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Treasure

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TREASURE

By

KAREN PERKINS, B.F.A.

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

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Treasure

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ABSTRACT

Long after a brutal series of events resulted from her power exchange relationship, Treasure Montgomery's recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder is hampered by relationships with family members and the legal difficulties of her foster daughter.

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Chapter 1: Treasure, Andrea, and Naomi

The Change

Her first inkling of a sea-change came one morning when she hesitated—she never did that—in front of a dresser in the living room of her 1964 ranch house. Treasure stood in front of the dresser, thinking what the dresser needed was—she hated even thinking it—a television. She hadn't thought longingly of a television since being plastered on every screen in the country after her husband Jared murdered two women in the house Treasure lived in at the time. She thought of the news reports filled with innuendo and half-truth: was Treasure a black widow getting away with murder or was she a wife brutalized by her husband's violent fantasies?

And yet, a few days later, Treasure again pictured herself watching old cartoons, and the picture pleased her until, perversely, she became irritated by her pleasure. Treasure Montgomery began to long for a television, literally pine for one with a visceral ache in her gut. It was all she could think about: she pictured a television in her kitchen, easily visible from the counter where she stood to do her prep work, chopping and mixing and stirring; she pictured a television in her dining room on a buffet. She could put one in the bathroom—a thought which irritated her supremely, made her think *what's next? A telephone in the bathroom too?* Ridiculous. She wore a cell phone on her body like a weapon: she had no need of a landline next to her commode—too easy to cut.

Then came the night she lay awake in bed, alternately sweat-slicked then chilled, spending hours of her scant night thinking how much easier the long darkness would be if only she had a television by which to while away the hours—she didn't have to watch the news. The lack of television started a rivulet of salty liquid streaming from the inside corners of her eyes.

That woke her up.

“What the hell,” she spoke to the dark. “I am not just laying here crying over not having a TV.”

Abruptly she seethed. Furious sweat dripped from her pores.

She conceived the sudden thought that, if he but knew her vacillations on the subject of television, her brother Darren would have yet more ammunition for his ridicule. As if by magic or divinity, she thought of her sister-in-law Janice's discussions with their cousin Tad's wife Chiclets about the onset of menopause. Just like that. It came to her out of the blue. They'd called it “perimenopause,” saying the worst was never knowing when their laughter would unexpectedly morph into the deepest sadness they'd ever experienced.

“Girl. I never know what to expect!” Chiclets had shaken her head and sighed, and Janice had nodded, emphatic in her agreement. Both had promptly burst into tears.

Shortly after connecting what she'd been experiencing with that disturbing yet comforting conversation—wasn't she too young for menopause—Treasure drifted off to sleep the last hour before dawn. She did not think of it again for several days.

Transplanting plugs of dianthus and delphiniums, lupines, and foxgloves in the greenhouse, Treasure heard an advertisement on the radio for a county fair and carnival, becoming overwhelmingly emotional about the opportunity to see people trying to catch a greased pig or ride a two-dollar Ferris wheel and, again, Chiclets' words resonated.

“Girl, I never know what to expect!”

That night as she slept, dreams of sexual encounters tormented Treasure. She dreamed of Jared and Natalie, of faceless, nameless and terrifying people; she dreamed of Tom Pense, the man Jared set on her. It seemed she could not awaken from the dreams. In them, she alternated between arousal, sadness and loneliness, anger and fear. The old familiar dread that nothing she ever did would be enough. In yet another endless sequence, Treasure experienced a yearning so intense it passed beyond anything she had faced in her life. She was overwhelmed with sexual desire; she hurt with it. She imagined, dreaming, ways to gratify herself, to ease it even slightly. She ran from one horrid act to another. Her dreaming self becoming angrier and more desperate by the second, she ran on, pursuing sensations illusive and impossible, feeling more frantic every moment she did not find what she was seeking. In her dream, she searched for a master, he alone able to satisfy some un-nameable craving, for sex and violence and mayhem. In her dream, culpable, she sought wicked sensation.

But her mind, her body, rejected the scene. She wrestled and wrangled, tossed and turned until profound nausea caused her to shift to one side, an intuitive, conditioned just-in-case movement that finally waked her as vomit erupted.

Empty, she lay on her side half off the bed, motionless, gaining her bearings, listening for any sound that might indicate imminent need for flight. No sounds out of the ordinary assailed her, so she opened her eyes, stealthy, scanning the darkness for darker shadows, for unexpected light, for anything different.

Treasure wished, again, for a television. Instead, she got out of bed, wandering her darkened house in a preconditioned search pattern, checking. Checking. Checking. Everything checked out. Nothing out of the ordinary, after all. She cleaned her mouth. She cleaned the vomit. She went about the business without thought or disgust, without light.

When the unabated darkness paled to a shade of pearl gray, Treasure brewed a pot of French roast espresso, added liberal amounts of molasses and coconut oil, and blended the hell out of it. Froth spurted like an eruption of the geyser Echinus she'd seen once in Yellowstone National Park, sticky sweetness jetted out in unpredictable arcs because she forgot to put a lid on the blender jar.

She wiped up the mess and stood next to the hopelessly outdated chocolate brown refrigerator of her kitchen, taking all three gulps of the foamy brew straight from the sticky jar, Treasure thought, it's too much. It isn't enough. Everything is too much and nothing is enough.

She'd thought her nightmares scary, before. But this, this—bitter arousal—she was terrified by it. Recalling bits and snatches of her dream state, she bent double in

front of the stacked chocolate brown wall ovens, hyperventilating. *What the hell.* She began to cry, conscious of re-awakened arousal.

It made her so angry, Treasure wanted to run, to set her feet outside the electrified fencing of her fortified compound and run until she herself didn't know where she was anymore—if she didn't know where she was, how could others know where to find her? For the first time, she didn't feel protected in her secure home, she felt trapped. She wanted to get away. She wanted a fresh landscape, a pure and new distraction.

That, too, scared the hell out of her. She stood, peering at the appliances, thinking how dated the vintage antiques looked to her. Thinking they no longer comforted her with memories of her mother's kitchen in Houston. There in her kitchen, having what she could only acknowledge with half-hearted logic was yet another panic attack, Treasure could have sworn she heard her mother's voice saying *Get moving, it's time to move on.* She cried harder, mourning Natalie, hating what Jared had done to them. She hated what he'd made her do, hated Tom Pense the man he'd set on her, hated the gut-wrenching fear her nightmares generated, and she missed her mother with an intensity she'd lacked for the last decade. When the tears slowed, Treasure Montgomery decided maybe it was time to test the waters. Maybe it was time to challenge the status quo, to find out if she could or could not emerge from her safe zone that no longer seemed safe, only isolated and irrelevant.

Maybe, she thought, this time I'll listen to my mother.

The Way It Is

On any given day, Treasure spent her daylight hours seeding, planting, and transplanting a vast assortment of growing things, splitting her time between greenhouses, gardens, and her workshop. Treasure grew her bank balance in proportion: both nursery and floral industries were solid performers, and Treasure managed her cut-flower business well. She had capital. She never had to scrimp or make do because of underfunding, an advantage she never underestimated.

Treasure earned her Bachelor's degree in business at the age of twenty-one. When she gained liberty after seventeen years of marriage, she needed a goal, something to work for, a focus to help her forget. She went back to school, intending to earn a second B.S. in horticulture. Life, she thought, finally looked up, and Treasure had a plan. She planned to operate an upscale fishing camp near Toledo Bend and Lake Sam Rayburn, managing the investment on behalf of her family and friends. With three private lakes on three hundred acres of recreational paradise located in east Texas, Treasure thought she would need diverse skills, so she planned to learn those skills for herself.

Hurricane Rita and a man named Tom Pense destroyed her plan—she never finished the degree. She read and learned new skills by doing things for herself. She made yet another plan. Her current business, a wholesale nursery growing and selling cut flowers, was not something she imagined for herself. It suited her, however, once

she'd found a different place and built the right team to make it work. Things were finally beginning to look solid, to Treasure.

The cell phone perpetually at Treasure's hip vibrated.

She lifted it, glancing at the caller ID to see her daughter Andrea's code on the screen, sliding a finger against it in a jagged wiggle to accept the call.

"Hey!" she said with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

"Mother, how are you today?" Andrea asked, her tone prim and careful. Andrea was a student in medical school. She took herself seriously, dressed as prim and formal as her tone.

"Same old, same old," her mother said with more cheer than usual.

"Mother." Andrea sounded put out.

"Actually, Andrea, I was thinking of you this morning," Treasure said. "I was wondering about your schedule this weekend, if I were to drive over would you have time for lunch or shopping or something?"

"Mother?" Andrea questioned. "What's going on?"

"What? Nothing's going on, that's why I was thinking about coming to see you."

"You never come to see me," her daughter said, not quite so prim and careful.

Treasure sighed. "I know. But I thought I might like to try."

“Might like to try?” her daughter repeated. “Like the last time you tried? When Dad—Uncle Darren and Aunt Janice made a special trip to pick you up and drove you halfway here, and you had a panic attack and vomited all over their car, like that?”

“I remember,” Treasure said.

“Might like to try to repeat that?” her daughter reiterated.

“No, Andrea, that wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” Treasure said.

“Not what you had in mind?” Andrea said. “We were planning a pleasant family weekend, but no, can’t have that—”

“I can see you’re going to be difficult about this. If you’d rather I didn’t, never mind.”

“No, Mother!” Andrea said. “I’m trying to understand what you have in mind. Did Mo—Aunt Janice—put you up to this?”

“Janice? No! I told you, I thought I’d drive over—by myself—and we could have lunch or go shopping or whatever. You don’t have to make a federal case out of it or anything.”

“Mom, you haven’t driven in years,” Andrea said.

“That’s not true, Andrea, I drive every day.”

“No, Mom, you don’t.”

“I do. I drive every day. I just don’t leave the property.”

“You drive a golf cart, Mother.”

“So I’m driving a golf cart, it’s still driving. You can’t pretend it isn’t.”

Andrea sighed. A loud, exasperated, painful sound.

Treasure decided her first excursion would not be to Bryan-College Station after all. Maybe Lufkin or Tyler instead. Some place without the baggage of expectation and disappointment. Somewhere no one waited for her.

“*Uncle* Darren and *Aunt* Janice are tied up this weekend. So am I, a family event at—” Andrea’s voice trailed off.

Darren and Janice were visiting Andrea for “a family event,” Treasure thought, and neither had mentioned it when she’d spoken to them earlier in the week. It was their right—as Andrea’s adoptive parents. The acrimonious wound perpetually seeped rancor. One lie. One lie led to this.

Probably more than a single lie, Treasure admitted, realizing Andrea was talking again.

Andrea continued, “If you want to try to visit me, Mother, you’ll have to make weekend arrangements sooner than the Thursday afternoon before. Other people have lives, Mother. We have obligations and people depending on us. We have places to be. But, hey, if you want to push the limits of reality and think you can—”

Andrea appeared to be warming to her subject, so Treasure cut in, “What did you have on your mind, Andrea? Why did you call?”

“Oh.” Andrea hesitated. “I—” She didn’t say anything else.

“Have a lovely weekend, honey,” Treasure said quietly. “I’m so proud of you.”

Her daughter answered, subdued, “Thanks. I will.” She disconnected the call.

It never got better. It never got easier.

Treasure closed her eyes for an instant before fumbling to return the cell phone to its case on her belt. She stumbled to the potting bench and sat clumsily on a tall metal stool positioned in front of it. She sat there for an hour, unmoving, her elbows on the bench, her head in her hands.

Another Day

Treasure dialed the number by rote memory, “This is Treasure Montgomery. I wonder if I could make an appointment to speak to Dr. Barlowe? On the phone?”

“Ms. Montgomery, how wonderful to hear from you,” the receptionist said warmly. “One moment and I’ll connect you with Naomi.”

She sat upright in a straight-backed chair at her dining table, a tablet and pen before her, a glass of cold water in hand’s reach, on hold for several minutes before the call was transferred.

“Treasure Montgomery! How are you?” Naomi specialized these days in sexual trauma and addiction. “It’s wonderful to hear from you. Did you get my letter?”

“I did,” Treasure said. “It’s an, um, interesting approach.”

“Treasure, I think we might finally make a breakthrough. Think about it. You don’t have to talk about any of the traumas, you only think about scenes that stress you as I lead you through the eye movements—I’ve used it for several years now. If I’d known about EMDR back then—At any rate, this therapy has been miraculous. I’m seeing positive results in clients who’ve been extremely slow to recover.”

Slow to recover. What a diplomatic understatement, Treasure thought. “Thank you for thinking of me, Naomi, but that’s not why I’m calling. I—I’ve been thinking of getting out more. What do you think?”

“Get out more?” Naomi repeated, stressing the final word. “Have you gotten out *less*?”

“Well—no.” Treasure said.

“So—you haven’t left since the trip with Darren and Janice,” Naomi said.

“Well—sure, sure I have.” Treasure lied. “But that’s not the point. I’m not happy with things like they are anymore. I *want* to get out more, regularly.”

“So, you’re saying you *are* ready? You’re willing to try the new therapy I wrote you about?” Naomi asked.

“I—maybe,” Treasure said.

Naomi enthused, “Oh, thank God! Give me a little time to look at the schedule, but I think I could be at your place next weekend for an intensive. Let’s get you out of that compound.”

“An intensive?” Treasure backpedaled. “More counseling? You don’t think I can just get in the car and go to the grocery store or something?”

There was a pause at the other end of the phone line.

“Um.” Naomi asked slowly, “Do you?”

Treasure lost her patience. “You know I don’t *actually* have agoraphobia, right? Just because I chose not to leave the safety of my home doesn’t mean I couldn’t have.”

Naomi waited without responding.

“I can leave this property any time I want.”

No response.

“I can,” Treasure insisted. “I’ll take this phone with me right now, and I’ll get in the car and—”

“Treasure, do you have a current license?” the psychologist asked patiently.

Treasure felt triumphant. She renewed her driver’s license through the mail. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

“You realize it’s been four years since you’ve left the property?”

Treasure tilted her head, thinking, “I don’t think—”

“It has.”

“Has it been that long?” Treasure questioned.

Naomi asserted, “The last time you tried to leave was with Darren and Janice when they wanted you to visit Andrea at college. *That* disaster was the last time, whether you want to admit it or not.”

Treasure snorted. “You sound like Andrea. If you don’t think it’s a good idea, I won’t do it.”

“Wait. Stop. I do think it’s a good idea,” the woman said. “It’s why I wrote you. I want to help you accomplish this. Nevertheless, Treasure, this is not an easy goal and you will need help to accomplish it. Don’t you agree?”

Treasure sighed.

Naomi demanded an acknowledgement from Treasure. “I can’t help you if you’re not realistic about this. This will not be easy, yes or no? Do you think this will be easy for you to do?”

“No.”

“Thank God. Seriously, I think our best bet is for me to come up there and see this through with you. The timing is perfect, I was planning a few days of vacation and—Let me look over my calendar and see if I can get there sooner—this weekend, maybe.” Naomi hoped she could get to Treasure sooner rather than later.

Treasure took a deep breath and audibly exhaled. “Thank you,” she said. “But next weekend will be fine, later even if you already have plans. I can wait until you arrive.”

“Treasure, don’t you back out on me,” Naomi said.

“I won’t.” Treasure paused. “Really. I won’t back out, but I’ve got things planned already this weekend. Let’s try for next weekend, okay?”

Naomi agreed. “I’ll call you back later to let you know what I arrange. Don’t hang up! Tell me what’s been going on. I wrote you more than two months ago. I haven’t heard a word from you until today.”

“Oh, I’ve been thinking,” Treasure said firmly. “I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Yeah? Line it out for me. Where do you want to go? What do you want to do first?”

Treasure considered how to answer. “I want to go shopping, try on some clothes in a dressing room and see if they fit before I buy them.”

Naomi wondered how thin Treasure had become. “Makes sense to me. What else?”

“A grocery store—I want to go to a grocery store,” she said. “I want to squeeze fruit before I buy it.”

“Feeling tactile?”

“Probably,” Treasure admitted. “Or maybe I don’t want to do either of those. Maybe I just want a meal out.”

“Well, that’s a sure recipe for disaster. You cook better than any restaurant I know of, and if that’s your first outing, you’ll probably decide never to bother again.” Naomi Barlowe was a pragmatic woman.

“Okay, you might be right. I’d like to hold my option open on that. Maybe I’ll buy a television. We could shop for a television.”

“*Ri-i-ight.*” Naomi pronounced the word with three syllables, brushing past the uncharacteristically normal statement as if Treasure had not spoken. “What about a drive, on the open roads in the country?” Naomi asked. “And, maybe on Sunday, we could visit a church in the area? We could scope some churches out Saturday, first?”

Treasure hesitated before saying, “A drive sounds nice.”

“Good. Treasure, I think we have a solid game plan.”

The statement sent a shudder of distress through Treasure. Aborted plans plagued her. Treasure heard a clatter, some sort of ruckus in the background on Naomi's end. "Everything okay?" She heard a grunt and some huffing, a deep and muffled sound like a low, male voice, and then Naomi's voice saying *that's enough, now*.

"Treasure, let me call you back later," Naomi said and, without waiting for an answer, disconnected the call.

Treasure set her cell phone down on the table.

"Be safe, Naomi," she said. She had heard similar sounds before, when agitated clients disrupted Naomi's usual calm flow. She had been the ruckus a time or two, before.

Getting any work done until Naomi or Tara the receptionist called her back would be difficult. Treasure stood, picked up the phone, and forced her churning thoughts aside to consider what tasks she should do first in the greenhouse. She had a delivery truck arriving that afternoon and plants she would need to unload into her quarantine area.

She hadn't gotten farther than her back door before the phone in her hand vibrated. "Hello?"

Tara spoke, "Dr. Barlowe wanted me to let you know everything's fine and she'll see you next weekend for sure. Oh, and she asked if you can call her on Monday to finalize the plans. She said around 8:30 that morning, if that's okay."

“Thanks, Tara, sure, that’s fine. I’ll call. Thank you for calling me back so quickly.”

“Sure, Ms. Montgomery,” Tara said, “Dr. Barlowe doesn’t want anyone to worry.”

“I’ll talk to you Monday,” Treasure said.

Naomi never wanted anyone to worry. Treasure could relate. Things never worked that way.

Beside her back door was the electrical panel. As she did most days at irregular intervals, Treasure flipped a master breaker, cutting the electrical power to her home. She waited until the powerful generator kicked on, seconds later restoring light in the small utility room. Treasure flipped the breaker on again, and listened for the sound of the generator shutting off. When everything occurred as expected, Treasure left the house, locking the door behind her and arming the sophisticated security system.

It was her habit. It was her compulsion. She would never leave security to chance. At least, she never would again.

Chapter 2: Chloe Katrita

Ze'chon and Me

“Me and Ze'chon, we were just babies really when the biggest thing that ever happened to us happened: Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Those two hurricanes changed everything, for both of us. But I guess, reading about it now for this report, we're not the only ones. I guess I always thought we were the only ones the hurricanes happened to, like, we were the only ones affected by these storms. I was wrong.”

Miss Salinas stopped Chloe Baldwin from speaking with a wave of her hand. “‘Ze'chon and I,’ that's how you should say it. Not me and Ze'chon, and Chloe, this is supposed to be a report about an important historical event. It's not supposed to be about you at all.”

“I know, Miss Salinas,” Chloe defended herself. “But when I googled how to write this kind of report, they said it would have more power and impact if it included some, like, personal stuff too. Like anecdotes, it said. That's what I'm doing. I'm, like, establishing the personal side of the historical event, so like everyone can understand the impact. It makes it, like, *relatable*, you know?”

Miss Salinas looked pained. She waved her hand. “Continue.”

“So, like I was saying,” Chloe started her report over from the beginning. “Me and Ze'chon—uh, Ze'chon and I . . .” Chloe narrated the events.

Most people remember Katrina because that's what the news talks about, year after year. People remember New Orleans, and people want to know what's happening in New Orleans. And the nightly news shows photographs of flooded houses in New Orleans then and abandoned neighborhoods in New Orleans now, and they talk about what's been done to rebuild the city and what still needs to be done in New Orleans. And that's all the world sees, all the world knows about the month that changed a lot of people's lives forever. They remember Katrina because no one lets them forget it. They remember events at the Dome in New Orleans, but they forget events occurred at the Dome in Houston. The news never mentions Rita.

Nobody talks about Rita. It's like nobody remembers Rita at all. But the people who lived through it, they remember. And what they remember is so much bigger, so much more catastrophic. They don't think there was this one hurricane, Hurricane Katrina, and it seriously damaged the city of New Orleans. And then another hurricane came through and kind of made it worse.

No. They don't separate Katrina from Rita at all. When they remember, what they remember is Katrita: back-to-back hurricanes, events inseparable, wreaking havoc on two of the biggest cities on the Gulf Coast in a span of weeks. They remember Katrita resulted in evacuation from both major cities and from all the coastline in between them, in what was probably one of the biggest evacuations mandated in the history of the United States. Although few died in the actual hurricane itself, some reports indicate 120 people died during Rita's evacuation—a fraction, it's true, of the

more than 1,800 deaths attributed to Katrina. Still, nobody talks about them, nobody remembers.

That was the story Chloe Baldwin wanted to tell her ninth grade classmates, the story of one of the biggest migratory evacuation in U.S. history and the costs associated with it. She wanted to talk about the whole of it, not just the one tiny part that history remembers and celebrates every year in New Orleans. Chloe Baldwin wanted to understand how people, like her dad, got separated from her and her mom in the confusion. How some people never came back after the evacuation and nobody ever knew what happened to them. Chloe wanted to understand how people, like Ze'chon, who was bussed out of New Orleans with his fourteen-year-old uncle Malik, never saw loved ones afterward, never knew what really happened to them, only knew they were dead because a list somewhere said so. Chloe and Ze'chon didn't remember much because they both were young at the time. But they remembered some things; other things, they were told, and they paid for the damages every day of their disrupted, disturbed lives.

Chloe remembered stories her mother told her, the bitter tone of her mother's voice when she spoke of only having a beat-up old Toyota with no one to help but a little kid whining and begging for things she didn't have. How they ran out of gas after six hours on the roadway in a smog-choked line of cars, never even leaving Houston. How they abandoned the car and the things they'd tried to take, walking back home, her mother carrying her instead of their bags and never letting her forget it. Chloe

remembered her mother's eyes would water when she talked about Chloe's dad. He was at work, supervising a construction crew when the order came, and he evacuated with them to Austin, leaving her and her mom to find their own way out of Houston. Except they couldn't, because it was right before payday and her mom didn't have a penny to her name because her dad withdrew it all that morning on his way to work, just in case they were evacuated, which they were. Her mom would say, if he really wanted to get to us, he could have, he should have, he should never have left town with them, even though the plan was to meet up outside of Houston on the route to Austin. They never made it that far, and her mom said her dad deserved it, when he got hit by a car and died walking to get gas for his crew after they ran out of gas on the road to Austin in the middle of nowhere, because he left them in Houston, all their money in his pocket. Chloe never heard her mother call the storms by any name other than Katrita, and when she looked online for her report, she didn't find much and it took asking the librarian about it before she understood they were two separate events, at least in the minds of most people.

