalks, stuffing ripped fabric in coat-pocket holes. Then we'd grown up and met men who wanted to bring us to California. Military men, stationed out at Camp Pendleton, who promised us marriage and babies and all that sunshine. But before we woke to pink

clouds drifting over the coastline, before we found Upper Room and each other, before we were wives and mothers, we were girls and we loved ain't-shit men.

You used to be able to spot an ain't-shit man a lot easier. At pool halls and juke joints, speakeasies and rent parties and sometimes in church, snoring in the back pew. The type of man our brothers warned us about because he was going nowhere and he would treat us bad on the way to that nowhere. But nowadays? Most of these young men seem ain't-shit to us. Swaggering around downtown, drunk and swearing, fighting outside nightclubs, smoking reefer in their mamas' basements. When we were girls, a man who wanted to court us sipped coffee in the living room with our parents first. Nowadays, a young man fools around with any girl who's willing and if she gets in trouble—well, you just ask Luke Sheppard what these young men do next.

A girl nowadays has to get nice and close to tell if her man ain't shit and by then, it might be too late. We were girls once. It's exciting, loving someone who can never love you back. Freeing, in its own way. No shame in loving an ain't-shit man, long as you get it out your system good and early. A tragic woman hooks into an ain't-shit man, or worse, lets him hook into her. He will drag her until he tires. He will climb atop her shoulders and her body will sag from the weight of loving him.

Yes, those are the ones we worry about.

SINCE HE'D SEEN NADIA TURNER LAST, Luke had broken seven plates, two bowls, and six glasses. "A personal record," his boss Charlie had announced during the morning's staff meeting. "No,

scratch that—a company best. Give it up for Sheppard, folks. Making history one fuckup at a time." Luke never dropped dishes. He'd spent years grabbing footballs out of the air, snagging them out of the reach of defenders, cupping his hands underneath them before they hit the grass. In fact, he was heralded throughout Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack for his miraculous catches; the highlight reel, if one existed, would have consisted entirely of Luke Sheppard: Luke grabbing sippy cups before they tumbled to the floor, Luke palming bowls tipped by wayward elbows, Luke righting trays sliding off their stands as customers applauded and coworkers clapped him on the back. But since Cody Richardson's party, there'd been no heroics, no last-minute saves, no godlike displays of reflex and awareness. The commentators on *SportsCenter*, if *SportsCenter* covered workplace athleticism, would've hung their heads and said, "Too bad, that Sheppard kid sure had shown a lot of promise." Now glasses slipped right through his hand or slid off his tray, and Luke, who worshipped the save, the graceful leap into the end zone, found himself instead kneeling on the sticky floor, watery Sprite soaking his pant leg.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Charlie said, hovering over him.

"I know, I know."

"You trying to break every dish I own?"

"I said I'm sorry. What you want me to do? I'm cleanin' it."

"I want you to learn how to hold a cup. A monkey can hold a cup, Sheppard. A fucking chimp."

Luke pushed past Charlie on his way to the trash can and that slight shoulder tap—the inch of space he'd forced Charlie to yield—felt like that moment after the doctor injected pain medicine into his leg. A pinch, and then relief.

Focus, that's what Luke needed to do. Concentrate on one thing

at a time. The smooth motion of his arm when he reached for the cup, the way the glass felt against his palm as he tightened his grip. And he did focus, from time to time. He survived a shift without dropping anything. Then Nadia returned to him, a sharp, sudden pain like hunger. Kissing her in the beach shower, his hands, still gritty with sand, on her stomach, his lips passed against the back of her suntanned neck. Later kneeling at the edge of his bed, hooking his fingers under the sides of her bikini bottom, her skin smoldering under his hands. She smelled like the ocean. She felt like the ocean when he was inside of her, rocking and rocking and calm. When it was over, he'd kissed the side of her face, the soft skin near her ears, the light baby hair turned curly from their sweat. His mouth had never touched anything that delicate.

He spent his dinner break smoking in the alley behind Fat Charlie's with CJ. They used to play high school football together. CJ, a burly Samoan with long, curly hair, had been a decent nose tackle and earned a few letters from Division III schools, nothing like the recruitment packets and personal visits Luke had received. Still, they'd both ended up here, in an alley that smelled like wet garbage and sea air and cat piss. Luke leaned against the wall, passing the joint.

"You good, *uso?*" CJ said. "You got a weird look on your face."

"Just some shit with this girl," Luke said.

"Who? Shorty with the books?"

Luke hesitated, then needing to tell someone, said, "She told me she was pregnant."

CJ laughed, a strange, wheezing laugh.

"Oh, that's easy," he said. "Real simple. Don't give her shit until you know it's yours. I don't care how fuckin' cute that kid looks, don't even buy his ass some diapers before you swab him—"

"She ain't been with no one but me," Luke said.

He didn't know that, of course, but he knew he'd been her first. She hadn't admitted that she was a virgin but he'd felt it from her tightness, from the little gasp she'd made once he'd entered her, from the way she clenched her eyes when he'd barely moved. Three times he asked if she wanted him to stop. Three times she shook her head. She was the type of girl who never wanted to admit that she was in pain, as if not confessing it made her stronger. Her mother had died two months ago and he knew that was the reason she was fucking him. Why she hadn't mentioned his limp, why she'd pulled his Fat Charlie's shirt over his head, even though it smelled like sweat and grease. She was a seventeen-year-old with a dead mother and she wanted him to fuck the sadness out of her. Every time he felt guilty for hurting her, she wrapped her arms tighter around his back so he sank deeper, moving as slowly as he could until he finished with a tiny shudder. Later, he pretended not to notice the blood on her sheets. He rolled closer to her and slept on top of the uneven spots.

CJ blew a puff of smoke toward the crumbling tile roof and tossed what was left of the joint in a puddle.

"Still," he said. "You better get that kid tested. If you even act like he's yours, the state's taking all your money. Happened to a dude I know. The laws are all fucked up."

"She didn't keep it," Luke said.

"Well, shit." CJ clapped him on the back. "That's even easier. You got lucky, homie."

Luke didn't feel lucky. When Nadia had first told him, he'd felt wired, the way he used to feel right after he'd finished lifting, like little sparks were running under his skin. Just to think, that morning his biggest worry had been getting to work on time so he wouldn't get

fired from his shitty job. And now a baby. A whole fucking baby. He felt terrible—she looked miserable, barely eating anything—but a small part of him had felt amazed by what they'd done. He'd helped create a whole new person, a person who'd never existed before in the entire world. Most days, the biggest thing he managed to accomplish was to recite the lunch specials from memory. He imagined rushing to the break room, once she left, to log on to the work computer and Google when pregnancy shows, how to stop pregnancy sickness, how much it costs to raise a child. Then Nadia told him she wanted an abortion. He'd promised he'd get her the money, even though he'd only saved two hundred for his apartment, wads of cash tucked in an orange Nike box under his bed. It had been all too easy to blow his paychecks on beer and sneakers, and he'd felt stupid, pulling his life's savings out of a shoebox. How had he ever thought he could find a way to raise a kid?

He hadn't planned to leave her at the clinic. But the day of the appointment, when he slid his cell phone into his work locker like he did every day, it dawned on him how easy it was to walk away. He had done his part and she had done hers, and he would never have to see her again. He wouldn't have to imagine what she might look like after the surgery—grief-stricken, in pain—or find the right words to comfort her. He wouldn't have to tell her that she had made the right decision or that he felt like he had barely made a decision at all. He could just lock the phone up and walk away. This was his gift, a body tied to no one.