"I chose this topic for my report," Chloe said, "because me and Ze'chon—I mean, Ze'chon and I, both were affected by it. Probably a bunch more of you were too. Historical events we barely remember for ourselves changed the courses of our lives. I wanted to know why, that's all. It's messed up," Chloe finished. "That's all. It's messed up."

Genecia and Me

“So, how are you?” Genecia sounded bored.

“Good. You?” Chloe asked. She didn’t know why they bothered anymore. It had been too long, really. They didn’t spend enough time together in real life, and things had changed too much with Genecia for Chloe to even relate to her anymore.

“I’m good. It’s all good.” Genecia didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “My dad said we could come down and see you this weekend, if you want.”

Her attitude pissed Chloe off. Last month, it was all Genecia could talk about, how much she missed her and wanted to come back to Houston and do some stuff together. This month, Genecia was full of herself and could only talk about schoolmates Chloe didn’t know. She could have done the same thing to Genecia, talked about nobody except people Genecia didn’t know. But she didn’t. It was rude. “Hey, whatever. Listen, I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.” Chloe disconnected the call, angry that she felt obligated to take Genecia’s calls—all because it was her dad Delancy that paid for the cell phone in the first place. It was messed up.

The phone vibrated and burped, a loud, long sound calculated to irritate her obnoxiously tight foster mother. It was Genecia again. Chloe sighed, tapping the screen angrily.

“Hey, girl,” Delancy said. “Genecia was supposed to let me talk before she hung up. Got a minute?”

“Sure,” she pretended.

“I was wondering have you been able to get over to the zoo lately?” Delancy asked.

“Not in a while,” Chloe admitted. She hadn’t been to the zoo in more than a year. No one except Delancy wanted to take her, it seemed. Any time she mentioned it to the foster parents du jour, it seemed they never had time for the Houston Zoo.

“I thought maybe you’d like to go there this weekend.”

Chloe liked the zoo, had liked it since the first time she could remember going there, she thought maybe with her father. But, in the blinding daylight of brutal honesty, she knew the first visit to the zoo she really remembered was with Delancy and Genecia. She remembered a picture from her childhood, herself as a toddler with a man, her father. Her mother probably burned it after she kicked Chloe out. Before Chloe left, she kept the photo in her room, kept it in a little box and looked at it when she was angry with her mother, trying to understand why her mother put up with the asshole, like she did. Didn’t she remember the good times with her father? Wasn’t the picture proof there’d been good times? It was her mom taking the picture, and the man was smiling, she was smiling in the picture. It was a great picture. Didn’t it mean there had been good times with them as a family together?

“Yeah,” Chloe said. “That’d be good I guess. If you want.” Chloe settled in, listening as Delancy outlined plans for their weekend visit.

Delancy and Me

Delancy said they were celebrating. “It’s your first year in high school. Genecia’s last in junior high.”

Genecia rolled her eyes, but Chloe thought it was sweet that Delancy remembered. Nobody else seemed to care. In the move from one foster placement to the next, the school district changed: in one being in ninth grade was a big deal, the first time students attended classes on the high school campus. Chloe had several weeks in the old district on the high school campus, just enough time to learn that being a freshman sucked, before moving to a foster home in a different district. In the first few weeks of school, Chloe learned nobody on the high school campus gives a shit about freshmen, except for mothers and fathers excited for their little darlings finally to be in “high school.” In the new foster placement, high school started in tenth grade and, being in ninth, she was back on a campus with junior high kids, which kind of should have been better since it meant you were boss again, only it didn’t matter in this school because she was new and nobody cared about new kids. New kids were never bosses. Unless they were buff, football-playing boys. Even new boys were boss if they were buff and played football. It was messed up.

“Yeah, that’s kind of not such a big deal in this school system,” Chloe said. She tried to explain. Genecia didn’t get it, but Delancy patted her arm.

“That sucks,” he said. “Well. Maybe we aren’t celebrating that, then. Maybe we’re celebrating—” He couldn’t think of anything specific to celebrate. “We’re still celebrating.”

Genecia rolled her eyes again, but Chloe laughed.

They made small talk crossing the city to the zoo, Delancy talked about his work at the nursery, Genecia talked about kids Chloe didn’t know, and Chloe talked about her newest foster family, the mother a fake, hyper-religious type that Chloe had learned typically did not bode well for her, although she didn’t say so out loud. Genecia wouldn’t care and Delancy would care too much. Genecia talked about her homework. Chloe talked about the presentation she made to her class on a significant historical event.

Delancy looked proud. “Did anyone else write about the hurricanes?” He slanted a look at her in the rearview mirror.

Chloe was sitting behind him, so she could talk across the seatback to Genecia, although Genecia was too busy on her cellphone to be bothered. “No, I’m the only one,” Chloe said.

“I figured,” Delancy said. “It’s a great topic. I bet your report was excellent. Did you get an A?”

“No, Miss Salinas said I shouldn’t have talked about myself in the report, that it was supposed to just be about the historical event,” Chloe said. “She gave me a C-minus.”

Delancy opened his mouth to protest the injustice. Before he spoke, he thought better of it. He didn't know for sure if Chloe did a good job on the assignment. He thought he knew. The truth is, he couldn't know what kind of job Chloe did because he didn't read or hear the work. He didn't know what her assignment requirements were. He didn't have any right to say anything about it at all, not knowing those things. The only thing he knew for sure is the kid knew what she was talking about, giving facts and statistics and putting information together in an insightful, mature way as she spoke in the car going to the zoo. Even if she was only reciting what she'd read about the historical significance of the event, she did it well, in a way that made the topic interesting. It didn't make sense to Delancy for her to make a C on the project, given her obvious mastery of the topic. But, he admitted to himself, he didn't know if his assessment was right or if the teacher's was. It didn't do Chloe any good for him to shoot down the authorities in her life.

"Sucks," he said, glad to pull into the zoo parking lot.

It was a really good day, the last really good day Chloe had for a while.

Chloe and Malik

Chloe sat on the edge of the hotel chair, the last man gone. She showered him down the drain, scrubbed herself almost raw under the hot spray of the hotel's high-pressure water supply. She was clothed in jeans and t-shirt, slipping on a worn pair of socks with holes in the toes and heels. She put on a pair of cheap high-tops and waited for the knock on the door.

Instead of a knock, Chloe heard the slide of the key card and watched the handle dip. Her heart hammered.

Malik entered the room and sat hard on the ravaged hotel bed. He said nothing, only sat and stared into the television screen Chloe had flipped on while waiting, its volume barely discernible.

They sat, silent, for five minutes or maybe longer before Malik set his elbows on his knees, resting his face in his hands. Rubbing his hands up and down alongside his jaws and temples. He spoke, never turning to look at Chloe. “She isn’t coming back, hear?” His words resigned. Defeated.

“You said she’d be back. A few hours work was all, and she’d be back,” Chloe accused.

“Yeah,” he said. “She isn’t coming back. Ever.”

Chloe looked at Malik, looked him straight on for the first time since he’d entered the room. He looked washed out, sickly. She could think of nothing to say. She stared at the television.

Malik said nothing for another few minutes, then he glanced at the cheap watch strapped to his wrist. He shook his head, as if trying to clear cobwebs. “The same guys. They said they want you instead.”

Chloe could tell it troubled him.

On the television, a scene from one of those storm-chasing movies played, with skies twisting and rain falling down. Malik began to talk, to describe to Chloe what it was like, hurricane Rita, in New Orleans.

The storm itself, Malik said, he could understand: black clouds, thunder and lightning, rain coming down in sheets from a sky so ominous death itself could move undetected—he tried to capture as much of it as possible on the Canon EOS his grandmother gave him for his fourteenth birthday, he said. He ran out of film, he said, but couldn't stop a convulsive finger from pushing the button just for the familiar, comforting whirr. He changed batteries to keep the sound going longer. The sound kept him grounded, after. He still felt comforted by it.

He'd thought it would be easy, when they asked him to take a few pictures now and again of the girls, in their work. He'd thought of soft filters, and romantic lights. He'd learned quickly that wasn't what they had in mind. And now, this.

He spoke again. The aftermath of the storm—skies blue and clear, everything shining and rain-washed sweet—how could a body predict death would walk in broad daylight, in plain sight of God and anybody else who was looking?

But that's the way it was, Malik said. The worst things could happen in broad daylight as easy as in the dark of a storm or at night. The worst things could happen in plain sight of God and anybody else who looked.

Chloe could tell it puzzled him.

Malik continued his tale. In the bold sunshine after the storm, sitting on the bus with his three-year-old nephew Ze'Chon sprawled in his lap, Malik felt the agony of arms and legs go numb. Wedged against the outer wall of the bus, the seat should have been spacious but Malik shared the row with the largest man he'd ever seen in his life—they put the man beside the two slight boys, saying it made the most sense, “ya’ll be safe here by the Cap.” Made no sense. Others, mothers, got a seat for themselves and another for their lap babies. Why didn’t anybody look to see how the fat spilled over, rolled into the aisle and the seat, and crushed little boys against a sun-filled window so hot even brown bodies burned in its light.

The fat man wept and wailed almost the whole way to Houston, Texas, “I never left New Orleans before. Ain’t right to make a man leave his home. I could ha’ stayed back o’ town.” Until he suddenly went silent, only a half hour outside of Houston. Clutched one arm to his left shoulder and went slack in the seat, Malik and Ze'Chon trapped between the hot window and the dead man until EMTs freed them.

Ain’t right a journey they said normally took five or six hours took his whole life. Malik said he longed for home, yearned for his grandmother and his auntie, mourned his mother with every minute he survived past that sunlit, blue-skied day of his fourteenth year, when he fell off the bus onto the asphalt parking lot of the Astrodome, Ze'Chon purple and breathless.

Malik said he never stopped worrying over what could happen to a little kid like Ze'Chon if he didn’t have someone looking after him.

“You got to get out of here,” Malik said. “I’m telling you, you can’t go with them men. This isn’t about earning enough to stay fed. You go with them, you won’t come back either, hear? I mean, ever.”

Chloe was surprised when he told her to go, to walk away and keep on walking and never look back and never tell anyone about the last two weeks. That he’d only meant to help her, not to bring her harm. She walked out the door, and she started walking.

Problem was Chloe had nowhere to go.

Chapter 3: Treasure's Crew

Typical Day

Treasure followed a routine, not that anyone else understood it. Weeks in advance, she created a random work schedule for her four employees, using a cardstock-and-brad spinner to come up with days and times for their arrivals and departures, keeping it hidden and only communicating the particulars to them via cell phone at the last minute. At the appointed times, Treasure met them at the heavy gate, opening it with a battery-operated remote.

Treasure never issued remotes to employees, never allowed the gate left open. Her eccentricity no longer offended her employees, even if they did still occasionally rail against it and ridicule her for it. They'd been with her long enough and Treasure paid them too well for any inconveniences. She gave incentive bonuses and occasionally gave them paid days off in addition to paid vacation and sick days. She encouraged them to take a day off for personal time as needed, without fearing losses in income. And she did something unheard of for such a small business: she paid health insurance premiums for each of her employees and their dependents. When her employees insisted she did too much, Treasure said it was her money and her right to spend the money, selfishly, if she wanted. The thing about Treasure, her employees remarked, selfishness wasn't really her thing.

Celia, TeeJay, Juanito, and Delancy were single parents, and “Miss T,” as they called her, provided unprecedented support during some of the hardest years of their lives: it wasn’t something they could forget, even when irritated by Treasure’s compulsive, potentially paranoid behavior. They joked like family, squabbled like family, but relied on the lack of blood ties to keep things on an even keel. The thing about family was, her employees remarked, family draws blood.

“Miss T, I been waiting out here ten minutes,” Juanito yelled when Treasure finally arrived in her golf cart to open the gate. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Juanito, I got delayed back at the pond,” Treasure called back to him. She was visibly upset. “Looks like beaver might be trying to find ways to migrate from the Simpson place.”

He stood outside the gate, and they talked through the wrought iron.

“That’s not good,” he said, frowning at her. “They sure can be destructive. We’re starting to get a harvest on that new batch of decorative twigs and stuff you planted back there. Beavers get in, and that payoff would be gone in a day.”

“Exactly,” Treasure said. “I was looking over that west boundary, and I’m wondering whether or not they’ll go around us or through us.”

“I hope they go around,” Juanito said.

“Me, too,” Treasure agreed. “Well, come on.” She opened the gate and waited while Juanito drove his old pickup through. She waited while the gate closed

automatically, got out to rattle the gate, before getting back in the golf cart to follow Juanito to a gravel parking area beside several greenhouses and large metal buildings.

Two delivery trucks wrapped with elaborate skins advertising “Bud’s” wholesale floral nursery parked in the lot, one backed up to the loading dock by one of the buildings. A small Japanese car and another pickup also sat in the lot.

Juanito spoke to Treasure as they got out of their vehicles, “You want me to do an internet search, see what we could do to encourage them to go around?”

Treasure hesitated, her aversion to the Web distracting her from the beaver problem. “I suppose,” she said.

Juanito nodded. “I’ll take a look and let you know if I find anything worthwhile. Miss T, I’ve got something on my mind, and I want to talk it through with you,” he said. “I been thinking I’d ask Celia to marry me, but I need to know how that might affect us with you.”

Treasure grinned, “That’s wonderful. I’ve been wondering how long it would take you to get up your nerve. You’ve been eying each other for a while.”

“Well, yeah, but I need to know whether—”

“Whether you’ll both still have a job?” Treasure asked. “You will—assuming you want to stay. You’re both good at what you do, it would be hard to replace either of you. Of course, we’d figure out something, if either of you wanted to move on or stay home to be more available to the boys while everybody is adjusting.”

“No, that’s not exactly what I meant,” Juanito said.

Treasure waited.

“We’re worried about whether you approve or not,” he said. “You don’t exactly seem to support dating and—”

Treasure grimaced. “I’m sorry I gave you that impression. It wasn’t my intent. Juanito, is that why you waited so long? I wasn’t sure you two were even dating.”

“Oh, no,” he said. “You haven’t prevented us from going out together. Truth is, at first, neither of us even noticed the other. We were too—well, you know how it was.”

She nodded.

“Then, being gun-shy, neither of us wanted to move toward anything without knowing who we were dealing with a damn sight better than we had before, if you know what I mean.”

“I get that,” Treasure nodded. “But that was a while ago, and you still both held back. Didn’t you?”

“I guess we did,” Juanito said. “But it wasn’t because of you, at first.” At Treasure’s dismayed expression, he rushed on, “Neither of us wanted to complicate a good friendship, especially not when we both had young kids at home. But the boys are getting older, my boys and Celia’s boy, too, and they think we ought to get serious. Asking us to, I guess, is more like it, they want a house with a mother and a father in it. But still, neither of us wants to jeopardize our jobs here, Miss T, if you have a problem with—”

“I don’t,” Treasure said. “I don’t have a problem with you and Celia, and I’m glad to know I haven’t interfered with things between you.”

“You haven’t,” he said. “But. Celia, she’s got her heart set on a church wedding. Her first wasn’t, you know. But she says you’ll never come out for it. And she doesn’t much want to get married without you there. She has become my best friend, Miss T. But I would never have met her if it hadn’t been for you. I don’t much want to get married without you at the wedding, either.”

Treasure stood, looking back at the earnest expression on Juanito’s face. She sighed. “I’m working on it, Juanito. I’ve been thinking eventually something like this would happen, and I don’t want to miss out. I want to be there for both of you. I want to be there when—” Treasure broke off. “But I don’t want to ruin things for anybody.”

Juanito shook his head, “You never ruin things, Treasure. Don’t ever think that. And, yeah, you get a little paranoid sometimes, a little compulsive, but—” he stopped.

“But what?”

“I guess you’ve got your reasons,” he said, shaking his head slowly. He sighed. “I wish you could get past it all, but me and Delancy were talking about his PTSD and he said—” Juanito stopped again, as if afraid he would offend her.

Treasure looked to the sky, squeezed her eyes closed, listened for the wind and tried to concentrate on breathing: slow, deep belly breathing.

Juanito spoke slowly. “It might have made sense to you, what you were doing. However, if you don’t get help outside these walls, you’ll never get over this. However

bad it was, it's robbed you of your life, and this—this seems more like punishment than protection.”

Juanito paused, waiting to see if Treasure reacted. He shook his head again.

“That man who hurt you—Tom Pense—he's in prison, and from what I heard about his last parole hearing, he's not getting out anytime soon on good behavior. But seems like you're in prison too. And that's not right. Face your fear. Deal with it. Get help. But don't miss out on any more of your life because of someone else's evil. Andrea and Jon shouldn't have lost you over this and you sure don't deserve this kind of hell.”

Treasure couldn't listen. She'd lost Andrea and Jon long before Tom Pense kidnapped her during Rita, although maybe things would have been different if—no point going there. She reached out to press Juanito's shoulder once, hard, a warning, before turning to the loading dock. “Let's have a look at the docket, shall we? I think TeeJay has you loaded and ready to go, once we've checked it over.”

They looked at the docket and discussed particulars of the route and contact information. Juanito did a walk-around inspection of the truck, and he climbed into the cab to start the engine. After starting it, he swung down beside her. He and Treasure inspected the buckets of flowers and decorative woody stems, potted plants, and elaborate herbal topiaries loaded into the truck for delivery.

“Looks good,” he said.

“I’ll have the gate open when you get there,” Treasure said. She got into her golf cart and sped to the gate, only opening it when Juanito drove the truck up several minutes later.

“I’ll see what I can learn about herding beavers,” Juanito hollered to Treasure from the window of the delivery truck.

Treasure lifted her whole hand to him, letting it say yes for her, yes, I hear you, yes, you’re right, yes, thank you for navigating the evil internet to investigate how to repel beavers for me and, by the way, thank you for doing the things I can’t. I notice, I do, and I appreciate it, really, I do. She got his thumb up in return as he drove by, a slight preoccupied smile on his face as he adjusted something in the truck’s cab, shifted gears, and looked toward the open road—his thoughts already gone from the property. She closed the gate, getting out to double-check that nothing impaired its proper closure and locking mechanism. She rattled it to test the catch.

Business as Usual

Treasure walked into the larger of the two metal buildings, entered a small breakroom, and witnessed yet another volley between TeeJay and Delancy. She stood near the coffee machine.

“*Cállate ya*,” TeeJay said. “You need to get outta my face.”

Delancy responded, “Get your face outta my shit then.”

They sat facing one another across a table, a petite Latina woman with brunette hair and a buff Black man with hair so blonde it looked white, both reaching to claim

the same ham and cheese stuffed croissant from the tray Treasure dropped off earlier. Each chose a different croissant without complaint. TeeJay slid the clipboard beside her plate across the table, using it to knock Delancy's plate sideways, almost off the table into his lap. Treasure bit back an exasperated huff.

TeeJay and Delancy bickered. If they worked in the same room, the two kept up a steady stream of trash talk. Treasure tried, at first, to put a stop to it, interpreting it as unfriendly, discovering neither shared her opinion. Both complained at the "unnatural" atmosphere if they had to curb their tongues. Andrea and Jon had both been present during that confrontation, had stood nodding on the sides, agreeing that such banter was not inherently hostile.

TeeJay and Delancy both grew up in rural east Texas. Both shared a history of military service, taking them far from home at a crucial time in their lives. Both chose to return home after encountering certain family obligations, despite personal preferences to live elsewhere and do other things. Neither could find work back home in east Texas doing those other things.

Treasure remained uncomfortable with the dynamics until the day she caught the two in the middle of an actual heart-to-heart without any of the usual friction. She finally understood that, while she herself didn't understand the rules of engagement, the two of them did and they shared some invisible bond that caused each to work better as a result of the other's proximity. Whatever expectations Treasure harbored about

controlling her employees' mouths withered under the reality of the genuine friendship between TeeJay and Delancy.

"So how did the date go?" Delancy asked TeeJay, referring to her teenaged daughter's first date with a city kid new to the area.

"*Escúchame*," TeeJay said. "The guy was so out of his league. Hey, boss, you need something?"

Treasure turned to look at the coffee machine. "Coffee, I think."

Delancy smiled at TeeJay, "Yeah, looks like it. Juanito out the gate?"

Treasure nodded, choosing a mug and pouring a cup of steaming Sumatra Mandheling. She grabbed a dry plate from an open drain rack above the sink and joined the two at the table, helping herself to the last croissant.

"Celia outdid herself with that new design in the cooler," Delancy said. "How does she come up with this stuff?"

Treasure paused, about to take a bite, "Isn't it great? Those mini bouquets have been selling out lately, so she decided to expand the line and came up with the new design. I like working with floral arrangement too, but Celia's sense of proportion and style—it's like she sees things differently than anybody else. I walked by that same plant I don't know how many times, and I'm telling you, I never saw what she saw."

TeeJay said, "I know, right? When she told me to cut them yesterday, I was like, WHY?"

Delancy said, "And then I was like, Unbelievable."

Treasure rolled her eyes, nibbling the edge of her croissant. She tested the texture, chewing and tasting, comparing it without thought to some inner standard.

“Great croissants, Miss T,” TeeJay said. “I don’t know how you can stand to make those things from scratch, though. Sam’s in Lufkin sells ‘em by the box.”

Delancy laughed. “They don’t taste the same. And you can get empanadas from the freezer section at Brookshire’s but I don’t see you telling Miss T to buy those instead of making them from scratch.”

TeeJay lifted both eyebrows, bobbed her head side to side as if weighing the validity of the charge. “True,” she admitted. “But not even my *abuela* makes empanadas as good as Treasure’s.”

Delancy slid the clipboard toward Treasure, saying, “I know, right?”

“What I know is you’re both too old to talk like teenagers,” Treasure said. “You need to get out more, spend time with people your age instead of teens.”

The other two at the table groaned.

“Never gonna happen while our kids are still at home,” TeeJay said. “You remember how it is, Miss T. Home and work, that’s all there is, and if all you got to talk to at home is kids, you either talk like a kid at work or you talk like your mother—and nobody likes to talk like their mother. It’s even worse when your coworkers are all in the same boat.”

“And not to put too fine a point on it, Miss T,” Delancy said, “but you lecturing us on getting out more is the pot calling the kettle black.”

“And on that note,” Treasure picked up the clipboard. “TeeJay’s on the afternoon route. Delancy, I want you to start cutting from the west border today. Cut double what we planned, okay? I was back there this morning, and we have beavers trying to cross in and get at the pond. If they do—”

“I thought I saw signs yesterday, I meant to talk to you about it,” Delancy said. “Not good. Did you hear how bad they were over at the Taylor’s a couple years back?”

TeeJay said, “I did. Those trees were part of their retirement plan and they lost years of income in a single spring.”

Treasure grimaced. “Juanito said he’d look into our options. I thought voles were bad, but beavers—”

“Mice, voles, squirrels, beavers: doesn’t matter,” Delancy said, “A rodent is a rodent.”

TeeJay started to grin, opened her mouth to say something, but Treasure lifted a finger and shook her head in warning. Delancy and TeeJay both laughed.

“So you’re looking to cash in on at least some of that new stuff, in case the beavers get in?” Delancy asked.

“That’s about it,” Treasure said. “I don’t know what else to do, for now. I can propagate from cuttings, but none of those plants will grow as well away from the pond, so there isn’t much point.”

TeeJay and Delancy nodded, uncharacteristically somber. “We were starting to get a lot of requests for those fancy twigs,” TeeJay said.

“Yes we were.” Treasure sighed. “That’s the nature of the business.” She tried to be philosophical about it. TeeJay and Delancy tended toward the pragmatic themselves.

“Sucks,” TeeJay said. “What time is Celia coming in today?”

Treasure looked at the large-faced black and white wall clock, “Any minute,” she said, standing. “I’ll get the gate.” She strode out the door, headed to the golf cart and steered to the gate. Celia drove up a minute later, and Treasure opened the gate for her. She motioned Celia to drive on by, following her to the building where they both parked.

“Morning,” Celia said.

Treasure nodded. She wanted to ask Celia about Juanito, about their relationship, about marriage, but the questions lodged somewhere between her brain and her ability to vocalize. She said, “Hey,” and opened the door of the building to let Celia enter before her.

“Rough night?” Celia asked, sympathetic.

Treasure’s eyes whipped to Celia’s, and both women paused. Treasure moved her mouth into a slight smile, sighed and said, “No more than usual I guess.”

Celia pressed a hand to Treasure’s forearm but said nothing more. The two headed for the breakroom where Celia walked to the table and pointed at the empty tray.

“I figured I’d miss the croissants,” Celia said. “You people are pigs.”

Delancy and TeeJay only laughed, but Treasure stood and walked to the refrigerator, opening it to remove another covered tray. She handed it to Celia. She

started to say *my mother didn't raise a fool* but the words stuck in her throat and she stood rooted in her spot with the refrigerator door open while her employees went on around her as if nothing was wrong.

Weekend Plans

“I’ll be there before bedtime Thursday,” Naomi was saying. “I’ll call when I get to the gate, but I can’t be sure exactly what time that will be. I’ll see you then. Hey! I will call when I get to the gate.” She disconnected the call.

Treasure seethed. The idea of anyone—even Naomi—being at her gate, sitting outside it, without her already being there to oversee the arrival made her uncomfortable. Naomi had known it would, leaving the details of her visit to the last moment of the call, refusing to give her an exact timetable. Naomi knew when she’d arrive; Treasure would have bet she knew.

Treasure sat at the dining table, her notepad in front of her, an open package containing something Naomi called an anxiety workbook sitting next to it. She looked at the pad and package with dread, knowing the time from Monday to Thursday would drag, endlessly irritating and burdensome. At the same time, Treasure thought Naomi would be here too soon, her intensive strategy invasive and annoying and impossible to get away from.

Treasure popped up from the table, as if scalded. She paced to her kitchen, glared at the vintage appliances, and wished mightily for the work of renovation. She eyed the cabinets, considering the effect of ripping everything off the walls and starting

from scratch in the room. That made her think the wall between the kitchen and dining room ought to be removed. And, if she removed a wall between the kitchen and the dining room, she ought to find a way to open the spaces through to the living room. An open concept floor-plan, they called it.

She thought maybe she could get everything demolished before Naomi arrived. She thought maybe if she ripped everything out before Naomi arrived, maybe Naomi wouldn't stay three whole days. She compulsively ran through her test of the generator, thinking she'd done it at the same time only a week before. She thought, angry, she'd do it all again this afternoon, maybe twice or three times before nightfall, anything so as not to be predictable. She thought she ought to make a tart or something. But a cake already sat on the breakroom table, and her crew got miffed if she piled on too many baked goods in too short a time, complaining of the carbs and calories. So she fled out the back door, pointed herself toward the golf cart, sheering north at the last minute to walk vigorously, walk vigorously, walk vigorously the complete circumference of her property, eyeing the fence with a vicious glare, thinking take note, beavers, I will desiccate your livers if you set one foot upon my land.

And the phone at her hip began to vibrate.

Treasure glanced at the caller id, "Sweetie!" she said into the phone. "How are you?"

"Hey. Mother." Jon said.

"Wow, you do not sound chipper," Treasure said. "Is everything okay?"

“I guess,” he said. “I didn’t get the internship I was expecting, T—I’m trying to figure out what I’ll do instead.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” Treasure said. “You must be disappointed. You thought it was a shoo-in.”

“Not so much, it turns out,” Jon admitted. “Yeah, I guess I’m bummed.”

Jon attended Texas A&M University, the same university where his older sister attended medical school after graduating from the University of Texas. The two rarely spent time together, according to Andrea. But Darren and Janice told Treasure a different story, said the siblings maintained a strong bond and hung out together often.

“I can understand,” she said. Treasure knew better than to voice anything but the mildest interest.

“So, um, Mother, what if I spent the summer with you? Any chance my roommate and I could work for you all summer? I kind of said—” Jon’s voice dwindled to a stop.

“Your roommate?” Treasure questioned. “What did you say?” she paused to buy time to think. “Does he have any nursery experience?”

Jon said, “He’s an ag major.” His tone was dismissive.

“I’m sure he is, Jon,” Treasure said, her tone dry. “But does he have any nursery experience?” From Jon’s silence, she knew the answer. She sighed. “Look, of course you can come here for the summer. I would be thrilled for you to be here. But I’ll be honest, I’m just not sure about having a strange man in my—”

“Right, you can’t handle it, got it,” Jon said. “I’ll make other arrangements. Should’ve known—” he disconnected the call.

Treasure let the phone drop from her ear, staring at it, mourning afresh. No matter what she said every time she talked to her kids, the situation went from bad to worse. Anger, guilt, frustration, confusion swamped her, and the familiar panic rose like water to her chest, pressing the air from her lungs.

Chapter 4: Naomi

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Naomi breezed in, probably well aware of the anxiety her arrival caused Treasure but unaware of problems such as a presumptive birth-son and the potential ravages of beavers. Naomi found Treasure waiting at the gate, despite the deliberate gambit of refusing to provide an arrival time.

“You’ve been waiting here all day.” Naomi thought it was a safe assumption.

“No, I haven’t,” Treasure said. “I called Tara to find out when you left.”

“I made four stops on my way here,” Naomi countered, her head out the open driver’s side window.

“Oh?” Treasure pretended she hadn’t noticed. She opened the gate with her remote.

“Treasure, I’d like you to come to the gate,” Naomi said. She’d decided to test Treasure’s resolve. She’d debated the whole drive to get there, whether to start with the new therapy first or to check to see how Treasure was handling things at this point. It had been a while since they’d last tried. And miracles could happen. The miracle Naomi looked for from Treasure was trust, the willingness to keep trying, commitment.

Treasure sat in her golf cart, a spotlight illuminating Naomi.

“And turn off that light. Your golf cart, too, while you’re at it.” Naomi added.

“You probably should bring the remote.”

“Naomi?” Treasure hesitated. She disliked her own cantankerous tone and that made her mad. She huffed but followed Naomi’s directions, trying to focus on her breathing, deep belly breathing. She got to the gate and stood looking at Naomi, clutching her remote in one hand and touching the cell phone at her hip with the other.

“See,” Naomi said, “this isn’t so bad.”

“It is, actually,” Treasure said.

“Walk through the gate to my car and get in,” Naomi said. “Let’s go a few miles down the highway and turn around. We’ll be gone and back in five minutes.”

Treasure stood in the middle of the drive, the open gate feeling like an open sore: the longer it stood open, the more her anxiety rose. As mad as she was, as anxious as she was, a full-blown panic attack wasn’t far away.

“Get over here,” Naomi commanded. “I want you on this side of the gate when it hits. Come sit in the car. You can do this. Just sit in the car with me. I’ll keep watch for you.”

“I’ll vomit,” Treasure said. It sounded like a child’s threat when faced with eating green peas and pearl onions.

“So?” Naomi said. “Sit facing out and don’t put your feet in the car. You can keep the door open and vomit on the ground to your heart’s content.”

“I need to shut the gate,” Treasure’s voice rose toward Naomi.

“I’ll let you shut the gate as soon as you get in my car,” Naomi countered.

Treasure quaked with anger. “I don’t have my panic journal!”

“I know. I brought a fresh one for you,” Naomi said, her tone reasonable and even. “I have everything you need right here in the car. Just come sit with me in the car. The point is to let it happen and prove you can survive it.”

“If I have a heart attack and die doing this, I swear to God I’ve left instructions to sue,” Treasure said.

Naomi smiled but she didn’t laugh, “I know, Treasure, but if I didn’t think you were ready to do this, I wouldn’t be here. Treasure, I need to know you’re committed, this time.” She watched as Treasure seemed to bunch herself into a compressed mound and then bolt like a rabbit through the opening. Twisting to move her head fully back into the car, she could hear Treasure scrambling in panic to open the passenger door, heard her fumbling with the latch. Naomi stretched over and pulled the lever from the inside, pushing the door open enough for Treasure to wedge herself into the gap. “Sit down. Come on, you can do this.”

Treasure huffed like an old freight train, her face red-white like coals firing the engine. She plopped into the seat beside Naomi, her back to the woman, and immediately put her head between her legs. “I can’t breathe like this.”

“You can’t talk if you can’t breathe, and clearly you just spoke to me,” Naomi said. “Go ahead and panic all you want. That’s the point.”

“Swear to God, I will make you pay,” Treasure said. She wasn’t joking.

“I know,” Naomi said. “I’m already paying. You think it’s some big picnic to watch you puke?” She could joke. She watched Treasure shake and begin to retch. “Just

sit still. It'll pass soon; you know it will pass soon. Let it happen." Naomi stopped coaching, knowing nothing else she said would matter at that point. She sat and waited, watching Treasure. She waited for the convulsive movements to calm. She waited. Then, the moment she knew Treasure could hear her once again, she whispered to her, "You are so much stronger than you think."

Treasure wanted to tell Naomi *no I'm not* but she didn't have strength left to talk. She could only sit and cry, bent double over a large and odorous splat of vomit on the ground between her legs. She felt a surge of disgust, looking to see if any splashed up on her legs. Seeing none, she hauled her legs and shifted in the car, "Happy now?" she asked Naomi.

"Yes I am," Naomi responded. "You?"

"You're a sadist," Treasure accused, vicious in her anger.

Naomi said nothing, kept motionless and silent in the driver's seat, waiting to see what Treasure did next, hoping it would be to apologize.

"I'm sorry," Treasure said after six minutes thirty-seven seconds passed, with her doing nothing other than take deep belly breaths. "I'm sorry, Naomi. I know you aren't a sadist. I didn't mean—"

"Yes you did," Naomi said. "Yes. You did. If you're going to lash out, own it. Don't pretend you don't mean to hurt others."

Treasure bobbed her head. "I am sorry."

“You can be sorry all you want, but don’t try to pretend you didn’t mean what you said.” Naomi said. “Words have meaning. Actions have meaning. Doing nothing has meaning. That’s what this is all about, matching actions with words, taking responsibility for both. You have to speak up at the right times. You have to do things at the right times, and quit blaming others when you huddle away and hide yourself, frozen in an agony of fear every blessed day of your life.”

Tough love, they call it. Tough love.

Treasure started again, “You’re right. You are nothing like Jared. I was trying to get you to stop. I can’t take this. I can’t. I—can’t.”

“You are stronger than you think,” Naomi repeated the mantra. “You are so much stronger than you think. Marie’s death doesn’t mean the end of your ability to cope, Treasure. Your life can and should go on, even though hers ended. You sitting here feeling guilty, blaming yourself for burdening her too much with your baggage has gotten you nowhere good, you hear me.”

Treasure shook her head, slow, “It didn’t do her any good, the way I kept turning to her when things got bad. I didn’t know what it was doing to her heart.”

“That’s my point, Treasure, and you have to think about it: does Cameron blame you? No, what he says about Marie’s death is that he was blessed to spend those years with the kindest, most generous, most committed woman in the world. That marrying her and spending his time with her, and seeing how she supported you were the best things he did in his lifetime. He said she was the strongest woman he ever knew, other

than you—see, Treasure, even Cameron says you are so much stronger than you think. And look at you, yes, you still have these panic attacks, but there's new hope, and you just proved to me you're committed too. Pinch yourself: are you dead? I don't think so. You survived the pressure I just put on you, and nothing more awful than losing your supper on the driveway happened to you. Panic attacks trick you, make you feel like you're dying, like you're about to be murdered, but it isn't real. Look around. Do you see any danger here? Are we in any danger that you can rationally identify. Look around," Naomi insisted until Treasure raised her head to look. "Do you see any danger?"

Treasure shook her head. "No," she whispered.

"Is anyone here with us, holding us against our will?" Naomi asked.

"No."

"Are you tied into this car?"

"No."

"No you aren't," Naomi agreed. "And the car doors aren't even closed. Look at that. You can get out any time you want. You can leave this car if you want. Can't you?"

"Yes," Treasure acknowledged.

"Do you want to leave the car?"

"Yes," Treasure said. But she spoiled the bravado by laughing.

Naomi smiled and let herself laugh with Treasure. “Fill out the panic log on the dash there. Here, use this.” Naomi handed Treasure a pen.

Treasure took the pen and scribbled her way through the page, noting when, where, and how she managed herself during her panic.

“You did it. You survived a panic attack outside your safe zone.” Naomi said, “Good work. Ready to drive?”

Treasure rolled her eyes and groaned.

“Oh, wait,” Naomi said, “Turn around and get one of those barf bags off the back seat. I don’t want you stinking up my floorboard.”

“I hate you,” Treasure said, doing as Naomi told her. She grabbed a couple of the bags, twisted back into her seat, and asked, “Where do you even get these?”

“At the getting place,” Naomi smirked. “Fasten your seatbelt.” She put the car in reverse and backed to the turn-around. “Ready?” She didn’t wait for Treasure to finish buckling up, she didn’t wait while Treasure frantically pushed the remote to close the gate, she didn’t wait while Treasure grumbled a “no, no, I’m not ready.” She simply headed out, driving the distance to the highway. She heard Treasure drop the remote to fumble with the seatbelt until it clicked. She heard Treasure begin toretch. “Use that bag,” she ordered. At the highway, Naomi waited until the road was clear before pulling carefully onto U.S. Highway 69, wide and heavily traveled. She only went a mile north, toward Rusk, before turning back.

Treasure still heaved.

When she reached Treasure's drive, Naomi looped north again, turned back at the same point to drive the one-mile stretch, until four of the five minutes she'd told Treasure had passed. She pulled into Treasure's road, rolled up to the gate, and stopped.

She heard Treasure calm and breathe more easily. "Log it," she said quietly, waiting until Treasure finished scratching at the journal. "Ready to eat cake?"

"God, no," Treasure said, disgusted.

Naomi waved her hands at the gate, a wordless request for Treasure to find the remote in the floorboard, aim it at the gate until it opened. Naomi rolled the car slowly through the gate and said, "Grief takes time, Treasure, but you are so much stronger than you think." She reached across, pried the remote from Treasure's grasping fingers, aimed it back at the gate and clicked the gate closed.

"Let's try that eye movement desensitizing thing you told me about," Treasure said.

Long Night

It started as a sex dream, Treasure and Natalie together, Treasure aroused. Natalie stroked her gently, kissed her gently, held her gently, but the dreamscape abruptly changed. No longer aroused, Treasure stood in a warm rain, crying, so sad and heart-broken she thought, maybe, her tears made the rain. In the next instant, she was lying on the ground looking at a star-filled night sky, the warm sensation of rain replaced with the metallic salt taste of blood. She lay in a pool of warm liquid and she knew the wet

warmth was blood and she struggled trying to get up trying to get away trying to rouse herself and escape praying it was a dream only a dream.

Treasure awoke, sweat-soaked, her sheets beyond merely damp. Her heart thumping and her breathing shallow and rapid, she struggled harder and, struggling, fell from her bed. Sticky wet and thrashing like a fish on dry land, Treasure couldn't tell that the wet sheet around her was not a binding and she beat herself against it, crashing against the bed frame, rising to her knees to get away, surging against the dresser, falling back into the solid wooden rail of the bed.

She might have gone on damaging herself had the light not flicked on.

Naomi stood framed in the doorway, "Treasure? Uh, you done there?" Treasure stopped thrashing and blinked at the talking apparition. Naomi spoke again and Treasure's head cocked like a dog's upon hearing a distant round of howls. "Hey—you awake?"

"Naomi?" Treasure spoke, tentative. She didn't trust her own senses in the moment.

"Looks like you started your period," Naomi remarked.

Treasure looked around herself, realized she knelt on the floor beside her bed, wrapped in the sheet. As she became more alert, she noticed the sticky sensation and put it together with Naomi's observation. She put a hand out to support herself against the bedrail, loosening the sheet, and coming to her feet. She looked at the bloody

bottom sheet, beginning to comprehend. “I haven’t had one in—like, six months,” she said.

They stood, Treasure by the bed, Naomi by the door. Neither said anything for several minutes while Treasure got her bearings.

“That was unpleasant,” Treasure said.

“Looked like it.” Naomi often communicated in laconic, blunt fashion.

Her plain way of speaking comforted Treasure, had from the beginning.

Treasure trusted Naomi’s counsel.

“Meet you in the kitchen after you get this mess cleaned up?” Naomi asked.

Treasure stripped the linens from the bed, looked up to nod and say, “I’m taking a shower first” to Naomi’s back as she left the room. Treasure took stock of the mess, feeling the stickiness of her inner thighs. She dropped the bundle of linens to the floor beside her bed, wanting compulsively to get into the bathroom and clean herself before doing anything else.

Treasure flipped the light on as she entered the master bath, a tub-shower combination enclosed by a glass surround at her right side, the commode in a small compartment on the same side at the far end of the room opposite a matching compartment containing a closet. On her left side in a mirror above the long vanity, Treasure surveyed the wreckage. She looked like the victim of a grisly attack, except for the lack of physical damage apparent in the reflection. Once she reconciled that the

blood staining her pajamas was not from an injury, she stripped and dropped her nightclothes in a stoppered sink of water before running a shower in the bath enclosure.

After her shower, Treasure found a sanitary pad in the closet, attaching it to the crotch of a fresh pair of underwear. She dressed in jeans and a light t-shirt, stuffing her feet in cozy shearling slippers, last year's Christmas gift from Andrea and Jon. She gathered up the bundled sheets, noting the stained floor underneath, and headed for the laundry to get the load started in her high-efficiency front-loading washer. A few minutes cleaning the floor and Treasure stepped into the kitchen to find Naomi sitting at the bar, a cup of fragrant, steaming coffee in hand.

"I couldn't resist," Naomi said. "I had to know what a Kenyan Guama Peaberry was."

"Expensive." Treasure smiled at her, "What time is it?" She reached automatically for her cell phone.

"Early," Naomi said. "Earlier than I wanted to get up, that's for sure."

Treasure glanced at the time on the screen. "It's nearly five o'clock. It isn't that early."

Naomi groaned. "Says you. Four thirty is not nearly five. And *decent* people are still in their beds at this hour."

"That explains why you're up," Treasure quipped, "but why am I?"

“Now that *is* a good question,” Naomi said. “Why did you scream me out of a perfectly good bed, even if it wasn’t my own? You scared the crap out of me.” She paused, “Panic attack?”

Treasure poured herself a cup of coffee before answering, “Nightmare, I think. I think—someone was trying to kill me and I was fighting.”

Naomi thought for a moment, “That’s interesting. You didn’t have a panic attack? You don’t need to log anything?”

“I don’t think so,” Treasure said, facing Naomi across the bar top. “I wanted to get away, and I was scared. But I don’t remember a panic attack and I didn’t clean up vomit, just blood spatters. Did I look like I was having a panic attack?”

“I couldn’t tell, it was dark,” Naomi said. “What do I know what you’re doing flopping around on the floor in a private bedroom? Could have been personal, except the screaming sounded kind of public.”

Treasure laughed when Naomi added, “You’re the worst hostess ever.” She grinned, “I am, aren’t I? I’m out of practice.”

“I’ll say.” Naomi sipped from the heavy pottery mug. “Best cup of Kenyan pee I’ve ever tasted.”

“You are the most obnoxious person I know except for Darren,” Treasure said. She sipped the hot coffee, sucking air along with it, careful not to burn her tongue. “I was saving this, by the way. That’s why it was in the back of my refrigerator in an

unopened package next to three labeled canisters of coffee—any one of which would have been easier to get into.”

Naomi ignored everything except the “saving it” part, “Saving it for what?”

“A special occasion,” Treasure said.

“Honey, it doesn’t get more special than being awakened at three-something in the morning by a screaming bloody idiot.”

Treasure started to laugh, stopped, gave in to it. She took a seat at the stool next to Naomi. “It must have looked pretty bad.”

“Clearly, you have no idea.”

Treasure appreciated Naomi’s droll humor. They sat, sipping coffee in companionable silence. Then Treasure said, “No I didn’t have a panic attack. I don’t have to fill in your stinking logbook.”

“Okay then, tell me about your attacker,” she said. “Jared? Or Thomas Pense?”

Treasure raised her eyebrows, shaking her head at Naomi. “You don’t quit.”

“It is why I’m here,” Naomi pointed out. “And it’s not surprising. It’s kind of the point of all this, isn’t it?”

“Okay. But no, I don’t think—I don’t know who attacked me in the dream,” Treasure said. “I was standing in a rain storm, then all the sudden I’m lying in a field of blood.” She shrugged. “I felt like I was in danger, like someone was attacking me—whipping me, I think—but I didn’t have a sense of—” she shrugged again, “specifics. Weird, right?”

Naomi tilted her head to the left, then tilted it to the right as if weighing something in a balance. “Maybe that’s progress. Maybe not. Dreams—who knows?” She shrugged before switching gears, “Want to eat anything before you take me driving?”

“Oh, my God,” Treasure said. “I do not want to go for a drive right now.”

Naomi made a rude sound, dismissing Treasure’s statement, “It’s why I’m here.”

Treasure stuck her elbow on the table, leaned her head into her hand, and said, “Oh, geez, dry heave or full-blown bacon-and-egg up-chuck. What sounds good to you?”

“Thanks, I’m not hungry,” Naomi said. “You country people and your odd hours. I never eat before ten. Get your driving gear on, then.”

Treasure didn’t move.

“Do you have a to-go cup for this coffee?” Naomi asked. “It is pretty good. I don’t want to leave the pot to ruin.”

Treasure stood, shambled to a cabinet, and pulled out a stainless steel, double-walled, lidded drink cup. “This do?”

“You have two? You’ll probably need one, too, as long as I plan to keep you out today.”

“I really, really hate you,” Treasure said. Her tone sounded admiring.

Naomi took two cups and filled them both. “Seriously. Get your license and money and all that jazz—you’re buying when I finally do get to eat. Are you wearing those shoes?”

Treasure looked down at her slippers.

“Don’t forget your journal.”

“I *hate* you.” It sounded more believable that time.

Even Longer Day

“What’s the plan for your crew today?” Naomi asked at the gate.

Treasure clicked the remote. “I gave them the day off,” she said.

“That’s convenient. I don’t have to feel bad about them being locked out.”