But then he'd seen her at Cody Richardson's party. And she hadn't looked unpregnant. He'd only seen the word once before, years ago, when his father's congregation had joined a protest out in front of the

abortion clinic. He was just a boy then, clinging to his mother's side because the other marchers made him nervous. A red-faced man in a camouflage puffy vest stomped around, chanting, "It's a war out here, man, and we're the front line." An old black man held a sign that said ABORTION IS BLACK GENOCIDE. A nun carried a photo of a bloody baby's head squeezed by forceps. *There's no such thing as an unpregnant woman*, the sign read, *just a mother of a dead baby*. Years later, Luke hadn't forgotten that sign. The word *unpregnant* had struck with him even more than the graphic photograph—its finality, its sheer strangeness, not *not pregnant* but a different category of woman altogether. An unpregnant woman, he'd always thought, would somehow wear her unpregnancy as openly as pregnant women did. But when Nadia Turner had pushed inside the party, she looked no different than when he'd last seen her. Leggy in her high heels, a red blouse hugging her breasts, paining him with her prettiness. She wasn't even crying. He was the weak one who couldn't bring himself to face her.

Now he couldn't stop breaking things. If you dropped one dish during your shift, Charlie just humiliated you at the next staff meeting. Two and he took you off tables for the rest of the night. Luke counted the tip money in his pockets—fifteen dollars in crumpled ones and a few nickels. Not even gas money. He glanced at CJ, who was still grinning at him, in awe of his good fortune.

"Guess I am lucky," Luke said, blowing smoke into the sour air.

THAT SUMMER, Nadia spent more nights in Aubrey Evans's bed than in her own.

She slept on the right side, farthest from the bathroom, because

Aubrey got up more in the middle of the night. In the morning, she brushed her teeth and left her toothbrush in the holder by the sink. She ate breakfast in the chair nearest the window, her feet bunched up on the edge of her seat. She drank her juice out of Kasey's bright orange Vols cup. She left clothes in Aubrey's room, accidentally at first—a sweatshirt forgotten on the back of a chair, a swimsuit left in the dryer—then she forgot things on purpose. Soon, when Monique dumped a laundry basket on the bed, the girls' clothes tangled into an indistinguishable knot.

It wasn't hard to move into someone else's life if you did it a little at a time. Aubrey no longer asked if she wanted to spend the night—after work, when they walked out to the parking lot, Aubrey unlocked the passenger's side and waited for Nadia to climb inside. Aubrey was lonely too. She hadn't made many friends at school. She'd spent more time volunteering at church than going to football games or dances. It was strange, learning the contours of another's loneliness. You could never know it all at once; like stepping inside a dark cave, you felt along the walls, bumped into jagged edges.

"You sure you're not wearing out your welcome over there?" her father asked one night.

"No," she said. "Aubrey invited me."

"But you're over there all the time now."

"So now you care where I go," she said.

He paused in her doorway. "Don't get smart with me," he said.

She went anyway, even though on most nights, she and Aubrey did nothing at all, lounging on the couch, watching bad reality TV and painting each other's nails. They drove downtown and ducked inside little shops at the harbor. Last summer, Nadia had worked there at Jojo's Juicery, smiling plaintively while people squinted at the rainbow-

colored menu above her head. She had daydreamed while following smoothie recipes on laminated index cards taped to the counter. She served rich white people, mostly, who strolled with pastel sweaters tied around their shoulders, as if carrying them was too much work. She had never been inside any of the harbor restaurants like Dominic's Italian or Lighthouse Oysters—fancy places she could never afford—but she joked with the waiters sometimes when they came inside Jojo's. A waitress at D'Vino's told her how a Hollywood producer had yelled "*All dente! All dente!* That means 'to the tooth!'" at her and sent his linguine back three times until it was firm enough. He was trying to impress his date, a weathered blonde woman who barely reacted, which just seemed sad—what was the point of being a Hollywood producer if you had to yell at waitresses to impress women? At least no one would try to impress a date at Jojo's. During work, she liked to stare out the glass at the boats docked along the harbor, their colorful sails furled, but sometimes it made her sad. She'd never been inside a boat and they were docked twenty feet away. She'd never been anywhere.