“Nope,” Treasure agreed. She felt odd, sitting in her car at the gate. She hadn’t been in the vehicle for a while, hadn’t driven it as far as the gate in several years. She used to drive it from her garage to the parking lot to let TeeJay or Juanito take it out for a regular test drive. These days, she left the keys on a hidden hook in the garage, let them come and go with it as needed, although sometimes she obsessed over whether it would run for her if she needed to escape in an emergency.

Naomi told her that qualified as an improvement.

Treasure pulled through the gate, turning back in her seat to be sure the back bumper was all the way through before she clicked her remote. She waited until the gate closed, put the car in park, got out to check that the gate was firmly latched with no

malfunction. “Don’t you want to drive?” she asked, getting back in the car. She wanted Naomi to take the wheel again, feared she would wreck the car in a panic.

“I’m good,” Naomi held both hands up and shook her head no. She looked relaxed and comfortable in the dome light before Treasure closed the door.

“Why don’t we wait until it gets light,” Treasure suggested.

“Why don’t we go now, while the traffic is still light on the highway,” Naomi countered. “It’s barely five o’clock. Things won’t get moving too much for at least another hour or two. Maybe longer.”

Treasure took a deep breath. She eased the lever into gear and pulled away from the gate slowly. She crept down the drive, the speed barely registering.

“Push the freakin’ accelerator,” Naomi said. Her voice sounded patient and calm despite the measure of her actual words. “Remember the rule: people generally don’t perpetrate evil in front of witnesses. We’re safe. It’s the two of us in a locked car.” She knew it was just the two of them because Treasure insisted on searching the vehicle before she’d get in, including the trunk. “Go north. Don’t stop until you find me a doughnut shop in Tyler.”

“I’m not eating doughnuts for breakfast,” Treasure said. “You can just forget that idea. If I have to buy it, I’d rather have an omelet. Or quiche. Lorraine maybe.”

Treasure was on the highway headed north in the darkness before she realized Naomi’s tactic. Her eyebrows raised and she stuttered on the gas pedal but then felt like a hypocrite. She eased her foot back onto the pedal, accelerated in an even, continuous

press, admitting only to herself how good it felt to be in the driver's seat on an open road. She felt good all the way to Rusk, when the sight of the small town's lights made her chest hurt.

It came on fast, but not so fast she couldn't pull off the road. She had a sense of dire consequence, of danger and potential destruction before slamming the car into park, popping the door open and vomiting on the pavement. When her head came back up, Naomi stuck the journal and a pen in her hands and made her jot down the particulars, the way she felt when surrounded by other vehicles—as if someone coordinated them, trapping her. Treasure looked around, noted the relatively reasonable position of the parked vehicle in an empty lot at the far edge of town with wonder. She put the car into gear, pulled out of the lot, and put the pedal down.

Jacksonville passed outside Treasure's windows to little more reaction than a slight hitch in her breathing. The light of dawn seemed more rose-golden, more beautiful than usual. Tyler appeared in her windshield before she knew it was coming.

"Just in time," Naomi said. "I think you're trying to starve me to death."

Naomi babbled happily beside Treasure, a comforting distraction that Treasure allowed. So much had changed, the outskirts of Tyler shifted miles to the south since she had last visited. They were beside a large shopping center Treasure could not remember having seen before.

"Turn in here and let's see what stores they have," Naomi suggested.

Nothing appeared to be open, so Treasure turned into the next entry, doubling back to the outermost edge of the development. In the early morning hours, the place was deserted. She drove along slowly while Naomi read the names of the shops aloud: Bed Bath & Beyond, Cost Plus World Market, Kirkland's, Oscar Nails, Guitar Center, Jo-Ann, Petco. The Hampton Inn & Suites occupied an entire block, and to the back of the acreage sat more stores. Treasure tooted along and Naomi continued to narrate.

They passed a trendy "juice bar," and both women laughed at the pretentious accent and upside down letter. "Let's skip that one," Naomi requested. "Although, maybe that's what you need next: a juice cleanse." When Naomi first met her, Treasure had been slender, something Naomi identified as typical in cases of domestic abuse. When Treasure developed the tendency to vomit during panic attacks, slenderness became another issue for Naomi. One of Naomi's goals was to convince Treasure to have a physical, to check for complications from the vomiting. Treasure's phobia had prevented her from routine medical care, another problem Naomi brought up to no avail. Treasure was years overdue for a physical. Her last visit had been with an internist there in Tyler, nothing adverse apparent at her last appointment regarding the vomiting. Her physician chalked it up to the anxiety issue and told Treasure to get treatment for it, offered the option of a handful of prescriptions, which Treasure refused. The doctor had told her that vomiting too much would cause serious problems eventually. Naomi informed Treasure several times that now probably qualified as "eventually."

They wandered up and down through the empty parking lot and streets, exiting back onto Highway 69 when they came to the last shop on the opposite side of the center.

“I can’t do this stuff for you, Treasure,” Naomi barked. “You need to make an appointment with a doctor to get checked out.”

Treasure promised she’d do it.

“Today, Treasure. I mean call and make an appointment today,” Naomi insisted.

“Fine,” Treasure yelled at her. “Today. I can walk in to the office. It’s here, and you can watch me actually schedule the appointment.”

“Agreed,” Naomi said, satisfied.

Treasure managed breakfast at a place called The Diner without incident, but afterwards, as the town began to awaken and more diners crowded the place, her anxiety rose. She excused herself to vomit in the bathroom, but once inside, she simply sat in the stall, breathing in and out. Someone asked if she needed help. She said, thanks, no, and forced herself out of the enclosure, washed her hands, and returned to the table. When Naomi pushed the logbook toward her, she pushed it back, shaking her head. “Nope. Not this time.”

Naomi’s eyebrows raised. “That’s progress. Let’s go to Walmart.”

The women paid out and left the restaurant, Treasure following Naomi’s GPS directions to the nearest Walmart, open twenty-four hours daily. “Look, we can walk around here until other places open,” Naomi said.

They wandered, and Treasure said, shortly, “I’ve seen everything I want to see right here in one place. We can go home now, right?”

Naomi laughed, pretending she thought Treasure joked.

The store was by no means crowded, but more people entered as the morning progressed.

After another hour, Naomi offered to google the doctor Treasure had last used. The woman re-located to an office in a large medical center adjacent to a hospital, and her office opened in approximately thirty minutes. Naomi suggested they meander that direction.

Treasure accepted, eager to leave the large store. She regretted the impulse immediately, seeing lanes filled with traffic. Inside her car, she grabbed a barf bag and got busy losing breakfast. After she finished, she heaved a sigh, took up the log and entered her latest experience. She turned to Naomi, “Please. Can we just—”

“It’s called an intensive for a reason, Treasure.” Naomi sympathized. Her job didn’t allow sympathy to interfere with long-overdue progress. “What do you want to do first, after I’m gone?” Her strategy to redirect Treasure’s attention worked, again.

“There’s no point in going to Bryan-College Station,” Treasure said, her voice quiet. “I was thinking I’d go to Jasper. Or try. I think.”

Naomi sat beside Treasure, nodding. “What did you have in mind?”

“Darren and Janice. If I can’t get their support—there’s no point.” Treasure met Naomi’s eyes.

“I think you’re right. You need to show them you’re on the right track, that you’re willing to put in the work this time.”

Treasure growled, furious. “I was willing last time. I just—couldn’t.”

Naomi smiled at Treasure. “So show them. Tell them about the EMDR when you get there. Rationally—rational people understand. Knowing you have different tools available this time—tools you didn’t have access to then, that ought to make some difference, right?”

Treasure looked at the street. “I’ll go next weekend,” she said in a flat voice, “if we get through this one.” She started the car and followed Naomi’s directions, somber. At the doctor’s office, Naomi decided she would wait in the car.

Treasure stood at the receptionist’s desk, asking to schedule an appointment, sometime in the next three months, no hurry. Unfortunately, the internist walked up behind the receptionist, saw her, and immediately greeted her, “Ms. Montgomery, how are you? Is everything okay?” She addressed the receptionist, “Let’s get Ms. Montgomery into my office until room one opens up, okay?”

“Yes, doctor,” said the receptionist. She looked at Treasure, a slight wrinkle forming between her brows.

Just my luck, Treasure thought. She followed the woman, sat in the chair indicated, and wondered exactly what she would say. It had been nearly five years. The woman should not remember her. Treasure wished Dr. Stinson did not remember her.

Dr. Stinson paused to shake Treasure's hand, then pulled a chair near to talk to her without a desk between them. "Ms. Montgomery, how are you? I've wondered about you, since you canceled your last visit. I hoped—" She smiled at Treasure. "What can I do for you today?"

Treasure focused on breathing, in, out, in, out. She said, "I'm back in counseling. My counselor is actually waiting in the car. I just thought I'd set up an appointment, for a checkup."

"How is it going?" The woman expressed genuine interest.

"Better than I hoped. It's been a while," Treasure hesitated. "It's been a long time since I could—anxiety got the better of me, I guess."

"Have you been vomiting a lot?"

"It was better, at first, when I stopped trying to leave my property," Treasure said. "Then, over time, well. It's worse now. It doesn't seem to matter that I'm locked up, safe. The panic attacks just—I don't know. I'm trying a new technique, supposed to be good for people with PTSD. Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, EMDR, they call it."

Dr. Stinson nodded, as if she recognized the treatment.

What was it about the woman? Treasure wondered, frustrated at her willingness to reveal details. Treasure remembered that Dr. Stinson had listened, open-minded and supportive, from Treasure's early visits. Treasure didn't see her face, when she looked

at the scars, but she remembered the kindness in her voice. Her kindness, not pity, was what Treasure remembered about the doctor.

“That sounds promising,” Dr. Stinson said. “I read something about it not long ago. It’s supposed to be comparable to talk therapy, at least, right?”

Treasure said, “For some, maybe better, depending on the circumstances.”

“I’m glad you were willing to try it. Will you let me examine you today?”

“That’s not necessary. I’m sure you already have a full schedule.”

“Ms. Montgomery, I know how difficult this is for you, and I assure you, I can make time for you today. Let’s get this done while you’re here. It really won’t take long.” The woman smiled, reassuring Treasure with her measured, quiet pitch. “I’d feel better if you let me take a look, to see how things are going with you, physically.”

“Fine,” Treasure said. “I need to walk outside, to let Dr. Barlowe know what’s going on.”

“I can send someone out to the car to tell her,” Dr. Stinson said.

Treasure flushed. She doesn’t think I’ll come back. “She has her cell phone. I’ll call her. Don’t bother anyone else, please.”

The receptionist rapped on the doorjamb. “Doctor, room one is open.”

“Excellent. Ms. Montgomery, let’s move to room one then.”

A beefy man stood in the hallway, arguing with a clerk about his copayment.

Treasure felt saliva fill her mouth. “Restroom, please?” She barely made it into the room Dr. Stinson pointed her toward before Treasure began heaving. She vomited

into the toilet. When she finished, she flushed, rinsing her mouth at the sink. She called Naomi, asking if she would keep her company during the office visit and tests the doctor would surely order.

“Do you want me in there?” Naomi asked.

“Please,” Treasure said. “I’ll be in room one.”

By the time Treasure emerged from the bathroom, the receptionist waited to ask if she wanted her friend to join her. “Please.” Naomi held the log and grinned, “Thought you’d get away without it, did you?”

Treasure nodded, introducing Dr. Naomi Barlowe, psychologist, to Dr. Maggie Stinson, internist. Naomi retrieved a business card from her purse, passing it to the woman, and Treasure jotted notes in the log about her latest bout with panic.

“I’m very glad to meet you, Dr. Barlowe,” Dr. Stinson said.

“I’m sure this is probably unusual, but thank you for seeing Treasure,” Naomi said. “She told me how supportive you were of her. It’s appreciated.”

The receptionist brought in a stack of forms, including a release allowing Naomi’s presence in the room with Treasure. She pulled one sheet from the stack saying “This is FERPA, the privacy act. We’ll need your signature, Ms. Montgomery.”

Treasure signed the forms and Dr. Stinson asked if Treasure had any specific concerns. Treasure responded, “Can you tell if I’m going into menopause or anything like that?”

Dr. Stinson nodded and asked Treasure questions, beginning her examination. “If you are into perimenopause, Ms. Montgomery, that could cause you some complications. Shifts in hormones can be quite—disorienting—and, given your history—”

Noami said, “Oh, my. Yes. I hadn’t thought of that. That may be part of what’s going on, Treasure, elevated hormone levels can spike your sexual arousals.” She looked at Dr. Stinson. “That could become—quite disorienting.”

Treasure said, “Spikes? I thought menopause made all your hormones go away. I thought everybody’s always complaining they don’t have any interest in sex anymore.”

“That can happen, not always, but it can. But in perimenopause, hormones can create—well. Um. Extreme bouts of sexual arousal. I have heard of women being literally ill, shaking and obsessed with sex—symptoms like addiction.” Dr. Stinson stopped abruptly.

Noami said, “Treasure, I’ll want to know what these tests reveal.” She was firm. “But this may be an ongoing issue for some time. It certainly may explain some of what I saw this morning. Thank you, Doctor, for the heads up.”

Treasure squenched her eyes shut and groaned.

“I’m not saying this is a common issue,” Dr. Stinson said. “I just want you to be prepared—with your history, this is a potential problem, especially given your

inability—your refusal—um, your celibacy. Ms. Montgomery, I don't want you to be caught off guard. I don't want something like that to jeopardize your progress."

By late afternoon when they sat at the gate programming four additional remote controls, Treasure was hoarse from vomiting and trying to convince people they had the wrong idea. Half the people they encountered over the course of the day were convinced Treasure Montgomery was a valiant and heroic woman. Her arms and knees colored with bruising from her fall from bed that morning, they thought cancer or chemotherapy responsible. They encouraged her, wasn't it miraculous she still could even *have* a period, and they urged her, earnest in their good wishes, keep up the fight. Treasure was infuriated and frustrated, but Naomi laughed and suggested she accept the positive wishes. "You do have a fight ahead of you. They would probably still wish you well if they knew the real story."

Treasure didn't think so. Not if they knew the whole story. In her experience, most people who knew the whole story were disgusted and infuriated and blamed her for her weaknesses. But she held the remotes, thankful at least that the day's ordeal was at its end. She glared at Naomi, wondering how the woman had talked her into buying remotes for TeeJay, Celia, Juanito, and Delancy.

Naomi said, just because Treasure had the remotes did not mean she had to send them home with her four "reliable, trustworthy, consistent, steadfast, loyal, supportive, dependable, *faithful* employees."

"I hate you so much," Treasure said. She said it with conviction.

*

To spite Naomi, Treasure put the remotes into a box and put the box on a shelf in the back of a large closet: for later, she promised. Treasure meditated on the problem of her reemergence: how to communicate with Darren and Janice that she had left self-imposed isolation. She decided to let her cousin Tad run interference. She called him after work Tuesday to ask his opinion. Treasure talked on the phone with Tad and Chiclets for an hour, working out the details of their plan.

On Friday, she left work early, her car loaded with the makings for a feast—an offering of sorts—planning to meet them at their family business, before the three of them drove to see Darren and Janice.

Treasure arrived quicker than she was ready, but she handled the situation better than expected. She greeted her cousin and Chiclets, met new employees, too, and said hello to several acquaintances she'd met years before when she'd worked briefly for the company. Treasure thought Chiclets seemed pleased by her performance.

Chiclets said she still had a few more things to do, and she waved Tad and Treasure off. "I'm sure Treasure hasn't seen compost piles this big in a while," she joked. "It is so good to see you here, Treasure."

Chiclets and Tad visited her home only a month earlier, but Treasure understood. They hadn't seen her anywhere but her home in too long, from their perspective.

Tad held out his arm to Treasure, "Shall we?"

“Lets,” Treasure said, avoiding the contact.

Tad and Chiclets shared a private smile before Tad and Treasure headed outside. They wandered the place with long, leisurely paces, Treasure almost giddy, light-heartedness vying with anxiety over Janice and Darren’s reception of her progress. Despite the length of time since her last visit, little had changed at their business. She found herself smiling, pleased at its familiarity, pleased to walk free in the afternoon air with her cousin, on his turf instead of hers. Treasure smiled at Tad. Tad smiled back, and the two stood chatting, thinking back to the same point—a shared memory of a distant bitter, sweet afternoon together.

Chapter 5: Tad, Darren, and Janice

Fertilizing the Orchard

Treasure's cousin Tad caught her with her pants down, literally.

It was the second in a short string of beautifully sunny days, perfect autumn days unusually low in the characteristic east Texas humidity. Treasure was outside soaking up the sunshine. Someone—she couldn't remember who—told her she needed more of it, that sunshine was vital to good health, and as soon as the sun rose that morning, Treasure scooped up a pair of ancient ragged shorts, a sleeveless tank top, white crew socks, low hiking boots, and a scruffy looking hat. She dressed without consulting her fashion sense, ignoring deep misgivings about wearing the old clothes her sister-in-law Janice had dragged out from a box in the hall closet, saying, "Here, you look like you could actually still wear these. I saved them for you, hoping you'd come back—" Treasure had recognized a favorite outfit she'd last worn on weekend jaunts with newlyweds Darren and Janice in the 80s, before her marriage, before Jared.

She listened to a news report on the radio as she dressed, the rural regional newscaster confirming expected temperatures for the day to be in the high 80s, and Treasure hit the door with a lovely pair of goatskin work gloves—a present from her cousin Tad—stuffed in her back pocket.

When Tad meandered up to her, in an area she called “the orchard” in a fit of creative visualization, Treasure was squatted over a five-gallon-bucket clutching at her shorts with one hand and her shirttail with the other to keep urine from splashing them.

Tad had a prime—if unexpected—view of the exposed bottom of his younger cousin. He was close enough to see flesh that should have been smooth crisscrossed with a hash of raised welts, silvered, purpled, reddened, some running down her bare legs. Tad knew Treasure had not expected to see him that day. He should have called, warning her he was coming over. Tad, being a polite man, backed away as silently as he approached. He waited to ask his question until Treasure had delicately patted her nethers dry with a loose scrunch of toilet paper, disposed of the paper in a zip-able plastic baggie, and had her shorts back on and suitably fastened.

He cleared his throat, noisily pretending to be coming up on her for the first time. “What the hell are you doing, Treasure Montgomery?” Tad asked.

Treasure dropped the baggie of paper, stumbled sideways, and almost kicked the full bucket of liquid over. “Tad! Don’t you ever sneak up on me again.”

Tad closed the distance, approaching to stand a mere five feet from the baby of the family—a thirty-eight year old woman her own brother Darren thought had, maybe, lost her mind: in a family renowned for long-lived relationships, Treasure only recently showed up in east Texas accompanying their cousin Marie, without either her wedding ring or her two children. Tad had always favored Treasure, but after seventeen years of limited sightings, nobody knew what to think. He pretended he didn’t see her trembling.

He, melodramatically, pointedly, looked at the bucket. Nothing but the bucket. “What’s in the bucket?” he asked.

His wife Chiclets would have berated him for his overacting.

Treasure, however, looked at the bucket, looked at her cousin Tad, looked embarrassed.

She was urinating into a bucket of water since water-diluted urine is among the cheapest high-nitrogen fertilizers available. Treasure had determined that, in order to get this property growing and green again after its devastation by over-logging, strategic doses of high nitrogen fertilizer would be required in addition to new seeds and plants. Treasure began peeing in buckets the day she moved onto the property, determined to contribute every resource she had to the success of the project, given the generosity of the collective owners who were allowing her to stay rent-free in an old wreck of a house on the property in exchange for her labor. Given her complete lack of financial resources, she figured she owed them her every effort.

“Is that a bucket of piss?” Tad asked.

Treasure stopped shaking and sulked up, stubbornly refusing to address the question. She sauntered a few feet farther away, picked up a bucket lid gerrymandered with a short, stiff pipe that ended in a fair proximity of a watering rose. She picked the contraption up, popped the lid onto the bucket, and hoisted the bucket off the ground, clumsily tipping it and letting its contents spill. Treasure explained, again, for the one-hundredth time. For the one-thousandth. “Compost. Remember?”

“I repeat: what,” Tad stared at the woman, stunned, “the hell.”

“Do you have any idea how much organic fertilizer costs?” Treasure asked Tad.

Treasure was a healthy woman who drank a whole lot of water. More recently, she’d added a significant quantity of alcohol—she’d rather not think of that—but, otherwise, she took no prescription medications. She ingested few over-the-counter ones, either. She crossed two fingers before thinking she didn’t use drugs.

Why wouldn’t they avail themselves of an organic, quality source of nitrogen when they could supply it freely for themselves? It wasn’t as if vegetables grew on the denuded property.

For the moment, Treasure wanted simply to improve the depleted soil, to pour liquid organic fertilizer onto the soil. She wanted to be part of the effort to repopulate the healthy ecology of the place. She wanted to fertilize the emerging seedlings the new owners and she had sown—in September, October and early November—seeds of clover, rye, wheat, barley, winter peas, mixed herbs, and a variety of other species to form what, it was hoped, would become living mulch to protect the soil and, eventually, high quality browse for wildlife.

The owners, a group dominated by men who expected to hunt doves and deer, and rabbits and turkeys on the property again in the coming future, sincerely desired browse for wildlife.

“We can buy fifty-pound bags of fertilizer at the feed store,” Tad said. He and Darren, Treasure’s older brother, were among those who had purchased the property after the previous owner’s death, when his absentee children put it up for sale, stripping it first of every natural resource. “Fertilizer isn’t expensive.”

“Organic is.” Treasure had explained her plans to Tad numerous times already. She had. She explained herself again. Everything costs. The less spent on things readily available, the better off they’d be in the long run. No point in throwing money at problems that could be solved without it.

Tad shook himself and moved to take the bucket from Treasure.

Treasure resisted.

“Give me the damn bucket, Treasure.” Tad persisted in wresting it from her.

Treasure stood glaring at Tad, breathless and heaving.

“You did not tell me your desire to compost included human urine.” Tad insisted. “Is this full strength urine? No, it’s too clear.”

Treasure glared. “It’s diluted. You can’t water with straight urine. It’ll kill anything growing if you do.” She told him. She told him she wanted to compost. She had told him she didn’t want to waste a single available resource.

Hadn’t she?

“I’ll be damned if Chiclets is going to believe this,” Tad said, wondering how to tell his wife about Treasure’s latest feat. He rubbed his ear and determined he probably should not mention anything to Darren, compost-related or otherwise.

Treasure interpreted Tad's succinct comment as doubt regarding the competence of Treasure's composting plan, now that he fully understood it included transporting five-gallon-buckets filled with human waste around the entire property, to fertilize the ground "organically."

Tad held the bucket, easy, looking around for an indication there was some method to his cousin's madness. Subtle arrangements of debris came plain to him of a sudden, and he saw the grid-like pattern Treasure had arranged. He laughed, raising the bucket and beginning to sprinkle the liquid across the grid, conscientiously maintaining the boundary she established. Absently, Tad registered the emerged seedlings, realizing Treasure timed the application of liquid nitrogen fertilizer at an optimal point in their growth cycle. Treasure made a hell of caretaker. No wonder the property was greening up so unexpectedly well.