Some evenings, she stayed after work to help Aubrey volunteer. They packed food baskets for the homeless and cleaned Sister Willis's classroom, scrubbing the chalkboards and scraping Play-Doh off the tables. On Friday nights, they hosted senior bingo, dragging in stacks of metal chairs, setting up snacks, and calling out numbers the seniors asked them to repeat at least three times. Other nights, the girls sipped smoothies along the harbor and peered into shop windows at trinkets. In the coming darkness, the boats bobbed and swayed, and later, when she crawled into Aubrey's bed, Nadia felt like one of those boats, bobbing in place. She was leaving for college in two weeks. She was drifting between two lives, and as excited as she felt, she wasn't quite ready to lose the life she'd found this summer.

Sometimes Kasey grilled and they all ate dinner in the backyard, then walked down the street for Hawaiian shaved ice. Monique told them stories about work, about a hallucinating man who'd gouged his own eye out, a woman who'd fallen asleep at the wheel and crashed into a fence, nearly impaling herself on the post. One evening, she told them about a girl who had taken illegal abortion pills from Mexico and couldn't bring herself to admit it until she almost bled out on the E.R. floor.

"What happened to that girl?" Nadia asked later, while they all washed the dishes.

"What girl?" Monique handed her a wet plate.

"That girl. The one who took those pills from Mexico."

She still couldn't bring herself to say the word *abortion*. Maybe it would sound different falling out of her mouth.

"Horrible infection. But she pulled through. These girls are so afraid to tell someone they're pregnant, they get these pills cheap online and no one knows what's in them. She would've died if she hadn't had enough sense to get help." Monique handed Aubrey a plate. "Don't you girls ever do something like that. You call me, okay? Or Kasey. We'll take you to a doctor. Don't ever try to do something like that on your own."

Nadia had read online about abortion pills, forty dollars and delivered to your door in a plain brown box. She would've ordered them herself if Luke hadn't found her the money for the surgery. You didn't know how desperate you could be until you were.

"Do you think it's bad?" she asked Aubrey later. "What that girl did?"

"Of course. Mo said she almost died."

"No, not like that. I mean, do you think it's wrong?"

"Oh." Aubrey flipped off the lights and the other half of the bed lowered beneath her weight. "Why?"

"I don't know. Just asking."

In the darkness of the room, she could barely make out Aubrey's outline, let alone her face. In the darkness, talking felt safe. She lay on her back, staring up at the ceiling.

"Sometimes I wonder—" She paused. "If my mom had gotten rid of me, would she still be alive? Maybe she would've been happier. She could've had a life."

Any of her other friends would have gasped, turning to her with wide eyes. "Why would you even think that?" they would say, chiding her for entertaining such darkness. But Aubrey just squeezed her hand because she too understood loss, how it drove you to imagine every possible scenario that might have prevented it. Nadia had invented versions of her mother's life that did not end with a bullet shattering her brain. Her mother, no longer cradling a tiny, wrinkled body in a hospital bed, an exhausted smile on her face, but seventeen and scared, sitting inside an abortion clinic, waiting for her name to be called. Her mother, no longer her mother, graduating from high school, from college, from graduate school even. Her mother listening to lectures or delivering her own, stationed behind a podium, running a toe up the back of her calf. Her mother traveling the world, posing on the cliffs of Santorini, her arms bent toward the blue sky. Always her mother, although in this version of reality, Nadia did not exist. Where her life ended, her mother's life began.

THAT SUMMER, the girls drove to Los Angeles to explore different beaches. Somehow, sun and sand and salt water seemed better, more

glamorous even, in the shadows of Hollywood. They wandered down Venice Beach, past weight-lifting jocks and weed dispensaries, T-shirt shops and churro stands and bucket drummers. They swam at Santa Monica Beach and drove through the winding cliffs to Malibu. Other places they went: downtown San Diego, where they rode trolleys across the city, window-shopping at Horton Plaza and walking around Seaport Village and sneaking into nightclubs in the Gaslamp district. Nadia sweet-talked a bouncer who let them into an underground club where shot glasses glowed red over the bar, industrial fans spun lazily overhead, and she had to scream into Aubrey's ear to talk. They met boys. Boys tossing footballs on the beach, boys hanging out of car windows, boys smoking cigarettes in front of water fountains, boys, barely still boys, offering to buy them drinks in clubs. Boys bunched around them at the bar, and while Nadia flirted, Aubrey seemed to shrink within herself, her arms folded tightly across her chest. She'd never had a boyfriend before but how did she expect to ever find one if she never loosened up? So on one of her last nights in Oceanside, Nadia knew exactly where she wanted to take Aubrey: Cody Richardson's house. Aubrey had never been, and in her waning days at home, Nadia felt nostalgic enough to return. Besides, if she was honest with herself, she also hoped she might see Luke. She'd imagined their good-bye—not dramatic, they weren't dramatic people, but some final conversation where she would see, in his eyes, the realization that he'd hurt her. She wanted to feel his regret, for leaving her, for not loving her like he was supposed to. For once in her life, she wanted an ended thing to end cleanly.

The night of the party, she sat on the edge of Aubrey's bed, helping her friend with her makeup. She tilted Aubrey's face toward her, gently sweeping gold eye shadow across her lids.

"You have to wear the dress," she said.

"I told you, it's too short."

"Trust me," she said. "Every guy's gonna want to hook up with you tonight."

Aubrey scoffed. "So? That doesn't mean I want to hook up with them."

"Don't you at least want to know what it's like?"

"What?"

"Sex." She giggled. "Just don't expect it to be all beautiful and romantic. It's gonna be awkward as hell."

"Why does it have to be awkward?"

"Because—look, has any guy ever seen you naked?"

Now Aubrey opened her eyes. "What?" she said.

"I mean, what's the furthest you've ever gone?"

"I don't know. Kissing. I guess."

"Jesus Christ. You've never even let a guy feel you up?"

Aubrey shut her eyes again. "Please," she said. "Can we talk about something else?"

Nadia laughed. "You're so cute," she said. "I was never like you. I lost my virginity and . . ." She shrugged. "I don't even talk to him anymore."

She'd never told Aubrey about Luke. She didn't know how to explain their time together and she'd feel embarrassed trying to, because everything that had happened between them could be traced back to one of her own stupid choices. She was the one who'd gone to Far Charlie's day after day to see Luke. She had fallen in love with a boy who didn't want anyone to know he was dating her. She'd started sleeping with him months before she was leaving for college and she hadn't even insisted he wear a condom every time. She had

been the type of foolish woman her mother had cautioned her never to be and she hated the idea of Aubrey knowing this about her.

Aubrey opened her eyes again. They were watering, and Nadia dabbed a tissue, careful not to smear her eyeliner.

"I wish I could be more like you," Aubrey said.

"Trust me," Nadia said. "You don't want to be like me."

That night, the beach was empty aside from the flicker of a bonfire past the lifeguard tower. Almost deserted, like their own private island. She reached for Aubrey's hand, Aubrey lagging behind her, tugging at the black mindress.

"Don't let me drink too much," she said.

"That's the point—we're gonna loosen you up."

"Nadia, seriously. I'm such a lightweight."

"Oh, you can't be that bad."

"That's what you think."

Cody Richardson's kitchen was more crowded than usual. Tall skaters in ripped skinny jeans howled over beer pong while beside them, three fat blondes counted out loud before downing tequila shots. On the floor, a pale, freckled girl passed a joint to two skinny boys who were too busy making out to notice. Nadia mixed Aubrey a drink, but she shook her head.

"That's too much," she said, pushing the cup back.

"It's only two shots!"

"You didn't even measure it."

"I poured for two seconds. Same thing."

After her first cup, Aubrey started to relax. After her second, she was smiling, no longer caring that her dress almost showed her ass. After her third, she was dancing with a boy who certainly cared that

her dress almost showed her ass, so Nadia pulled her away before he got too handsy. Aubrey was an adorable drunk. She clung to Nadia, throwing her arms around her, toying with her hair. She plopped into her lap, an arm around her shoulder. She told Nadia she loved her, twice. Both times, Nadia laughed it off.