When Tad married Chiclets, he married into a pile of shit: to be accurate, compost. Chiclets' family, for three generations before his entry into it, gathered grass clippings and other green manures, animal manures, and wood chips, piling them together into massive two- and three-story mounds that had to be turned with heavy equipment. Tad had been turning the piles ever since the week after his wedding, a month after he graduated from college with a degree in horticulture.

It was good work. In a surging economy everyone wanted to improve their landscapes. In a poor one, everyone needed to improve their lands. And, yes, Tad knew

the cost of organic fertilizer: organic compost was a profit-maker at the Cock-a-Doodle Compost Company.

In late September, Tad brought over a backhoe, a bulldozer, and a number of dump truckloads full of the highest quality well-ripened compost the company had available at the time. The group split the cost, of course, but Tad and one of his kids threw in their time and expertise on the heavy equipment as a bonus.

It was shortly after Treasure arrived, after they'd offered her the house so she no longer had to impose on Marie and her husband in their small bungalow. Treasure pitched in like a trooper, making a number of observations regarding the endeavor that proved her a valuable asset.

Tad and his daughter Shorty, a tall red-haired beauty like Treasure, re-contoured the land after Treasure had asked a half dozen astute questions, shrewdly leading Tad to the realization that a day's worth of dirt work before they replanted would improve water flow and retention. He and Shorty reevaluated, looked at a few topographical maps, then brought the equipment over to create a series of slight basins and overflow routes. They even added a third small lake, once Treasure made a case for it. The whole thing seemed so natural and obvious, Tad wonder why none of them had thought of doing it before Treasure happened along. He asked her what she thought about their planting plans, and tentatively at first, then with more enthusiasm as both Shorty and Tad had embraced her comments with eagerness, Treasure made a few suggestions.

Never one to hide her feelings, Shorty had jumped up and down, clapping. “It’s brilliant, Dad. Why didn’t we think of it?”

With the new contours, lakes, and Treasure’s suggested additions to the land management plan, the acreage could become even more productive than anticipated, especially during times of drought. Tad wondered again why they hadn’t thought of the simple, sensible changes before Treasure mentioned them.

He guessed, sometimes, it took fresh eyes to see the obvious.

The next time everyone got together, Tad and Shorty laid it out with good-natured self-deprecation, Tad saying he was the one who was supposed to be the expert—not—and laughing when he admitted how much better Treasure’s rapid landscape evaluation was over his own. He cajoled Treasure into the conversation, getting her to tell them what she’d told him about the vacation habits of city dwellers. The new plan for the place developed, organically, from there.

They’d taken to calling it “Treasure’s Master Plan,” although no one dared do so in front of her. The woman was sensitive and often too quick to think they were ridiculing her. Everyone loved the plans, thinking them a far cry better than the original idea of a rough hunting camp reserved strictly for a few families’ personal use. Everyone thought so, except Darren, of course; Darren had a stick up his butt about the new ideas. He kept saying a private hunting camp made the most sense, but everyone understood mostly he just didn’t like that the changes originated with “baby-sister” Treasure.

Tad did understand what Treasure was trying to do, with her bucket of urine. Tad was a landscape professional; if there was anything he understood it was the business of reclaiming and utilizing land. Composting human waste was a bit more hardcore than he usually encountered, although he knew of some folks who were adamant about the long-term necessity to utilize wastes differently, less wastefully, than current practices in the mainland United States.

Tad had a sudden, unbidden thought, his mouth shifting to form an open “o.” “I’m surprised you aren’t collecting your own shit,” he said without pausing to consider the thought further.

Treasure’s complexion pinkened in the lovely late autumn sunlight.

Tad stood looking at Treasure. Beginning to laugh, he said, “Oh, my god, Treasure! You are. Chiclets is going to love this.”

Treasure shifted, uncomfortable. She told Tad she had started composting, hadn’t she? He should have listened to her. Shouldn’t he have?

Tad closed his mouth and smiled, gentle, “Treasure, this place is going to be amazing. I can’t believe how lucky we are to have you here working with us on this,” Tad said. “It’s a smart idea, using dilute urine. Makes a lot of sense while we’re still trying to get green on the ground. We’ll need to shift gears some, eventually, if we ever put in a vegetable garden or that orchard you’ve been talking about.” Tad nodded, smiling at her. “Urine’s free, you’ve got that right. The well water’s almost free, not

counting the electricity to pump it above ground—although, are you dipping water out of the lakes?”

Treasure nodded.

Counting the new one he and Shorty had dug, the lakes covered more than fifteen acres in total.

“Even better. That’s free, too. You’re staying well away from the water with your humanure, right?” When Treasure nodded and mumbled “a thousand feet,” Tad said, emphatic, “It’s a good plan. You’re brilliant, Treasure. Now show me everything. Show me the whole setup. I have to see this.”

He let her point the way back to the dilapidated farmhouse, stepping out first and marching ahead of her so she would not question what he thought as he walked behind her.

Treasure had gained a few pounds since arriving in east Texas. She was self-conscious about them.

Tad thought Treasure was starting to look a little healthier, less pale and death-like, and her startle reflex didn’t idle quite as high as it had, at first. He did not dare let on he’d seen more than her bucket: some of those scars had looked dangerously fresh.

Treasure, for her part trailing behind Tad, concentrated on her breathing. In and out. Even and steady. Keep it together, dammit. Breathe.

Everyday Ordinary Family Celebrations

Janice opened the door to Chiclets, her best friend from high school through most of her adult life, until Treasure Montgomery entered the picture after her husband had her nearly beaten to death, not that they knew that. Maybe the phone call, the plea for an evening spent together like old times meant an end to the strained relationship. “Did you pick up barbecue this time or chicken?” Janice asked. Her friend’s legendary ineptitude at cooking provided endless fodder for conversation.

“Not this time,” Chiclets said. “Maybe it’ll be better.”

Tad stood behind her as if she needed a prop.

Chiclets stood in front of Janice, offering her a hug, but letting Janice make the choice. The women moved together, awkward and clumsy. Despite good intentions, the evening’s prospects seemed remote to Chiclets. But they had to try. Treasure didn’t deserve otherwise.

“Better than smoked brisket?” Darren yelled from the living room. “What’s better than smoked brisket?”

Janice caught site of Treasure’s car, pulled into the drive behind Tad and Chiclets’. She studied the vehicle, until Treasure stepped out. Janice’s features hardened. “Oh my God, Darren! Get out here.”

Treasure forced herself to plaster on a tentative smile and, tongue-tied and shy, she aimed her face toward Janice. Why could she never be gracious around Janice and Darren? Stupid. Stupid. She held out a dish to Janice.

Janice took the dish, looking through the glass lid. “Cheesecake? Darren!”

Darren poked his head through the doorway. “What?” He saw Treasure and stared, a ghost smile paling his face. “Look at you,” he said. “You finally find a drug combination that works?”

Treasure attempted to hold a hospitable expression on her face. She could see Tad move, as if to mount a defense. She also saw Chiclets touch Tad’s hand and shake her head no. Good, thought Treasure. Chiclets heard what I said.

Janice reached out, too, touching Treasure lightly on the forearm. She handed the dish to Darren. “Unload the car, Darren. Looks like we have more company than we expected.”

Wordless, the group unloaded Treasure’s car. They packed an ice chest and a variety of portable containers into the house. In moments, Tad and Darren delivered the last item to the kitchen. The women unpacked, falling into a remembered rhythm.

Hostess gets the final say on placement of items, the family rule read. Janice dropped a stack of plates, probably harder than she intended, onto one end of a counter and added a rattling cup filled with flatware beside it. She set glasses down and positioned the last of the things on the counters.

Tad asked for an ibuprofen, “I pulled a muscle this morning, meant to take one before I left home,” he said. Actually, he was developing a headache. It felt severe.

Janice retrieved a bottle from her pantry, the action triggering the lost memory of Treasure's first Thanksgiving with the family after her marriage with Jared ended. She handed Tad the bottle, lost in her recollection.

*

Janice pulled her husband into the kitchen by his ear. "Darren Montgomery, if you don't start treating your sister nicer, I'm going to box your ears."

Darren snuggled close to his wife, nuzzling her neck. "I'd like to see you try," he whispered suggestively, his hands curling around her bottom.

Janice giggled.

It could only be called what it was: a giggle. It was a high, girlish sound. It defied any other classification or qualifier, even the middle-agedness of the girl doing the giggling.

Darren's sister, who happened still to be standing within ear and eye, rolled her eyes and sighed. Janice shrugged, apologetic, and watched Treasure shift out of eyesight. "Behave." Janice swatted Darren's hands.

"I'm on vacation," Darren asserted.

It was a true statement, albeit a random observation of irrelevant fact.

When Darren reluctantly released his wife, she moved to a pantry cabinet, opening it and removing a bottle of Tylenol. She looked at the bottle a moment, then put it back on the shelf. She rustled around, moving items from one place to another in the cabinet. She pulled another bottle, labeled Ibuprofen, and turned to her husband. She

grabbed his arm and shoved the bottle into his massive hand. “Take this to her, and tell her you’re sorry the day didn’t go as well as she’d hoped.”

“You take it to her,” Darren grumbled. He immediately headed to the living with the ibuprofen in hand to do as Janice said. “Hey, Treasure, here’s some ibuprofen. Sounds like you had a rough day. I wish it had gone better, but at least you got out there. That’s good.” He spoiled the speech by making a facial grimace that, to his sister, implied an insincerity she remembered from their youth.

Treasure took the bottle, popped its cap, and shook two tablets into her hand. She handed the bottle back to her brother.

Darren headed to the pantry and returned the bottle to its shelf before Janice reminded him. He looked at Janice, smug, before yelling back into the living room at his sister: “Hey, T, you want an ice pack for your ass?” He cackled like a hyena. “What?” He demanded when Janice glared at him. “It’s funny.”

Janice shook her head. “Just shut up and actually get her an ice pack. She’s probably in terrible pain. Remember when you fell on your butt last year? You were stove up for a week afterwards, and you whined like a—” Janice stopped talking when Darren swatted her behind. “Stop that.” She grinned at him.

“Who else are we expecting?” Darren inquired, hearing the sound of a truck in the drive.

"I called Chiclets when Treasure showed up, told her she came over after all," Janice said. "I think she and Tad, maybe some of their crew, and possibly Marie and her sweetie may be coming, too."

The backdoor opened and Tad entered the kitchen.

"Well, lookiethere, it's Tad Montgomery, in the flesh," Darren said in a Mayberry-RFD-style country voice.

"Darren," Tad said by way of greeting.

The two men engaged in a handclasp, gripping the other from forearm to elbow, then released hands to bump chests. It was curiously adolescent. They left the kitchen for the couch and recliner in the living room in front of the television where a football game played loudly.

Chiclets wandered in carrying a covered casserole dish. "Leftovers. What did we miss?"

Janice took the casserole. "Girl, she fell down twice at the Community Center."

Chiclets raised her eyebrows. "You're kidding. Was she drunk?"

Janice glared at Chiclets. "Please. I don't think so. At least, I don't think so. She couldn't have been. Could she?" The women whispered and gestured behind their hands, staying out of sight of those in the living room. "I think she slipped in the mud once, and then, after lunch, the old metal chair she was sitting on gave out and flattened. She's miserable in there. I made Darren give her some ibuprofen just now."

Chiclets made a sympathetic sound. "I guess we better get in there and run interference." She and Janice exchanged a long look, and Chiclets added, "Did she bring any food?"

Janice laughed. "Not since the things she brought over yesterday. But when she got here, I handed her a jar of peaches and asked her to whip up another cobbler—hey, she didn't mention she was injured—then, I practically had to beat Darren to keep him from digging in before you and Tad could get here. He was slobbering on himself. That woman is the best cook I've ever seen."

"Lord, I know it. She's thin, a beautiful red-head, single and she can cook. The worst part of it, she has no clue how devastating that is for us normal women. It's a good thing our husbands are related to her—and that they aren't that country," Chiclets said.

Chiclets and Janice laughed. Both made an elaborate, pretend shudder.

"You're an idiot," Janice said, shaking her head.

*

How blithe they'd been, how ignorant. How judgmental, when they knew the least bit about Treasure's marriage—Janice cringed, thinking of it. How sure they'd been Treasure misrepresented the danger Jared presented. Idiots, they'd all been. Treasure should have been more emphatic, made them understand. Marie should have given them more details, instead of letting Treasure be the one to choose what to tell and what to keep secret.

“Shall we visit before supper?” Janice asked, pasting a smile back into place.

The evening was off to a good start, Treasure thought, her expectations chronically low. The “visit” took about thirty-seven seconds, and when the conversation stalled, they looked to the games closet. They played several hands of a card game that was the current rage with Darren and Janice’s church set before turning to Treasure’s food, a palpable comfort.

Darren, unusually, restrained himself. They were getting old, all of them, he acknowledged. Darren retired the previous spring, filling his days with work at the b-and-b. He thought of his resistance, thought of how much grief he’d given his sister—out of jealousy and anger with her because she wouldn’t tell him what had happened to her. Mistakenly, he thought Tad knew—and Marie didn’t. He sat at his dining table, listening with only half an ear, his mind preoccupied with one particular day he should have been more thankful. Maybe if he’d been gracious to her, Treasure would have found a way to tell him more. Maybe it would have made no difference.

*

Dinner seemed more like the Inquisition than Thanksgiving, Darren was thinking. They were sitting at the table in the formal dining room, segregated from the kitchen and the family room, no television in sight. Tad, Chiclets, and Treasure were going on and on about Treasure’s stinking ideas for the property. Like he cared one way or the other whether Treasure composted or not. He liked the original plans better: a private

hunting spot for the guys. Having more guest cabins, a city folk version of a fish camp b-n-b, like they were talking, would limit their access to the place.

The girl got herself a fine degree in business and all she could see herself doing is working retail or cooking and cleaning up after a bunch of city folk pretending to enjoy the country. It wasn't right. She could have had a full time job right now and then, he'd have bet, she wouldn't be so fired up to interfere with the guys' plans. But no.

"I thought some of the kids, at least, would still be here," Treasure was saying.

Tad and Darren snorted in unison.

"They usually head out after lunch," Janice explained. "They're mostly grown, more or less, and they think they have better things to do than sit around with us old fogies."

"Some are with in-laws," Chiclets added. "Can't miss a single holiday without splitting time between two families. Nope. Can't do it the old way, one holiday with one family, the next with the other. Nope. Got to fit both in, running up and down the roads, cheating both of a good visit by being too preoccupied with juggling the logistics."

Yada, yada, yada, get over it, is what Darren was thinking. "Kids grow up. Get used to it. If they're under foot too much, you'd complain about that, too," he said.

Chiclets stood up, grabbed a dish towel someone had used to bring a hot dish to the table, whirled it in the air over her head a few times, and skillfully popped Darren smack across his arm. "Take that," she said.

"Ow!" Darren yelled.

With great dignity, Chiclets placed the cloth carefully beside her plate at the table and re-seated herself. She turned innocent eyes back on Darren, “You were saying?”

Darren laughed, getting a look at his sister. Treasure’s eyes were as big around as saucers. She was holding her breath, gray as a corpse.

God, he was sick of Treasure’s overreactions. What was wrong with that girl? Melodramatic drama queen. A knock sounded at the back door, and Darren went to answer it. “Hey, girl, come on into this house,” he said to his cousin Marie. Her new husband followed her in, and the three stood talking in the kitchen.

“Y’all playing Forty-Two tonight?” Marie asked, giving Darren a quick shoulder bump, her hands full with food and a bag of something. Her husband of seven glorious years pumped Darren’s hand, “Hey.”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Treasure wandered over, and the numbers are off,” Darren said.

Marie squealed. “Treasure!”

“Good,” Cameron said, another bag slung over his shoulder. “We brought some games. Thought it might be a night for Cranium or something other than dominoes.” Cameron and Marie unburdened their gear onto the kitchen counter.

Cameron was just no good at Forty-Two, Darren thought. “We haven’t started on anything, just getting around to supper,” Darren said. “Y’all eaten yet?”

Marie dashed to the dining room, “Treasure, I didn’t think you would be here.”

Treasure stood, turning to allow her cousin Marie to embrace her. Treasure and Darren's father, Tad's father, and Marie's father were brothers, with Marie's dad the oldest of his generation and Marie the oldest of theirs. Treasure, as the baby of the family, was close to two decades younger than Marie.

In the kitchen Darren was saying, "There's a fresh cobbler. Treasure whipped up another one this evening after she got here. And," Darren herded Cameron to the refrigerator, opened its door, and pointed to the last few slices of turtle cheesecake sitting under glass on the top shelf. Marie, her greeting complete, had wandered in and stood behind Cameron, peering into the refrigerator with the men. "She brought a few things over yesterday afternoon. I kept the kids from the last few slices so you'd have a crack at it. It goes real good with a cup of coffee. Fancy coffee Treasure brought over yesterday. She just put on a fresh pot, too, since nobody can't make good coffee but her." Darren used his Mayberry voice and made a rude face.

Marie swatted Darren. "Shut your mouth, Darren Montgomery. As a matter of fact, nobody around here makes coffee anywhere near as good as hers. You ruin it for the rest of us, and Cameron will ruin you. Tad'll help him, too."

Darren laughed and shut the refrigerator. "Don't I know it. They'll have to wrestle Janice and Chiclets if they want to get at me first, though." He lowered his voice, a rare show of discretion, before saying, "I don't know what else she's been up to the last fifteen years, but at least she learned to cook. The girl sure can cook, I'll give her that. But I still remember all the times growing up she burnt water."

Marie laughed. "She never burnt water. She never even walked into the kitchen back then, much less got out a pot or a pan." Marie, as oldest felt a responsibility toward the rest of the crew, and as the only divorced and remarried one of the whole bunch until Treasure, she felt an intense kinship with Treasure that trumped her family obligations. She stopped her cousin with a press of her fingers on his arm. Her expression sobered. "Things change, Darren," she said. "You keep that in mind, things happen and people change, and a little compassion from you goes a long way, boy."

Darren grimaced. "I know it. I know. I'm trying. I just—I don't even know her anymore, Marie."

Marie laid her head on her younger cousin's shoulder for a moment and said, "Honey, she's a woman in terrible pain. What else do you need to know?"

Darren squeezed Marie. "I'll keep that in mind." They parted, and Darren stood looking around his kitchen as if seeing it for the first time. He and Janice had lived in two apartments and three houses over the years of their marriage. This house, by far, was the nicest. And it was nice. Darren had a degree in forestry from Stephen F. Austin State University, a minor in biology, and he'd done well for his family in the woods of east Texas. Janice did her part, too, working as office manager for a local family doctor.

The kitchen was exactly as Janice had described it to him when she dreamed of the house they would build together: custom cabinetry, gorgeous woodwork, and natural granite countertops. The room was fine. But it could fit three times over into the

kitchen his sister left in The Woodlands, by his recollection. He thought of the work Treasure was doing on the old farmhouse and shook his head. Darren pulled two more place settings from the cabinet, motioned at the mugs and glassware, and said, “Get yourselves something to drink.”

*

Darren felt a surge of self-disgust. He’d been an ass. He hadn’t listened to anything Marie said to him, thinking he had the right to know or already knew everything. Thinking nothing could really be bad enough for a woman to abandon her own kids. Thinking he was a better judge of things—anything, everything—than her. Thinking Treasure was the arrogant one, and unreasonable.

Darren walked out of the room before his guests left and Treasure spent two sessions with Naomi trying to understand the damage from Darren’s perspective. This, she remembered. This is what I was trying to protect myself from when I stopped driving out my front gate.

Chapter 6: Treasure

Let By-Gones Be

For the fourth week in a row, Treasure ate lunch with Janice and Darren, Tad and Chiclets. For the fourth week in a row, Treasure listened to their cautious encouragement: go to Bryan-College Station to see the kids when you want to, they said, but don't expect them to change plans for you, yet, and don't be heart-broken when the kids don't show how happy they are to see you. They will eventually.

If Treasure had ever doubted how screwed she was with her kids, she didn't after the so-called encouragement.

For the fourth week in a row, the four had urged Treasure to visit the land she'd lived on when she moved to Jasper. We'll drive you out for a look around, they said. It's so beautiful. You won't recognize the place. It's so much better than we imagined, more profitable. It would have been fine if they hadn't kept apologizing when she had the inevitable panic attack and vomited. Treasure didn't mind vomiting. She didn't mind vomiting in front of them, really. What she objected to was how guilty they acted, after. As if her inability to recover from post-traumatic stress disorder was their fault. It made her angry. Her anger at them stressed her, and she started vomiting again in another surge of panic, and they felt guiltier.

Treasure never managed to look at the place. She determined not to go back with the four of them—she'd go back, eventually, but she wouldn't take any of them

with her—except maybe she'd take Tad. Maybe he would be okay if the rest weren't with them. Maybe she would meet him out there, one day. Except Darren would be there, too. From what she'd heard, Darren spent most of his time since he retired working around the property, allowing the current B and B manager more freedom and flexibility. It surprised her, that Darren was able to make peace with the place. She certainly hadn't been able.

She headed home earlier than she planned, exhausted from assuring them she was fine.

“Maybe you should eat something before you go, Treasure,” Chiclets said.

“Are you sure you don't want us to drive you home, Treasure?” Janice asked.

“Did that doctor say anything about you gaining weight?” questioned Darren.

“You're looking good,” Tad said.

They'd discussed her medical status, results from the doctor's appointments, the news about being well into “the change”—this with her sister-in-law and Chiclets who discussed they too had been surprised by the rapid changes in mood and sexual interest—not that the boys couldn't hear every humiliating word. Treasure was glad to leave the visit early. They exhausted her.

Treasure took each week as it came, learning new routines and letting herself be satisfied with small strides. Treasure and Naomi met twice a week somewhere between their respective homes for a few hours of talk and, other times, the therapy Treasure liked to call restless eye syndrome. Treasure had been amazed at the success they

seemed to have with the eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, even if Delancy acted like her miraculous progress was to be expected. It had worked for him, he said, of course he wasn't surprised it was working for her. Treasure allowed Delancy to encourage her. She allowed herself to enjoy her work—something that often eluded her, enjoyment. But that, in itself, told her much about the effectiveness. She was allowing herself to enjoy things again for the first time in a long time.

Her visits with Naomi dropped to once a week. In time, her visits became less regular, less essential. Few changes were truly immediate, but the relative ease of the treatment this time around tended to piss Treasure off when she thought of it. The years of cognitive behavioral therapy, of talk therapy—until she'd rebelled and refused to speak another word about her traumas—seemed such a waste to her. Then, some stupid person comes along and invents something that—for her, anyway—worked when other things hadn't. And it was just thinking. Directed eye movements, combined with scripted, directed recollections: it had been out there for how long? How much time had she wasted, not connecting with the right thing at the right time?

Treasure vacillated between irritation and gratitude.

The therapy worked. Why look a gift horse in the mouth?

Hermit, Reformed

Monday mornings came too soon. Treasure had not expected the sense of foolish shame each time she trekked to the gate in her golf cart to open and close the

gate, still resisting. She wondered, not for the first time, how her employees could stand to work for her. She found herself avoiding their eyes.

The remotes in the back of the closet laughed their triumph over her.

Treasure picked a random day on the calendar and scratched, ferocious, one word in the calendar square: remotes. It was decided; Treasure heaved a sigh of relief. I will talk to Delancy and give up the remotes on that day.

On that day, Delancy called her early, apologizing that he would not be at work on time and requesting a change in the schedule: he needed the morning off to calm his teenaged daughter who was distraught, he said, after learning a friend was missing.

For the fifth time that day, Treasure sat at the gate in her golf cart, waiting. It was full daylight. Treasure dreaded seeing Delancy. She dreaded the fact that she'd put this off so long, making it a bigger deal than it should have been. She talked to herself, said to herself Delancy will understand.

He had told her she needed help if she ever expected to cope with whatever private demons plagued her. He had known, too, about her guilt and desire for punishment—a thing she could never name or discuss—so confusing and shameful she had broken from Naomi's counsel before when the topic was broached. Delancy talked about the sense of guilt and shame as if they were common, ordinary, comprehensible reactions to incomprehensible, damaging events.

Naomi—and everyone else at the time—had told Treasure it was not her fault, it was Tom Pense's fault. Before that, they'd said it was Jared's fault, it was not her fault.

But if no one else seemed to understand her guilt in everything, Treasure had known and she could not bear to be forgiven. She had an overwhelming sense of guilt and a need to be punished because she'd ended her parents' lives and ruined her children's lives and added to her cousin Marie's stress level—probably hastening her death, too—with her poor decisions and inability to act decisively when necessary.

Delancy, somehow, knew exactly what she felt. Treasure hated that he knew. She hated the hope that came when Delancy acted as if her reactions were normal. She hated that he would show her understanding when she handed him the remotes.

It was only mid-day, and exhaustion swamped her. The four remotes lay on the seat beside her, and the only thing she could think to do was give them to Delancy when he arrived. He would know what to do with them. She promised herself she could go home and take a nap once she saw him. She spotted his truck coming up the drive and clicked the gate open before he even got close enough for her to identify him. As he passed her, Delancy grinned at her, and Treasure was infuriated by his smile. She followed him up the drive yelling at the top of her lungs.

“You can take your crap-eating grin and just leave me the hell alone, Delancy Perkins,” she yelled at him. “And you can shove these remotes up your ass.”

She felt better then. Calmer.

He parked his truck, having never heard a word of it.

Treasure hoped the rest of the crew were equally oblivious to her outburst. Her exhaustion multiplied, but she didn't feel so bad. A nap would improve her disposition, she determined.

"Miss T, your weekend went well, I hope," Delancy said.

"Here," Treasure lacked any graciousness. "Take these and do what you want with them. I don't care anymore."

Delancy stood looking at the remotes in her hands without taking them from her.

"You better take these damn remotes before I run my golf cart over them," she said, "and you, too, while I'm at it."

Delancy took the remotes from her.

"I swear," Treasure said. "If anything happens because you people—" She couldn't finish the sentence. Her reasoning didn't make sense, hadn't made sense, and Delancy grinned at her.

"I will instruct my co-workers regarding the proper use of these as well as the safety and security of the property," he said. "You can count on me." In case she missed he was being facetious, Delancy laughed. He sobered when he saw Treasure's grimace. "Miss T, don't be like that. We know how important this is. We won't be careless with these."

Treasure didn't yell; she didn't have the breath for it. She looked at Delancy, her expression worried and sad. "It isn't that I don't know that, Delancy. You know it isn't."

“I know it isn’t,” he agreed. “Miss T? How about a compromise? What if I carry a remote for a few weeks? What if I let folks in and out for the week, instead of you? Then, in a week or two, we’ll see about giving out another. What would you think of that idea?”

Treasure’s chest loosened a slight amount. “Would you?”

“I would,” he said. “Depending on my schedule, if I’m not here, you’ll go right on as usual.”

“I think I could do that,” Treasure said, her heart rhythm a little slower and more regular.

“Miss T, looking good. Looking good,” Delancy said. “I’m not kidding around here, I know how hard this thing is. It’s a beast and a monster and a force bigger than other people can imagine. But I also know, once you let it out of yourself, you find out pretty quick it’s nothing but a paper tiger.”

Treasure didn’t meet his gaze, but her breathing eased a bit more. She nodded at him, suddenly brisk. “I’m going to take a nap today, Delancy,” she said.

“You do that, Miss T,” he said. “We got this, here.”

Treasure did not sleep. She spent half an hour staring at the pages of a new book on beavers she bought over the weekend. The deterrents they’d tried had not been successful. She wasn’t rested after, exactly, but she felt better.

Someone Else’s Bad Situation

On Friday, Treasure and her crew sat around the table in the breakroom, another week's business hashed out between them. They focused on sour cream coffee cake, Treasure's mid-morning offering to them. Delancy and TeeJay argued over which was better, Treasure's blueberry oat crumble coffee cake or the sour cream. Juanito and Celia were unusually quiet, and both smiled more than usual. With their argument-of-the-moment resolved, TeeJay asked Delancy, "Did Genecia hear anything more from that girl? Do you know what happened?"

Delancy nodded, "Chloe's foster-mother kicked her out of the house."

"That's not right," TeeJay said. "She didn't she call the social worker?"

"The foster mom? Nope," Delancy said. "Just threw the kid out the door with a couple changes of clothes in a duffel bag. Kept most of her things."

"What was she thinking? Did the kid do something? Wait—scratch that. It doesn't matter what the kid might have done," Celia said. "Anything serious has to go to the social worker, if the foster parent can't deal with it. Right?"

Delancy nodded. "That's the way it's supposed to work. Unfortunately, people get jaded, start thinking more about the check they're getting than the lives they're supposed to be changing."

"So is that what happened?" Juanito asked.

Delancy's hands opened wide, palms up, a question. "Maybe. I don't know, really."

"Why didn't she answer her phone?" TeeJay asked.

Delancy shook his head. “She didn’t have her charger with her. Said the lady was crazy, screaming at her about her being a whore of Babylon. Kept it up for weeks. She said the woman grabbed her bag, told her to take her whore clothes, and get out of her house. Chloe said it was intense, and in all the drama, she picked up the phone but not the charger. She only got out with a few things, the lady hitting at her the whole time. She said the phone died the first night, and she didn’t have any way to recharge it. The details are sketchy, but I guess she showed up back at school after two weeks without any excuse for her absence. Luckily, the school principle called in Chloe’s advocate and social worker. I only talked to her a few minutes. The social worker spoke to me. She said they were confiscating the phone because the foster mother insisted Chloe probably had “nasty photos,” and apparently, there actually was one on the phone. She said she was obligated to report it. Now the kid has no phone.”

“Where is she now?” TeeJay asked.

“Chloe’s back at a group home. She got some of her stuff back, not all. The woman threw away a lot of Chloe’s stuff.”

The group made sympathetic sounds.

“Genecia didn’t hear from Chloe for two weeks. She thought Chloe was just mad at her because she’d been rude the last time they talked. I guess Chloe was on the streets for two weeks, nobody catching on.”

“She could disappear forever in Houston,” TeeJay said. “If she hadn’t gone back to school, maybe nobody would have found her again.”

“This kid never gets a break,” Delancy said. “She’s smart. Chloe Baldwin kept Genecia safe after her mama died—the foster system can be rough. She’s the one who told Genecia she needed to find out what was what with her daddy—thank God Genecia’s mama told her my name. I owe Chloe Baldwin. If it wasn’t for her, I never would have known I had a daughter.”

They sat, quiet at the table, thinking about Delancy’s story. A few years out of high school, Delancy met Genecia’s mother who was only fifteen at the time but looked and acted older. She deceived Delancy: he thought the two were the same age and viewed the escalation of their relationship as progress toward a home and family of his own—adulthood. Delancy learned the truth when the girl’s stepfather tried to have him prosecuted for statutory rape: the girl wanted out of her abusive household so badly she was willing to do anything to escape. For some reason, the judge had been sympathetic to Delancy’s situation, advising him to make a life change. He recommended the military, not knowing Genecia was pregnant. Broken-hearted, Delancy followed the advice, thinking himself lucky not to be in jail. He embraced his life as a soldier until the day he received a letter from Genecia’s friend in foster care, asking him to take a paternity test. His daughter was nine years old at the time, her friend an astonishing age ten. At the time, Delancy wanted custody of both girls. The court couldn’t refuse his petition for his own daughter, but they were unwilling to release the white girl to him, an unmarried black man. He’d done his best to stay in touch, to keep Genecia in touch,

but after their move to east Texas, distance and time separated them despite good intentions. His hope, that their gift of the cell phone might keep Chloe safe, evaporated.

Delancy had been as worried as his daughter when he realized how long it had been without word from Chloe.

Not for the first time, Treasure turned her anger inward, cursing whatever instinct made her reach out to employ single parents in situations as complicated as her own.

Chapter 7: Tanya

Re-Connect

The phone call came out of the blue, or so it seemed to Treasure: a call from the social worker she'd had to report to when Natalie had brought the kids to her against the stipulations of Jared's custody order. To see her children after the awful time away from them, but to see them so changed, their innocence strained; to see it strain and shatter further in the years that followed—the social worker belonged to a nightmare past; she should stay there. The call upset Treasure's equilibrium beyond anything she imagined. Wasn't this kind of thing what she'd been training to withstand with the EMDR? What good was any of it?

Treasure questioned everything, her confidence near the breaking point. And so, she cut the call off, pleading an emergency at the nursery, saying she would call the woman back, later, when things were not so—she couldn't finish the sentence, and so she merely disconnected the call.

It was later, and Treasure had not returned the call. She could not return the call. Seeing Delancy each day at work shamed her. Keeping the phone call secret from Naomi shamed her. But it was as if Treasure had reached some inner hurdle she could not cross: like the days before she committed to improving—such a short time ago, how could it be such a short time ago? Treasure asked herself why this, why now, why? But she did not return the call.

The woman called back in the evening, left a message which Treasure ignored. The woman called each evening, every day for a week, leaving messages on voicemail. Treasure neither listened to nor acknowledged.

Treasure recognized the irrationality of it. She knew it made no sense. She knew her anger was not at the woman, not at the social worker who merely did the job she was required to do in a situation that was impossible, complicated, unpleasant. She knew the woman had been kind, had been true to her charge, had been good to the children, actually had been good to Treasure too.

It made no sense and Treasure knew it made no sense and Treasure could do nothing to change her response to the calls. It made no sense.

She was relieved when the calls stopped.

Naomi questioned her about Treasure's odd moods, but from Naomi's standpoint, nothing seemed out of the ordinary, considering.

Darren called a week and a half later. "Hey, Treasure," he said, "I got a call from Tanya Broussard. She asked me to let you know she was trying to reach you."

"Oh?" Treasure could think of nothing to say.

"Yeah," Darren said. "She saw you at lunch with us awhile back, she said. Said you've been on her mind and she wanted to touch base with you again. Said she has a proposition for you."

Treasure said nothing.

"Treasure?" Darren said. "You still there?"

“Oh,” Treasure said. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Well, okay then,” Darren said. “So, here’s her phone number.”

Treasure pretended to write the number down.

A Disturbing Proposition

Tanya Broussard called the business landline, Celia answered the call, listened a moment, and said, “Why, yes, she’s here. One moment, please.” Celia held the phone out toward Treasure, “Tanya Broussard, Treasure, for you.”

Treasure was caught. She grimaced, took the phone and said, “Tanya, hello. What can I do for you?”

Celia walked away, back to the workroom, back to her floral arranging.

“Treasure, thank God,” the woman said. “Thank you for taking my call.”

Her reaction puzzled Treasure. “Um, well, yes—” Treasure could have hemmed and hawed all day.

“You’ve been on my mind,” the woman said. “In fact, I’ve been thinking of you for months. But especially since I saw you out with your family, I could not get you off my mind. Treasure, I know you’re awfully busy, but I want to tell you about something. Someone really. I need to let you know up front that this, well, this probably isn’t strictly ethical of me. But—” Tanya paused. “It’s right. It’s the right thing for me to do.”

Treasure thought Tanya was talking more to herself. “Okay. What’s this about?” Dread filled Treasure. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh! Oh. Oh!” Tanya exclaimed. “Oh, no, Treasure, this isn’t about you at all, my dear. Not at all. Well, it is. But not exactly.” She dithered. “Just listen to me. Treasure Montgomery, I know of a child who needs you.”

Nothing Tanya Broussard said to her could have taken Treasure more by surprise.

“Let me tell you about it before you say anything,” Tanya said. “I probably sound like I’ve lost it. But hear me out, and then don’t think you have to answer me now. I know you will need time to think this through.” The woman paused, as if thinking, “You have an employee, Delancy Perkins, don’t you?”

“Delancy Perkins?” What in the world, Treasure wondered. Delancy belonged to the new life, not the old. Tanya Broussard should know nothing about Delancy Perkins. Treasure sat frozen with fear.

“Oh, never mind,” Tanya said. “I have a friend in Houston. My friend and I both work for the Department.” She paused. “Well, you see, we were talking shop. Now, it’s just not right for us to get too specific, you see. Not even with each other,” Tanya said. “Be we do. Sometimes we do. Anyway, my friend is very concerned over one of her children. This girl is getting lost in the system, Treasure. And she’s just too bright, too good to get lost. My friend is beside herself, really. When I saw you it dawned on me you could help her, Treasure.”

“Me?”

“You,” Tanya said.

“How can I help your friend?” Treasure hated herself for asking. But Tanya Broussard’s strange conversation unnerved her, made her ask questions even when she didn’t want to hear the answers.

“Not my friend,” Tanya said. “You would be helping the girl. And the way for you to help is to open your home and be a foster parent to this girl. It has to be you, Treasure. You have to foster this child.”

Treasure could not remember hearing Tanya sound disorganized or less than professional, not ever. She could remember the woman making command-like proclamations and expecting them to be obeyed however. Her last statements fit Treasure’s recollections of Tanya to a T, so much so that she laughed, relieved to be on more familiar footing. “I am no fit foster parent.” Treasure laughed again.

Tanya made her most dignified snort, a sound that Treasure recalled well. “You are, too, Treasure Montgomery. You’re probably the only person fit to be this child’s foster parent right now.”

“Tanya, I really cannot handle a child. Not now. Not ever.” Treasure said, her amusement at an end.

The idea of it was preposterous.

“This girl is not a child, Treasure. She is a young woman, fifteen years old. She has been terribly misused, and I can’t think of anyone who could understand her situation better than you. *You* are the right person to foster her.” Tanya paused. “The girl’s name is Chloe Baldwin. And believe me, Treasure, at this point in her life, there

are no better options. In fact, I'd say this girl is out of options. Except for you, Treasure Montgomery. You are her best option. Probably her only option, but still, her best one."

The silence extended longer than thirty seconds. On a telephone, thirty seconds may as well be an hour. Silence. For an hour. Treasure thought she might scream.

"If you don't do this, Treasure, this girl's life is ruined. Think of everything you went through with Tom Pense—with Jared—then think about what if you'd been arrested and prosecuted for the crimes *they* committed. And, Treasure, that's what's coming for this girl." Tanya badgered Treasure with her bull-headed tone. "You don't have to give me your answer now, but you *have* to say yes. You cannot turn this opportunity down, Treasure. It doesn't make up for you losing Andrea and Jon, but—you call me back in a day or two, once you've gotten used to the idea." She hung up.

The girl's name is Chloe Baldwin.

Delancy walked into the office, picked up the current availability list from the corner of the desk, and walked out again.

The girl's name is Chloe Baldwin.

Good God, no.

Treasure looked at the phone in her hand; it had started to make an unpleasant noise.

Tanya Broussard wanted her to foster Chloe Baldwin. Tanya Broussard thought Treasure was Chloe Baldwin's best option. Tanya Broussard was either delusional or she was serious.

Treasure remembered being terrified of the woman, so afraid of what her disapproval would mean for her, what her disapproval meant for Andrea and Jon. She remembered staggering acts of kindness, too. She remembered the woman was usually right in her judgments. She remembered that, except for the judge, Tanya always had the last word.

Good God, no, not Chloe Baldwin.

Treasure wondered if Delancy would find out. Treasure wondered: if he did, would he ever forgive her.

A Hundred Reasons to One

The day turned blustery and cold after Treasure left home in shirt-sleeves and light-weight pants: a near fifty-degree drop in temperature, from 82 degrees to 34 degrees Fahrenheit. She probably should have checked the weather, given that serious nurserymen tended to watch the weather: it wasn't something irrelevant to her work. But she had not. She had been distracted of late. She had left issues of weather and migratory beavers and sophisticated floral design to her employees, hoping they at least had more sense than to ignore the important stuff.

When she arrived in Bryan, Treasure's first stop would have to be a clothing store. Her plans with Jon and Andrea required more appropriate outerwear, she thought, a jacket perhaps. Treasure pulled off the road at a gas station to text Delancy. She clicked the blinker on and readied herself to pull back into traffic when he returned her

text. She put the car back into park to read his text.

“Already on it, boss. I told you I had this. Enjoy your weekend.”

Treasure was beginning to owe Delancy Perkins far too much. It pissed her off. At least Delancy wasn't passing out the remotes hither and yon. Not yet, at any rate. He'd invited TeeJay to carpool with him, since he drove near her house on his way to work. It had meant Treasure giving up some control of schedules as well as remotes, but she was dealing with it. After letting Treasure have a few weeks to think about those changes, Delancy offered a remote to Juanito, suggesting he and Celia might want to carpool too. The changes were limitations to Treasure's power, compromises designed to communicate Treasure's improvements to all of them, and Treasure appreciated his strategy. She had figured Delancy would hand out every remote first thing, but he had not. If their positions were reversed, she suspected that's what she would have done. She took a dive into the rabbit hole, thinking how much easier it made them all to track, how much more predictable. She cut off the unproductive thoughts, focusing on the road ahead of her.

Her mind wandered as she drove, probably too fast, and she cursed under her breath on the journey toward her children. Children. Like Tanya Broussard's "child." Jon and Andrea were grown, somebody else's kids, and Chloe Baldwin was fifteen and Treasure had as much business being a foster parent as she'd had trying to raise Jon and Andrea—which was why she'd told them she'd been the one who shot Jared, why she made Darren keep the secret.

Darren and Janice were good: they didn't make messes of things, like she did. Darren might get angry, but any righteous person would, and she certainly knew the lengths Darren would go to, to protect those he loved. Her kids had needed that kind of protection, hadn't they? She certainly couldn't give it to them.

A foster parent? She already screwed up with Jon and Andrea. No way did another kid deserve the mess Treasure made of living. No way.

Naomi did not agree.

Naomi, like Tanya, thought it a golden opportunity.

Naomi, unlike Tanya, did not tell Treasure she couldn't say no, exactly. Naomi did say she thought it might be healthy for Treasure to stop obsessing over her own situation and think of someone else for a change.

Treasure had said that was uncalled for.

Naomi had laughed at her. She had said, "You say E-ther, I say I-ther."

Treasure rolled her eyes again just thinking about the conversation. Before she knew it, she was on the outskirts of Bryan, and it was time to find a store where she could buy a new outfit. Treasure hated shopping. She hated how anxious she felt, thinking about the discussion she planned to have with Andrea and Jon. She hated what they would undoubtedly say to her when they learned she actually was considering opening her home to a foster child.

A light snow began to fall, a rare occurrence in east Texas.

Treasure looked at the sky, checked her mirrors, and pulled into another gas station. She consulted her phone for directions to a mall. She was an hour too early to meet the kids, which was a good thing. Maybe it would give her time to shop. If she showed up dressed as she was, they would have yet more ammunition when she told them about Chloe Baldwin. On the other hand, if shopping took too long and she showed up late. Well.

“You say E-ther, I say I-ther,” Treasure said to the screen of her cell phone.

She arrived on time, and the day proceeded as planned. After dinner, she sat at her daughter’s table in her daughter’s cramped apartment, discussing things.

“Chloe Baldwin?” Andrea said, too loudly. “You can’t welch out on this, Mother. You owe it to Delancy.”

Well, that’s not what I expected, thought Treasure.

Jon played *Final Fantasy* with an intensity that struck Treasure as more obsessive than most of her own behavior.

No one complained about Jon’s obsessiveness. No. Darren and Janice said his behavior was normal. “It’s the way all kids play these games,” they said. “He’ll figure out where to draw the lines. Stop obsessing over it, Treasure. It’s not normal for you—”

Treasure stopped listening at that point. Calling one addiction normal and one not simply because one wasn’t hers struck her as patently unfair.

“Are you even listening to me, Mother?” Andrea said, louder.

“I’m listening,” Treasure said. “But Andrea, I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to become a foster parent because you think I owe someone.”

“Well, you’d be wrong, as usual.” Andrea was in a fine snit, had been all day.

Treasure could tell it after the first five minutes with her daughter. She had not wanted to tell her daughter anything, had delayed until the last possible minute. But Darren and Janice spilled the beans in a phone call early that morning, and Andrea already knew all about Tanya’s request. Treasure guessed they thought she wouldn’t follow through with the discussion.

“So this is how it’s going to work, *Mother*,” Andrea said.

Treasure winced at the sarcasm in Andrea’s voice.

“You’re going to do whatever it takes to get custody of that kid. And then you’re going to get out of the way and let Delancy raise her. She can spend most of her time over at Genecia’s and nobody’ll be the wiser. Don’t screw this up.”

Treasure thought of Tanya’s second phone call two days ago. Treasure thought of Tanya saying to her, “A lot of folk will be telling you that you’re not the one for this job. But Treasure Montgomery, when I said you’re the one for it, I meant *you*. Not Darren and Janice. Not Delancy Perkins. You.”

Treasure asked Tanya one question only, “Why?”

“Because you have the life experience this girl needs,” Tanya said. “You’re strong and you don’t let experiences break you, and this girl needs to know it’s possible to survive the things she’s done, Treasure, the things she’s had to do. You’re the only

one I know who can show her the truth of it—that a body can make a life, even after so much disaster.”

The truth of it. Hah. That was probably the most preposterous statement made, thought Treasure, in the whole history of the world.

“Andrea, what happens will happen,” Treasure said to her daughter. “I’ll make the call, but ultimately the placement won’t be up to me at all. You know how it works.” She met her daughter’s eyes. “Just because I’m willing doesn’t mean they’ll let me be a foster parent.”

Jon picked that moment to roar at the video screen. He jumped from the couch with the controller raised over his head. “Feel the burn,” he yelled.

Treasure’s phone vibrated, and she automatically lifted it to read another text from Delancy. “Don’t try to travel tonight. Roads are a mess. Stick tight.”

Andrea read the text over her mother’s shoulder. Her voice was hard. “We don’t have a spare room.” Andrea shared her apartment with a fellow medical student, and Jon lived in a dorm. His roommate was away for the weekend, but no way would Treasure go there. She’d hoped to meet the boy, Jon talked about him often enough, a kind of hero-worship tone in his voice that Treasure didn’t care for. She thought, meeting him, she’d be able to give Jon a better reason for refusing his request for summer work.