"No," Aubrey said, "I really do love you."

When was the last time anyone had told her that? She felt embarrassed that she couldn't remember, so she pretended not to hear. She twisted open a bottle of water and handed it to Aubrey.

"Have some," she said, "before you puke."

Partying at Cody's sober was a strange experience. She felt like she was in a museum, sneaking under the guardrails for a closer look at the exhibits. She noticed the details, the sadness behind smiles, the tired faces, strained with pretend happiness. She was comforted, in a way, to know that she wasn't the only one who sometimes faked it. She finished her beer, barely buzzed, while Aubrey tried to goad her into drinking more.

"I can't," Nadia said. "I'm driving."

"But you're not even having fun!"

"I am . . ."

Aubrey pouted. "No, you're not."

"Yes, I am, and you're having fun. That's the point."

"But you're just sitting there."

"I'm having fun through you," she said.

And she was, oddly enough, even though she was sober, even though she was disappointed that she hadn't seen Luke. She felt grateful, almost, watching Aubrey party with the giddiness of someone who had just wrenched herself free of her body.

"Jesus, AUBREY." Nadia hooked an arm around her waist as she helped her up Monique and Kasey's driveway. "You are a lightweight."

"I'm not *that* drunk."

"Oh yes you are—"

"No . . ."

"Yes, you fucking are." She fumbled through Aubrey's purse for the gold house key. "Now, shut up, okay? Everyone's probably sleeping."

She clamped a hand over Aubrey's mouth as she shuttled her inside the dark house. Floorboards creaked underneath them and she stepped lightly, ushering Aubrey down the hall, her hand moist from her breathing. Inside her bedroom, Aubrey flopped onto the bed, stretching out like a starfish. Nadia wiggled out of her dress. She glanced into the mirror. Behind her, Aubrey propped herself up on her elbows, watching her undress.

"You're so pretty," she said.

Nadia laughed, rummaging through the drawer for a T-shirt to sleep in. She felt uncomfortable, knowing that Aubrey was looking. She'd never liked anyone watching her undress, not even Luke. She pulled on a faded Chargers T-shirt, piling her hair into a sloppy bun.

"You are," Aubrey said. "You are so pretty, it's not even fair."

"Come on. Let's go to bed."

"But I'm not tired."

"Want to change into shorts? You're not sleeping in that, are you?" "We'll talk, right?" Aubrey said. "When you're in college."

Nadia's throat tightened, but she didn't say anything, shielded by

the dark and the quiet. "Of course," she finally said, unsure if she was trying to comfort Aubrey or herself.

Down the hall, the air conditioner hummed loudly, but her mind refused to settle, not even after Aubrey grew quiet and still beside her. She slept on her stomach, like a baby, and in the darkness, Nadia rested a hand on her back, feeling it rise and fall.

"Remember the trampoline?" Aubrey said. "That I told you about? The one in my neighbor's yard?"

"What about it?"

Aubrey clenched her eyes shut, her voice dropping to a whisper. "That was the first secret I ever kept."

IN THE MORNING, Luke's bum leg burned. An unusual type of pain. He knew other types well, a side effect from a reckless youth. A broken arm after accepting a dare to swing across the monkey bars blindfolded, sprained ankles and jammed fingers from pickup basketball games taken too seriously, cracked ribs from drunk fights with friends. In college, he learned pain intimately, the tautness of sore muscles, the feverous push beyond all points of reason, the weight of a hundred pounds on your back, digging into your shoulders, cutting off your breath. The pain of too-tired, can't-get-up, no-thinking, just-surviving. After football, he didn't think he could ever unlearn pain. He felt violence still in his body, echoing against his bones.