“No problem, Andrea, I made a reservation.” Treasure lied without blinking an eye.

An hour later, Treasure pulled away from the curb, a white blanket of wet snow layering everything. The motel she looked for was only a few blocks away, but visibility was nonexistent, and the roadway was slicker than owl snot. The idea of a hotel sickened her, left her stomach in greasy knots. But maybe the sensation was better attributed to Andrea's idea of dinner. Although she and Jon seemed to like the food well enough. Regardless, Treasure was noticeably queasy, and for once, she wasn't sure it had so much to do with anxiety—although, clearly, she was anxious.

At her first stop, the clerk told Treasure they had no vacancies. At the second, seventeen blocks and forty-five minutes away from the first, another clerk shrugged and said, "The storm, you know?" At the third motel, Treasure waited, nauseated and green, in the lobby behind several dozen guests trying to check in ahead of her. She had vomited in one of the barf bags she got from Naomi before leaving her car to stand in line in the lobby. The idea of staying in a hotel gave Treasure the heebie-jeebies, but it seemed more profound than that. When yet another large group entered and pressed Treasure tight against the back of a black-coated, wooly mammoth-like individual, Treasure felt her gorge rise again. She rushed to the parking lot and began to vomit. Before she finished, a police officer stood beside her, threatening to arrest her for public intoxication. When he finally left her alone, she got into her car and switched the key only to realize she didn't have enough gas to keep it running all night. Given the state of the roads, she wasn't sure she had enough gas to make it to the nearest open gas station, assuming any remained open. She sat in the car in the parking lot of the hotel with the

engine turned off, shivering in the blue light of a lamppost watching people go into the lobby and come out again almost immediately, turned away by the night clerk.

By six the following morning, she'd been both arrested and hospitalized. Of course, the police dropped the charges as soon as they got medical confirmation of ptomaine poisoning and no alcohol in the blood. Still. Treasure's simple day trip with her kids was not a positive experience, every reservation she had trenching itself deeper.

Chapter 8: Treasure and Chloe

Outflanked and Overruled

I met Chloe Baldwin a few times at a group home in a suburb of Houston before her first weekend visit to my home. After my approval to foster came through, I arranged for her to stay the weekend with me in my home, a trial run, sort of.

We did okay, her and me. She didn't seem too bothered by the gated compound I live in.

I told her I had two kids, grown and gone, and now I had empty space. It was true, but felt enough like a lie I almost choked telling it, but it's what Andrea and Darren and Janice told me to say.

I told her Delancy and Genecia lived nearby, I told her sometimes I have panic attacks, I told her the choice was hers, ultimately. Another lie.

She looked at photographs of Andrea and Jon and told me my place seemed like a decent enough option to her.

I told her we could wait until summer break for the move, if she wanted.

She said why wait just as soon get the move done.

Her words held a resignation that bothered me, so I invited Delancy and Genecia over for supper. We did okay, the four of us. But later, it dawned on me I wanted Chloe to want to come live with me. I wanted her to think it really would be a better place for her with better opportunities. Her tone bothered me because it told me she didn't really

think she had a choice. It told me she didn't think any choices would be good. I'd spent years thinking the exact same things, but when I saw it in her, I got angry. Tanya was right: there are better options. For the first time in decades, I knew I had something better to offer someone else.

One Monday, the first day of her high school's spring break, I picked her up, checked her out like a library book through her social worker's office: she brought a single duffle bag with her. The local high school on my end had spring break a week later, making it the theoretical "best" time for us to make the change: A two-week window of opportunity. A vacation. A new start.

Everyone said it was a good plan. But me, I was freaked out about having to submit an itinerary in triplicate, being accountable again for every decision I make and having to put it on record every place I want to take a kid, when, where, how long. These kinds of things just make you easier to track, being in the system. Make you easier to trap.

We sat in the car in front of the social worker's office, a sheaf of papers listing contact information for folks at my local office, court dates, appearances required, routine checks and notice of unannounced spot checks, the usual bureaucratic kinds of things sitting in a file folder between us.

I said this would be a huge change for both of us. I said, tell me, if this isn't what you want to do. I said you have options. But I could tell the way she answered she didn't believe that.

She said it didn't matter, she said we might as well get it over with, she said putting off the drive wouldn't make anything easier or better.

Quite the little optimist is Chloe Baldwin. And little is the right description for her. At a height of four feet eight inches, Chloe is petite, her wrist like a child's. Her features had a child-like fragility that surprised me.

Delancy made her sound like an Amazonian warrior princess. Invincible. Ancient. Wise.

She was like nothing I expected, and yet from the first visit with her, I had the same sense—that she was the adult, I was the child. I didn't have to imagine the kinds of forces that wrought such maturity.

We were driving home when she asked me what I'd been told about her.

I didn't say anything at first. I thought about when Natalie and Jared died, about how I made a choice to tell Andrea and Jon a lie, that I shot their father, instead of telling the truth—that before he even knew Jared had killed two women in my home and intended to kill me, Darren shot Jared. They weren't they only ones we'd told the story.

Darren hadn't known about the sick situation I'd escaped. He hadn't known the sick situation I'd left my kids in when I ran. But when he found out, his fury was direct and undeniable. And when Jared showed up in my living room one day—the look in Darren's eyes when he raised his shotgun—I hadn't known whether he intended to shoot me or Jared, when he found me down on my knees in front of him—

People said the truth will set you free, but I never felt free. Whether I lied or whether I told the truth about Jared and Natalie, or me and Darren, either way I felt tied up. Bound. I hadn't been able to talk about it. I was all tied up, a decade later. Maybe ten years from now this girl won't have to be bound by the things that happened, like I was. I'd been thinking for weeks about what I would tell this girl, this warrior princess Chloe Baldwin, if she asked me anything.

We were near a rest stop past the town of Livingston, Texas and I pulled in and parked.

The day was beautiful, and a few other cars were parked around the building that housed restrooms and an exhibit on Native Americans, the Caddo. We stopped and looked at it on Chloe's first visit home with me. The day was too beautiful for the indoors, and anyway, the building was no place for the talk I felt sure was brewing—certainly no place for the things I had to say.

I motioned to a picnic table under loblolly pine trees that swayed in the warm March breeze. Be right, Tanya Broussard, I prayed. Please God, Tanya Broussard, you better be right about this. For God's sake, please be right about this. It was the first time I prayed in years.

No one was near enough to hear us. So, for the first time in years, I talked about it. Like a story, I laid it all out for her, the things I had not been able to talk about since Tom Pense, since Rita. I said, maybe you don't need to worry so much about what I was told about you, maybe you should worry more about what you weren't told about me.

TMI

Chloe sat across the table from me, looking at me with big brown eyes like a toddler's, like an old woman's. She looked sad, like she already knew more about me than I would ever know about myself. She said, "I heard you had it rough. Some kind of attack, right?"

"Some kind," I said. "But probably nothing like you're picturing." And just like that, I told her about Jared and Natalie, about living in a power exchange relationship with a dominant when I wasn't a submissive and didn't want to be. I just wanted to honor God, the way my parents and theirs had, to stick by my commitments. I just wanted to be a wife, to honor my husband, in sickness as well as health. I didn't know if she even knew what I was talking about, she was fifteen, and it was totally inappropriate, but hell, they gave the kid to me to deal with knowing all of it already and I couldn't see doing it any other way. I told her Natalie was my husband's paralegal, that he was a lawyer, and one day, he'd brought her home and told me we were, from that point on in, a polyamorous relationship—the three of us married, I remembered when he told me that. I said to Chloe, I was so messed up at that point, I was too afraid to say no, too afraid to even try to walk away. I could see she didn't know what polyamory meant so I explained. I explained, too, that Jared was brilliant, by then a sadist, and probably mad; I said, at some point, he lost the last of any empathy or sense of reality he ever had. Jared didn't care whether I objected or not, whether he hurt me or not, whether I wanted to be hurt or not. I told her things spiraled down from

there, and one day, he decided what he really wanted was to have sex with someone who couldn't ever object again. I called it what it was: necrophilia. And I told her how it ended for Natalie and another woman on three-hundred acres off Highway 96 not far from Jasper, Texas, and how Jared intended for my life to end that day too. I didn't tell Chloe that Darren shot Jared. But I didn't claim the old lie that I shot him, either.

Chloe looked stunned, and I let the sounds and smells of the pines around us soothe me. I tried so hard not to remember. I'd been trying so hard, for so long, not to remember. It was impossible to forget. I hurried the story to get through it. There'd be time to remember, later.

Chloe asked, "How did you get away?"

I startled. "What?"

"When Jared came after you, when he killed the other women, how did you manage to escape?"

I said my brother was with me, we called the law on Jared, but things happened too fast, things—spiraled. "Jared was shot and killed," I said, leaving the details nebulous. "Chloe, that's really not the bad part of my story. The bad part came later. Jared was dead. Two women—one woman I was very close to—" That was an understatement. "They were both dead. And just when we were getting through that, just when I thought my kids and I were safe—that we could have a happy ending, Tom Pense showed up with every kind of bad intention. That's probably the attack they told you about."

Chloe nodded. “After Katrina, right? But,” she said, “Damn. You thought it was all over?”

I nodded, then shrugged. “I knew Jared was angry with me, and I knew—from past experience—Jared’s anger could take unexpected turns.” I didn’t want to explain what I meant. I didn’t want to talk about hours disappeared from my memory, or the entire weekend I had so little recollection of—after which I’d been hospitalized with severe wounds from a whip, vague memories and recollections of what I’d been through; scars and recurrent bouts of vomiting the legacy. “In Pense’s trial, I guess, it came out that Jared spent a lot of time on the web, talking to other men who shared his, um, interests. That’s how Pense knew about me. Not surprising, I guess. It’s not the kind of stuff you talk about with friends and neighbors, usually. Computers make it too easy to—” I swallowed back my nausea. “Engage in,” I wouldn’t, couldn’t say what, so I didn’t.

“Jared shared a lot of details about me online, in chatrooms or whatever, especially during his fight against our divorce. He communicated with this one man, Tom Pense, *a lot* apparently. I never understood whether Pense acted on his own, a revenge plan or something after he found out about Jared’s death, or if maybe Jared put Pense up to it before he had his big psychotic break at the end. Either way, it doesn’t matter. Pense knew enough about me to track me down when he wanted to, and he had the same crazy patience Jared had—he waited to come after me. Waited until everyone was distracted with Katrina, and then Rita, and he took me right in the middle of that

storm. I was with him a month. Everything was so crazy with the storms and all. He said he'd thought about what he could do with me for a long time—said, in the end, the opportunity the hurricanes presented was just too good to pass up.”

Chloe nodded as if she understood. She asked, “How did you escape him?”

“Everything was so crazy. He took me, kept moving me, kept us hidden in the confusion of all the evacuations, going from place to place. He used different vehicles. Stayed at a house once, a motel another time, a camp way out in the middle of nowhere—that was bad. No one could hear me. It was—crazy, after the storms I mean. Even outside the affected areas, out of Texas. People everywhere talked about the storms. Really, I think that’s what saved me. People were different, for a while. After 9-11 and the storms. They were kinder, maybe. They looked out for each other in a way that was different, I think. I was out of it, totally out of it—I know that much—there at the last. I don’t know what they saw, the people who rescued me, how they knew. But they knew the situation was dead wrong, and there were enough of them to overcome Pense and rescue me. At the trial, Pense called them do-gooders, busybodies. To me, they’re good Samaritans, my heroes.” Treasure shrugged, her head moving side to side in negation of Pense’s interpretation. “I never realized how many stone-cold crazy brilliant people there are out there.”

“How did you stand it?”

I didn’t, I said, I built walls and locked myself away. I have panic attacks, I said. “See, here’s what you need to know about me,” I said. “I know what it is to do things

you don't want to do. I know what it is to *like* doing things you don't even *want* to do. And I know what it's like to think you're going to die doing things you never thought you'd ever have to do again. Sex—I'm talking about sexual things."

We sat at the picnic table listening to the wind in the trees.

"Here's the thing," I said. "You signed on thinking you were the one with the problems. That I was probably some do-gooder—" I laughed, bitter at using Pense's words, "with good intentions and absolutely no clue what's waiting out there in the big wide world. Something like that, right?"

Chloe's chin tilted defensively.

"I didn't think it was fair," I said, "you not knowing the real story of my past. That's all. I didn't think it was fair for you to base the next three or four years of your life thinking you're the only one who's been victimized sexually by people who were supposed to love you and take care of you. And if you don't want to do this, if you can think of a better solution—"

Chloe shook her head. Her eyes looked war-like. I saw for the first time what Chloe Baldwin looked like to Delancy, her eyes the eyes of an Amazon. "That's just it. There isn't a better solution for me. I haven't seen my mother since I was nine years old and she caught her pedophile boyfriend doing me and she kicked me out of the house naked as the day I was born. He said I made him do it to me. I heard later, the dumb shit was having a baby for him. How'd you put it? Things spiraled down from there? I've

been kicked out of five foster homes, and the group homes are—some are okay, I guess, but I haven't had good luck. Let's just leave it at that."

"What did you do? Those three weeks you were missing?" It finally occurred to me to ask her.

She stared back at me, her eyes gone black and empty. "What it took," she said.

I couldn't help it. I dropped my eyes first.

She said, "This deal, with you, it's probably my last chance. There's no going back now, you know? Anyway, I don't want to go back, I'll take my chances with you, thanks."

Chloe stood and walked a few steps toward the car. She turned back to me, "You ready, or what?"

We had driven thirty miles before she said anything else. She said, "So. Who do I have to have sex with—you know, for privileges?"

I winced, swerved the car a bit to the right into the rough-graded edge of the pavement, and fought for control. "Totes adorbs." I said. I'd heard TeeJay and Delancy say it recently. Or a few years ago, maybe. Time tends to elude me. I looked at the clock.

She sat there beside me in the front seat of the moving car waiting.

Feeling suddenly sick to my stomach I said, "Nobody that I know of." I spared a split second to consider the astonishing fact that I'd spilled my guts to this kid without once vomiting. I said, "I think you can consider your body your own—at least until you

get out and about more. I can't really control what happens then." I let her sit with that for a minute. "When you leave the house, that's another thing entirely—but you're safe until then. Wait. That's a lie. I can't really keep you safe anywhere, not even on the property. It's a great big sick ball of a world and you and I don't have much of a say over any of it."

Chloe gave me one long sober look, nodded, and neither of us said another word until we got to the property. When we got there, got the gate opened and closed behind us, after I checked to make sure the lock was tight and got back in the car, Chloe sighed.

I looked at her then. I saw a hint of a bantam smile tip the corners of her lips.

"We're here," she said.

A few hours later, Genecia called, inviting Chloe to spend the night, if it was okay with me.

I told Chloe it was up to her, I wanted her to consider this her home. I told her I knew she hadn't had nearly enough time to catch up with Delancy and Genecia yet. "Go ahead," I said. "Genecia will be busy with school most of next week. Take some time with her this weekend."

It's a good thing she took me up on it. The memories I'd held at bay so long collapsed on me in the night. I didn't need a witness while I said goodbye to Natalie's apparition.

Chapter 9: Treasure and Natalie

I awoke to the stroke of Natalie's finger down my jaw. Her lips followed in the lightest, sweetest kiss.

"One day," she said. "One day where it's about you and me and pleasure and nothing else and he isn't part of it one bit. Can't you give me just a single day?"

I held her, stroked her, "Yes. One day. Today."

I was supposed to go to work with Tad and Chiclets, filling in for Crystal on maternity leave. Instead, I called Tad and said I needed a day to get myself together. I must have sounded a little odd to him, because he asked if everything was okay.

I told him. "I just need a day."

"Anything you need, Treasure," he said. "You know I'm here for you, right? We're here for you—"

Tad probably felt twisted up in a hobgoblin's reel. How does he think I expect him to react after learning the events that brought me, alone, to east Texas?

"I know."

There was an awkward pause. Neither of us hung up or said goodbye. Then Tad said, "Be safe today, Treasure, Okay? Just—be safe."

I laughed. Whatever he was afraid my day would involve, I'm pretty sure he still didn't have a clue what I'd really be doing. Then again, maybe he did.

"Fine, Tad, I'll be fine. Tomorrow, okay? I'll see you tomorrow."

Natalie held my hand through the entire conversation. When I hung up, she said, "I'll cook breakfast."

Natalie never cooked at home with Jared. He'd ordered her never to serve me like that. Natalie was never to serve me, she existed entirely for him and for his pleasure. Her role in our marriage was to be a constant source of humiliation and pain to me. And she had been.

Natalie was a terrible cook.

We laughed and dumped the burned toast and dry eggs into a bucket and set the bucket outside the kitchen door. Eventually, it would go in the compost pile.

"What do you want to do today? Can we go out?" she asked.

I poured Natalie's horrifying brew down the sink and made a fresh pot of fragrant coffee. "Okay, how about antiquing. Do you want to wander around looking at antiques in the country?" I asked her.

We'd never done anything like that, had only ever appeared together in public connected with Jared's and Natalie's work together at the firm—and at my parents funeral—but I didn't acknowledge the second.

After drinking a few cups of coffee together, we migrated to the bath and showered together. We dressed together, neither of us commanding anything from the other. Both of us enjoying the other's companionship, something we'd never been allowed.

I wanted to show her antique stores like Nethery's Mercantile, in San Augustine, but it turned out to be closed during the week. I soon discovered most antique shops in the rural area tended to close during the week, their customers tourists from the metropolitan areas usually only up for the weekends.

"We may have a problem," I said to Natalie. "It never occurred to me these places were only open on weekends."

"Not much business around here otherwise, I wouldn't think," Natalie said.

We drove around the countryside for several hours, looking anyway. Finally Natalie said, "Let's go to Nacogdoches. I haven't been back there since I graduated."

I hadn't known Natalie went to college at Stephen F. Austin. I'd been thinking about going there to study horticulture.

We talked. We told each other about ourselves, another thing we'd never, ever done before.

I told her my master plan for life without Jared. She told me about how she'd intended to work a year or two as a paralegal to gain experience before going to law school, to give herself a break. Then she was assigned to work with Jared, and everything changed.

"You could go back to school now," I said. "Become the lawyer you intended to be instead of a paralegal. I think you'd be a good lawyer."

"Maybe," Natalie said. "But maybe it's time to do something new. Maybe I ought to break the patterns and do totally different things."

We expressed opinions. We asked questions. We spoke of “should” and “ought” but never once did we form a sentence with a single command.

We were hungry having gone without breakfast, but we suppressed mention of that fact until we made it as far as Lufkin. Instead of turning north to Nacogdoches, I turned the pickup south, toward the restaurants that lined Highway 59 on the south side. We drove around and around, debating between seafood, Mexican, or steak. We finally decided to eat at El Chico’s.

The place was old, and it had that abandoned look all the best dives seem to have. It was the kind of place Jared wouldn’t be caught dead. It was perfect for us.

We sat across the table like two women friends would sit. We didn’t touch. We didn’t gaze longingly at each other or be obvious in any way. And yet I think we were both hyper-aware of the other, as if it was the date night we’d both decided would be “the night.” We ate enchiladas and soaked up the smells of chile and corn, wishing the day would never end. Wishing there was a place we could go together. Wishing we’d never met.

After lunch we drove to Nacogdoches.

“May I drive,” Natalie asked, and I pulled over to give her the wheel.

She drove a circuitous route around town, re-acquainting herself with sites that were familiar and changed from what she remembered of her four years living there. We stopped at the college and walked around on the pine-treed campus. We got back

into the truck and drove around a little more. Late afternoon, she pulled into the parking lot of a hotel, the Fredonia.

“I’m going to stay here,” she told me. “I think I’ll get a room here for now. Will you come in with me to see it? In a little while, maybe we can drive back to your place and I’ll get my things. But I think it’s best if I stay here, don’t you?”

I nodded, and we got out together and went into the hotel lobby.

Natalie reserved the room for a week, and with the key in her hand, we went upstairs.

I tried to take in every detail of the place. I tried to make a photo album of it and her in my mind, but every bit slipped away. I recall none of the surroundings now, only her.

She was gentle with me and she gave me only pleasure.

At dusk, she said, “We should go now.”

We drove home in the dark together. When we reached the land, we got out of the pickup and we sheet composted. I took one bucket, Natalie took another, and we spread shit in the moonlight, shaking pine straw and grass clippings over it.

“Make it change,” I prayed, “make it change.”

We washed up, I made dinner and we ate, still silent. After, I asked her, “Will you promise me you’ll get counseling?”

She stared in my eyes a moment before she answered, “I will.”

“He violated both our trusts, you know that, right?”

She said, "Yes. I know."

"You can't go back to him. You won't go back to him, will you?"

I could see the strength of his pull on her. I could see the war that raged beneath the surface, "Promise me, please, please promise me. He will kill you for this, you know he will. Probably was already planning to."

She sighed, "I know. He isn't himself. He no longer has the control to keep me safe, and I do know that—but—"

"I'm sorry," I told her.

She hadn't expected me to say it. But I was sorry for her. I was sorry for us both, and I was sorry for the children I had refused to abort. I was sorry I hadn't and I was sick that I was sorry. For the first time, I let slip my fiction regarding how safe and how separate from Jared's domination the children had been. I let myself see the truth of how I'd betrayed them staying with him as I had.

"What about Darren and Janice?" Natalie asked, seeming to read my mind.

"Do you think they would raise the kids? They deserve that. They deserve some place safe away from all of us. Kids shouldn't have to—"

"I don't know. I hope so," I admitted. "It's what I hoped for when I came here, but I could never admit it to them. Now, now I probably don't have to admit it; they can probably see that for themselves."

"I'm sorry, Treasure," Natalie said to me. "I know how much you wanted to keep them safe. You did better than I would have done. Than I did. When I saw him,

looking at Andrea—and Jon. Jon was bossing me around like I was trash under his shoe—I’m so sorry.”

We were both sorry. Terribly, horribly sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

“Nobody talks about what happens when things go bad,” Natalie said. “In the lifestyle, I mean. They say a sub has all the power. They talk about how consensual everything is—It’s a crock of shit, isn’t it. They never mention doms that don’t take no or being passed around when you said you didn’t want it—or having your kids taken away—”

I thought of the panic attacks that assailed me when Jared called for play time. I thought of the fear so all-encompassing I nearly passed out at the first site of his toys. I thought of the weight and pain in my chest, of his accusations I was faking, that I faked having a heart attack so I could avoid submitting. I remembered that final weekend, before I ran.

“It’s a crock of shit,” I said. “Promise me you’ll see a counselor? Naomi—she knows the whole story already. She could—”

“I can find someone myself,” Natalie said, belligerent. “Thanks, but I think I’ll be heading in a different direction.”

“Natalie,” I urged her. “You know about Stockholm Syndrome, right? This is like that. You know? You know what this does to us, right?”

“I know!” she said. Anger tinged the words. “I know.”

“Do you, Natalie? You understand how the perception of pleasure can be altered over time. Do you understand that brain chemistry itself changes? Because of the stimulation and association—do you understand that altered consciousness goes with Jared’s kind of sexual training?” It was a pointless argument. She knew as well as I.