The leg hurt differently, not the sting or swell he knew, just a dull, seasoned pain that felt hot when he stepped, especially in the morning after hours of not moving it. So when his mother banged

on his door early one Sunday morning, he took a minute to untangle himself from his covers and shuffle barefoot across the room. Golden shards of light slanted through the slats of the blinds and across his carpet. He eased toward the door, gingerly opening it and poking his head out. In the hallway, his mother stood in a peach skirt suit, her purse clutched under her arm. He squinted into the sunlight, clearing his throat.

"What you need, Mama?" he said.

"Hi Mama," she said. "Good morning, Mama. It's so good to see you, Mama . . ."

"Sorry, I just woke up."

"Let me give you a hug since I don't do nothin' but work and hole up in my room all day . . ."

He stepped forward lightly, putting an arm briefly around her shoulders.

"What'd I tell you about going to see that doctor?" she said.

"It don't hurt that bad."

"Can't hardly walk and still won't listen to nobody." She shook her head. "Why you standing like that in front of the door?"

"You don't wanna go in. It's messy."

"You think I don't know that already?"

"C'mon, Mama, what you need?"

"I don't need anything. I just want to see my son."

"I been busy," he said.

She scoffed. "Busy. I know you're still thinkin' about that Turner girl. You just like your daddy. Can't let the past be the past." She touched his cheek. "Look, what's done is done. You got yourself in this mess and you should be on your knees thanking God for getting you out of it. Don't everybody get another chance, you know that?"

"Yes," he said.

"What you need to do is come to church," she said. "If you'd listened to the Word a little more, maybe none of this would've happened."

Luke leaned against the doorframe. He hadn't meant to get his parents involved but he needed the money quickly, and part of him had hoped that they would scold him for even considering aborting the baby and refuse to give him a dollar. Then he would've returned to Nadia, hangdog, his hands thrown up, and told her that he'd tried his best but couldn't find the money and maybe they should take a moment and think this over. But his parents, who didn't drink or swear or even watch rated-R movies, had helped Nadia kill his baby. He had asked them to.

"Okay," he said. "I'll try to make it."

IN OCEANSIDE, seasons blended together into year-round sunshine, but fall came regardless: cheerful welcome messages now flashed on Oceanside High's electronic marquee, and backpacks and binders had been pushed to the front of Walmart. Nadia had received e-mails from the University of Michigan informing her of orientation. She tried to swallow her nervousness each time she passed those generic back-to-school images framed in red and orange leaves. In Ocean-side, leaves didn't burst into red and orange; they withered and faded into a pale green that filled the gutters and lined the streets. But for the first time in her life, by the time the trees hung empty, she would be living somewhere else.

The Sunday before she left for Michigan, Upper Room took up a love offering to send her on her way. She was the first one in the

congregation to earn an academic scholarship to a big university, but it didn't cover everything. She would need little things—like a real winter coat—so the pastor asked Nadia and her father to stand at the altar with an empty paint bucket by their feet. Second John tossed in his cigarette money; he'd promised his wife he'd cut back anyway. Sister Willis gave the cash she'd set aside for her Powerball ticket and whispered to Magdalena Price that her numbers better not win that week. Even the Mothers tossed in a few dollars, long used to stretching Social Security checks like watered-down dish soap. Nadia had been so distracted by member after member who rose to give that she almost didn't notice Luke at first, sitting in the back pew. He wore a gray suit that dug into his shoulders and when her eyes flicked to his, her father's arm around her shoulders felt tighter. After service, while her father stood in the receiving line to thank the pastor, she felt Luke sidle up behind her in the lobby.

"Can we talk?" Luke asked.

She nodded, following him past the congregation gathering in the lobby, out the front door, and around the church to the garden in the back. Violet African daisies bunched around the fountain and a bitter-leaved acacia spread over the stone bench where Luke sat, stretching out his bad leg. She lowered herself beside him.

"Heard you got in a wreck," he said.

"Months ago," she said.

"You okay?"

She hated his fake concern. She pushed herself to her feet.

"I don't have the money," she said.

"What?"

"The offering. My dad has it. But I'll pay you back."

"Nadia—"

"Six hundred, right? I'd hate for you to feel like you ever did me any favors."

"I'm sorry." Luke glanced over his shoulder, then leaned toward her, lowering his voice. "I couldn't go to that clinic. If someone had seen me—"

"So you didn't give a shit if someone saw me?"

"It's different. You're not the pastor's kid."

"I needed you," she said. "And you left me."

"I'm sorry," he said, softer. "I didn't want to."

"Well, you did—"

"No," he said. "I didn't want to kill our baby."

She would later imagine their baby growing up. Baby takes his first steps. Baby throws his bottle across the room. Baby learns to jump. Always Baby, although sometimes she wondered what she would've named him. Luke, after his father, or Robert, after her own. She even thought of more distant family names, like her mother's father, Israel, but she couldn't imagine a baby bearing the heaviness of that name, its biblical sternness. So Baby he remained, even though in her mind, he grew into a boy, a teenager, a man. After Luke had said, for the first time, "our baby"—not the baby, not it—she couldn't help wondering who Baby would've become.

That night, the Flying Bridge was mostly empty, except for fishermen sharing a round at the bar, their thick backs hunched in flannel. She pushed through the front door, toward the booth in the back where Aubrey was waiting. Sometimes she thought about telling Aubrey everything, about Luke, about the abortion. She imagined the two of them in a dark room, how she would take a shaky breath and confess, how Aubrey would tell her that she had been forgiven. Sometimes she wondered if this was what had drawn her to

Aubrey. If some small part of her thought that by gathering near to Aubrey—with her purity ring and her good heart—she would somehow be absolved. She would close her eyes and feel Aubrey's hand on her forehead, all of her sins lifting out of her body.

"What's wrong?" Aubrey said, as soon as Nadia sat.

Maybe Nadia could tell her how she hadn't been ready to be a mother, to forfeit her future, how she couldn't imagine how she could live any longer trapped in a house that only reminded her of her mother. How she'd thought she and Luke had both agreed it would be for the best, but how she hadn't really cared because she was granted the right to be selfish this one time, wasn't she? She would be the one sharing her body with a whole new person, so she should get to decide, right? But then Luke's face today when he'd told her that he'd wanted the baby—not the baby, *our* baby—which had gutted her, since she'd never imagined that he might. What young man did? He was supposed to be relieved that he'd been freed of his responsibilities, that she had handled the difficult part and resolved their problem. But maybe Luke was horrified by what she'd done. Maybe he'd left her at the clinic because he couldn't even stand to look at her after.

She could tell Aubrey all of this, and Aubrey would understand. Or she wouldn't. Her face would fall the way Luke's had—in horror, in disgust—and she would back away from the booth, unable to conceive of how anyone could kill a poor, defenseless baby. Or she would say she understood, but her smiles would tighten, never quite reaching her eyes, and she would call less and less until they stopped talking altogether. She would disappear, like everyone eventually did.

Nadia pushed away from the booth, suddenly feeling trapped. She wandered to the pool table, tracing her hand along the green felt. Her

father had taught her how to shoot pool when she was young. He'd brought her to his commanding officer's house for a Christmas party, and while his friends drank spiked eggnog, he'd spent the evening in the back with her, teaching her how to shoot pool. After, they'd driven home slowly, circling through neighborhoods to look at the Christmas lights. Despite her pleading, her father never bothered to put up Christmas lights at their house, but he still drove her around to show her the beautiful designs other people had created.

"Do you play?" Aubrey asked. When Nadia shook her head, she said, "Wanna learn?"

"You play pool?"

"Kasey taught me." She grabbed a cue stick, handing Nadia the other one. "Don't worry. I'll show you."

She patiently guided her through the basics, then stood behind her to correct her stance. Aubrey's hair tickled the back of her neck as she guided her hand back for her first stroke. Nadia wanted to feel the soft, constant pressure of another person's touch. She wanted Aubrey to hold her, even if it was a fake embrace.

"Can you show me again?" she said.