Five years, Natalie lived with my husband and me. Five years Natalie abused me, but she didn’t do it to hurt me. She thought it’s what I wanted, what I’d agreed to. Because she agreed to the lifestyle of her own free will, she thought I’d had that right too. She didn’t understand what I did, I did to keep us safe. All of us, safe. And because we were both Jared’s slaves, because he controlled our every interaction completely in what he called a “power-exchange” relationship, it took her years to see the truth. It took me years to see the truth. Maybe we wouldn’t have, if Jared hadn’t so completely lost it.

There is no way for anyone to comprehend how much I love her or how much she loves me. She gave up her master to protect my children. She gave him up to be with me. She has agreed to reveal the private relationship, to testify to the truth of what we had—against her master’s explicit commands. That’s how much she loves me. She’s telling the truth about everything now, for me. And there is no way for anyone to understand how much we hate each other because of all of it.

“Please Natalie, I’m begging you,” I said.

Natalie shook her head. "You know as well as I do he still thinks both of us will come back to him, right? He thinks ultimately we'll let him do anything he wants. I'm not sure he isn't right about that."

"God—don't say it. Don't say that."

"Did you know Jared still hasn't granted you the divorce? You're still married. Did you know that? He's obsessed with you," she said. "Me. I'm just the needle to jab you with." She shook her head, "I didn't understand how much until that weekend, when he let them beat you—and took those photographs, and the kids. These last months—" Natalie began to cry, "Do you know he wanted me to have plastic surgery—he wanted me—he gave me a picture of you to use as the model of the changes he wanted. Thank god, I couldn't get an appointment for four months—Jared looked at Andrea, and he smiled. God help me. He smiled and he said, 'Never mind. Cancel that appointment.' And the same day Jon told me his breakfast tasted like crap, to take it away and fix him something that tasted good instead. He used that tone—you know? He sounded just like Jared, and I just couldn't—I couldn't go on, you know?"

I folded myself around her, wishing I could give her the shelter she needed.

"He has a new paralegal," she told me. "He made me quit work and stay home with the kids. And, and those bites?"

I stroked the small bites that were turning to scars, knowing already what she would say.

“He made her bite me, mark me,” she said. “I’m sure he told her it was what I wanted, what I liked, same as he told me it’s what you wanted.”

Jared would never really be charged with any crimes, because he never really committed any. He was always too intelligent, wicked crazy intelligent, for that. Natalie is right, we’ll never escape him.

My stomach gurgled and everything in it turned to liquid. I ran for a bucket. I reached it just in time not to soil myself. I covered the brown splatter with sawdust, cleaned myself, and when I left the bathroom, Natalie had taken her things and gone.

I gathered the day’s bucket and I headed outside praying, somehow, this shit could become something better. I folded the waste into a giant pile of straw, praying. I went into the greenhouse, breathing the night air deep into my lungs as if it had the power to drive away the putrid funk of what I’d been.

I planted seeds, one by one, into tiny trenches in black plastic seedling trays. Painstakingly, I worked for hours, planting flowers and vegetables and herbs. “Focus on the plan,” I told myself. “Just focus.”

When I could stand to go back inside the house, I did, searching for a drawing pad and colored pencils. For another two hours I drew fanciful drawings of the landscape I hoped would mature to cover the barren, scraped ground. I drew tiny cabins, picturesque and quaint, colorful and rustic, too. I drew roses and elderberry, mulberry trees and hickories, and blackberry brambles trailing. I drew things

blossoming. I drew fruits and leaves and every thing of beauty I could imagine growing on the property.

And finally I noticed dawn had come. I found a package of thumbtacks I'd bought, tacked up all the pictures on the walls around my bedroom. I took a shower and changed into fresh clothes for the day. I cooked a coffee cake and made a pot of the best coffee I had in the house and ate a fresh orange, sucking the juice as I cracked the peel open, eating the segments one at a time.

I tried to spend a few minutes praying. I'm not very good at it. It's hard for me to believe, anymore—but still. There are good people, and they believe. They say I should pray. So I prayed Darren and Janice were up to the task of handling the catastrophe I'd made of my children's lives. I prayed they would help my children rebuild now that Natalie has given me a way to burn down the house.

Treasure emerged from her dream of Natalie as a corpse, come to tell her goodbye, once and for all. She lay immobile listening, hyper-vigilant. She had not vomited. That was good, right?

She spent the rest of the night wide awake, as she often did, thinking—not of Jared, at first, but of Darren—what his defense of her had cost him.

Treasure thought of what it would have cost her and her children if he hadn't.

Chapter 10: Chloe

Email from the Moon

Z—So get this: Genecia's happy, safe and happy. She's über normal. She's like, all vanilla country-fried, now. It's hard to believe she was ever the scared, screwed up kid of a crackwhore. And I know I saw her when they visited me in Houston and all, but you can't ever really tell. You know? People pretend all the time, and the visits were short. I could never really tell what her life was really like. She said it was better and all, but how was I to know? For real?

I still like her. I mean, like, she's funny and all. Delancy's this TV dad, you know? I mean, it's kinda hard to watch and all. But I've gone over there like three times already. Two times this week for dinner, because Genecia's still in school this week.

Honest to God, it's like she's younger now than she was when we all lived in group together.

So, I'm trying to figure this Treasure chick out, Z. I don't get her. She's like us, but she's also like this hard-ass group mom, all jaded and shit, but then she's not. Not exactly. She's like, I don't know. Different. She scared the shit out of me on the way here. I thought I was, like, going to have to be bitch to a gang or some shit. Then she said some shit like "my body's my own" or something. But, this week anyway, it's true. Nobody's messed with me all week.

You're not going to believe what I have been doing all week, either. Treasure's place is this big nursery. Not like little kids or nothing like that. It's a place where they grow flowers and plants and stuff in greenhouses and outside, too, and they make these flower designs like they sell in grocery stores and shit. Treasure says it's a wholesale floral nursery. We stopped on the way up here, at this town called Lufkin, and we got me some boots and some jeans and some flannel shirts and shit with long sleeves, cuz Treasure, she says I'll need it and all. And then, all week long, she's got me working in this place. Learning how to cut flowers off plants just right and how to treat them after, like every one of them has a different way you have to handle them. Some need hot water right after you cut the stem. Some need other stuff. And then, you cut the stem a little again when you bring them inside and you put them in a solution made with this white powder stuff you put in a metal bucket with water and you put all the flowers in the buckets into the cooler when you're finished.

Z. The "cooler," it's like this giant refrigerator room. Bigger than the beer fridge in Nguyen's convenience store. And that's where they put all the flowers and stuff until they ship them out to the stores. They even have their own trucks for delivery. Delancy helps with that, you know. I finally understand what Delancy does. It's nothing like we thought.

Ze'chon, like eight hours a day, most days this week, I had to work there. And, it's like, you've got to do things just exactly their way. And so, then, just when I'm feeling all Solomon Northup—she's working me like a dog all week—she comes in

with this piece of paper, this check, and it's got my name on it and it's got like \$336.44 written on it. And Treasure, she says, "Here you go, I thought you'd like this now instead of tomorrow." And I'm thinking like, bitch, the state pays you way more than this. Why you have to work me so hard? And, like, then she says once she starts getting the payments from the state, I'll have access to a lot more money than that measly little check. Like she's going to give me the whole check or some shit. But then, she starts explaining what all the writing on the check means, what withholdings means and how the taxes and shit for the government come out, what it all means.

She starts telling me this stuff about healthcare policies. Like I know shit about healthcare. But she says, I don't have to walk into a doctor's office with Medicaid now. She said she'd probably catch crap over it, but there was no way she was messing with Medicaid. She asked me if it bothered me, if people treated me different in doctor's offices because I had Medicaid. I told her if they did, I didn't know it. It's all I've ever had. How am I supposed to know? But it's her party. Whatever.

Then, she's like, you want to go the bank? And she lets me make my own decision about what I want to do with the paycheck, but she said when we're travelling around on vacation, I'll want some cash money of my own, that's what she said. That I can spend it however I want. And she said I can work after school, if I want. She said I can work summers, too, if I want. She said, "You're not my slave, you know. But if you want to work here, you can. It's up to you." And she said I'd be getting the money from

the state, to put into my own account, so if I don't want to work at the nursery that's okay, too. And she said it like two or three times, man.

Like I said, Z, this chick ain't like nobody we've ever met before. I don't know. She may turn out to be this big madam or something and I'll be pissed. We'll see how it goes when I'm camped out all week with her. We'll see what we see then, won't we?

But listen, I'm at this library in Lufkin—we're so far out in the boondocks that we have to travel more than thirty miles through the country to get back to a town big enough to have a library. And we've been to the bank. I have a bank account now. Of My OWN, Z, with more than \$200 in it. And cash in the hand, too, a buck-twenty-five. And a new library card. They said at the bank I can get an ATM card if I want one. Treasure's all skeptical, "why would anyone want one?" But I do. I want one. They said I'll get it in the mail in a few weeks.

One thing Treasure doesn't have is a computer. Well, two things. She doesn't have a television and she doesn't have a computer. Not that I've seen, at the business or her house. I was like, how do you watch your shows or stay in touch with people. And she just pulled out her cell phone and said she calls and texts but nothing else. She says she stays off computers. Said, televisions are not kind creatures. Said it all weird. But she said we'd make a trip to the library pretty regular and I can use the computers at the library if I want, or maybe sometimes at Genecia's, but I don't know what "regular" means to her. Then she laughed and said she'd been thinking she might give TV a try again.

Next week, we're not even going to be around here anyway. We're going to Austin, that's the capitol city of Texas. We're going to the "Hill Country," like I know where that is. Well, I kind of do, since I looked at it on a map. I know I said I would email you all the time. I can't. Not right now. I don't know how often I'll be able to get to the library or to Genecia's where I could use the computer. Maybe it'll be better when I start school. But I don't have my own phone anymore. They confiscated my old one—the one Delancy gave me. He pitched a fit about it, but they wouldn't give it back. He said he'd get me a new one, but then this business with Treasure fostering me came up. We let it ride. Treasure, she hasn't said anything about it, and I'm not going to ask, not right now anyway. Hey. Maybe I'll buy my own cell phone.

I will stay in touch. As much as I can, like we said, through email. Nobody knows about the accounts and can read them except us, right, it's the safest way so we can tell each other what's really going on. Stay safe. Don't let Malik get you down, Z. Don't let him get to you.

Malik and Ze'Chon

Malik felt the new phone's vibration in his pocket before he heard the distinctive ring-tone. The iconic sounds of Jaws broke the silence. He fumbled trying to remove it from his pocket, hands shaking. After an interminable delay, he spoke one word of greeting. "Hello."

"Malik, you did get my present after all. I was beginning to think it might not have been delivered."

The words resonated with displeasure.

“I was climbing stairs with five bags of groceries. There was no place to—”

“I despise whining.”

Malik stood on the third-level balcony, ten feet from his apartment doorway, his packages littered around him. The half-gallon of Blue Bell ice cream had hopped from its plastic shopping bag on impact, and its lid popped off. Homemade Vanilla, his favorite flavor, lay in glops around the half-empty container. Malik closed his eyes, concentrating on the voice on the phone. Malik listened.

“I have the most spectacular production in mind for you. It came to me over the weekend. We’ve overlooked a gold mine. This is *the* project that will make you famous.”

Malik’s eyes squeezed tighter as he listened.

“That little whore that got away, where is she these days? The girl your beloved cousin is so fond of, she’s perfect. I can see her in the starring role. Brilliant.”

Malik’s eyes popped open and he stared at the run-down railing. A risky business, getting this kind of scene on film, and risks were something he didn’t need. This kind of risk communicated to Malik that his usefulness to them probably had reached its end. The deliberate mistake, substituting cousin for nephew, indicated his nephew’s life was forfeit. The scene described would make him famous, in a very tiny, very particular, and very dark circle.

Only three more years, his nephew eighteen and able to go off to college somewhere else, Malik's responsibility to him absolved. He could have disappeared forever. Made a new start. Done legit photography even, maybe, or gone to a cinematography school himself, to Hollywood. Only three years. He was still young, would not even have been thirty yet.

He no longer had three years. Hell. His nephew's life had always leveraged against him.

Risks were nothing but opportunities, right? Hell, risks could be turned to his own advantage. Right? He thought longingly of an old-fashioned telephone book, not knowing exactly how to start the Internet search he needed to make. Who would be the most interested in his story, he wondered. Who might have the power to get Malik and Ze'Chon free of the situation?

Chapter 11: Treasure and Chloe

Begging Ill Becomes Her

“It’s just—” Treasure didn’t want to explain. “After—”

Darren figured out from the scant context where Treasure was going. He felt pity, something he tried to do as seldom as possible, thinking it made Treasure weak. Darren sighed. “After the hotel fiasco you don’t even want to try it again, right?”

“Right,” Treasure said, slowly. “I’m—”

“You’re afraid it’ll happen again?” Darren laughed. “Yeah. If you’re talking about you freaking out. Probably. Ptomaine poisoning, now really, that’s not nearly so common as you seem to think. Are you sure about this, Treasure? I mean, *camping*? You and the kids only got to use the thing that one time before—” It was Darren’s turn to stutter. “Um, I. I. Um. I mean—”

The Tom Pense thing was always there between them. Darren blamed himself—he’d promised to help Treasure that night, and if he had, he would have been with her and maybe—

Clay feet—the eternal problem of heroes.

“I have to try,” Treasure whispered into the phone. “I have to try. So, can I borrow it for a week?”

“Borrow it? The damn thing’s yours,” Darren barked.

“Not anymore, and anyway you built the thing. It’s been sitting in your shop all these years. If it’s not yours, I don’t know whose—except maybe the kids. But they don’t want it.”

“Don’t be that way, Treasure,” Darren said. “It’s yours. Come get it, if you want it. Maybe you’ll have better luck with Chloe—” Darren broke off.

Treasure vacillated. “Nobody’s got plans for it?”

“Just use it, okay?” Darren’s frustration with the conversation came out in his growl. “Make the effort, Treasure.”

The teardrop belonged to that netherland, that time and place before the world stopped turning. Treasure saw a teardrop camper after Jared’s death and they’d been cleared. She determined they should have one. For Treasure, camping represented things they never could have done.

Camping belonged to an idyllic childhood, the days when Treasure and Darren lived at home with loving parents. They’d load up on a Friday afternoon and go north on Highway 59, to east Texas, to camp out on the lake, to boat and swim and visit with aunts and uncles and cousins and extended family, all summer long, it seemed, remembering. Treasure, Andrea, and Jon had only used it once before the Pense attack. The thing sat in Darren’s shop under a cover.

Darren and Janice took the kids camping. They honored Treasure’s intent. But Darren didn’t use the teardrop he helped Treasure build. He built a new one, a different one, they called it the Spam Can. It was roomier than the teardrop—he and Janice were

more comfortable with the larger space. They'd taken Andrea and Jon out in it, adding family-sized tents, and inviting their adult children's families on weekend excursions and vacations, like they'd experienced themselves growing up. Janice would zip off mid-day Fridays to set up a base camp, the Spam Can the centerpiece of the campsite, tents clustered around it according to how many and who wandered in before bedtime. Sometimes, they took the teardrop, too, for an extra bed or two. Camping formed the basis of elaborate family rituals, but those rituals centered on Janice and Darren. Treasure's anxieties excluded her from participating with the exuberant group: Janice and Darren's three adult children, their spouses and children, and other friends and extended family.

But Treasure's discomfort with hotels outweighed her discomfort with camping, she'd been surprised to realize. Too, Chloe had reacted strangely to the suggestion of staying in a hotel.

"If this works," Treasure said tentatively, "Maybe I'll want to keep it—or for you to build me a new camper."

"A new one?" Darren perked up. "I'd like to build another. There are things I'd do different, now that you mention it."

Darren had built seven homemade campers since the teardrop, beginning with his Spam Can, for family members and friends who lost the desire to sleep in an un-air-conditioned tent in the heat of the summer but did not care for expensive, modern travel trailers. Several of their friends owned RVs, but for the sheer sense of nostalgia, the

smaller, lighter campers struck the Montgomery clan as providing an experience better suited to the outdoors. They liked the ease of use and convenience of them: pulling smaller trailers required no special vehicles or unusual skill at driving to navigate down the highway. Folks who couldn't see themselves in a pick-up towing a large travel trailer could easily imagine themselves towing Darren's smaller trailers.

For the first time, Treasure considered Darren's hobbies—in his way, he was as compulsive as she. The realization startled her. Naomi is right: time to give up my self-absorption, Treasure thought.

“Thank you, Darren.”

“See you Friday?” Darren asked.

“Friday.”

Treasure disconnected the call, wishing she didn't feel like the weight on her chest was going to press her flat to the ground.

Play Together, Stay Together

Shared activities create bonds. It's what Tanya and her friend the social worker from Houston, and even Naomi, told Treasure. “Work together the first week and play together the second week, but stay together the whole time,” Naomi advised Treasure. “It will make an easier transition for both of you in the weeks before she starts school. It'll help create a bond between you.”

Blew it on day one, Treasure thought.

Treasure had worked with her own kids, vacationed once with her own kids, neither the bonds nor the transitions between them any easier for it. But she knew how to be compliant, knew how to appear to follow the rules even while bending them her way to keep from going mad. She provided an itinerary with enough detail to satisfy the social workers but not enough for someone to surprise her, waiting at any specific location to interview them and check on Chloe's welfare or blind-side them and make them disappear forever. Hopefully, the social workers would do what they said and give Treasure and Chloe time to adjust to one another before any spot-checks occurred. It didn't make sense to Treasure for them to try to catch them on the road during vacation, but Treasure didn't remember much of what Tanya had done making sense to her, originally. Maybe things would be better this time. After all, Treasure was supposed to be one of them, the good guys.

The plan was for Treasure and Chloe to leave Saturday evening, stopping overnight to visit Andrea and Jon in Bryan-College Station before heading west for "the Hill Country." Treasure and Chloe would get to know each other and Treasure's children, travel, sightsee, go to museums and other educational places, and shop. They planned to hit a huge outlet mall between New Braunfels and San Marcos and to eat out or watch movies, and camp. They would end up around Austin, San Marcos, New Braunfels later in the week to meet up with Genecia and Delancy. Treasure said Genecia and Chloe could share a tent or, maybe, a hotel room, and Delancy would have a tent or a room nearby. Chloe nixed the hotel. She said she'd rather camp. They'd

inner-tube the Comal or the Guadalupe River or maybe go to Schlitterbahn, if the weather was good.

Treasure got out a map, and she and Chloe sat side-by-side at the table in the nursery breakroom, talking about the route they'd take, places they might stay. Treasure spoke of *might* a lot. Delancy said something about the long drive ahead of them, so Chloe looked at the distance between Houston and Alto on the map, measuring it between her thumb and her forefinger. She traced the route Treasure said they would take to get to San Antonio and the mysterious area Treasure called the "Hill Country," seeing the distance between Alto and San Antonio.

It didn't look so much further to Chloe, not quite twice as far. But Chloe couldn't figure out how long the drive was along something Treasure called the "devil's backbone." She didn't know how much mileage Treasure's plan to see Fredericksburg or the Sauer-Beckmann Farm (Treasure had written it out for Chloe) would add, either. She used a kindergartener's wooden ruler from a nail on the wall of the breakroom to measure distances on the map, trying to figure it out. Chloe had never left Houston until Treasure came along. Houston was big enough for her. Too big, she told Treasure, circling the city proper with her finger along the loop. Only two places she'd lived had been outside the loop in Houston, Chloe told Treasure.

Treasure said, "You're outside the loop now."

Chloe thought about Z, her best friend, stuck back there inside the loop, and she worried. Z needed to get away from Malik. Things weren't going to end well for Malik,

Chloe knew it. Best thing would be if Z could get as far away from him as she'd been able to move, maybe farther. The week flew by, and on Friday, Treasure gave Chloe a check for her efforts, told her there was still one more day before the work was done for the week, but they'd take off a few hours early to go to the bank if Chloe wanted. Chloe wanted.

Chloe watched everyone all week long. She tried to be cool about it, so no one knew she was judging them, trying to get the lay of the land. Delancy seemed exactly as he'd appeared to her, nice, hard-working, good sense of humor, didn't take himself too serious. TeeJay was harder to figure. She acted all tough and hard, but she was always offering Chloe a snack, or showing her an easier way to do the work, or helping her out by finishing a task for her when Treasure wasn't watching. Celia and Juanito were so into each other they barely noticed anybody else. But Chloe didn't get any perv-obsessed kind of vibe from them, just a nice vanilla shine. They were okay, she thought. They were both older than Delancy and TeeJay, but they seemed to have younger kids or something. They'd worked for Treasure the longest, from what Chloe could figure out. She watched and tried to understand how everything worked.

And Treasure, Chloe watched Treasure the most, trying to figure her out. She watched her with Genecia and Delancy, thinking she seemed almost normal when she was with them. She watched her at work, surprised at how competent and focused Treasure was when she worked, when she said things like 'leaves of three, leave them be' to warn her not to touch some kinds of plants. It was maybe the only time Chloe

thought Treasure really felt confident. She watched her Friday evening after a trip to the bank and to the public library, when they met Treasure's brother Darren and sister-in-law Janice to get the teardrop camp trailer. They parked beside a truck and this cute little trailer—Chloe could see why it was called a teardrop, because of the shape of the thing. It was the first time Chloe saw Treasure have a panic attack, watched her yak up her guts in the parking lot by the restaurant where they were meeting them for supper. A man ran up to the car, asking for money, and scared them both.

But, maybe it would have happened anyway because the minute Treasure saw the trailer, it was like she got all weird. Chloe thought Treasure had been kidding about the panic attacks. At least, she didn't think they were a big deal, until she saw Treasure get whiter and whiter, then green, then shake like an addict before she yakked all over the place—she did it quiet as can be, too. That was dank. Chloe never saw anybody vomit quiet, like Treasure did.

And Treasure watched Chloe, too. Treasure tried just as hard to figure Chloe out as Chloe was trying to figure her. The two circled and sniffed, dropped tails and raised them, panted, whined, and growled, laid ears and pricked them as if both contained the same inner animal.

TeeJay talked to Delancy about it in the greenhouse, Delancy talked to Juanito in the parking lot, Juanito talked to Celia at home in the evening, Celia talked to TeeJay in the breakroom when no one else was around. Darren talked to Janice on their way home after the meet-up to transfer the teardrop into Treasure's care.

It was like watching wolves at the zoo, they agreed. Tragic and transfixing—only two of them in the exhibit, no pack anywhere to be found, and the dynamics of wolf-ness far more critical because two wolves were now in the same enclosure. Everyone watched everyone, wondering.

Wolf at the Door

Treasure and Chloe planned to leave Saturday evening on their trip, but the phone rang Friday night. Tanya Broussard called, giving Treasure a rushed and less than coherent head's up: someone in Houston had the bright idea to pressure Chloe into giving them information about the weeks she'd been missing. They believed she had knowledge of sex trafficking, prostitution, or a porn ring—or something—and they planned to pressure Chloe to talk about it by arresting her on child pornography charges.

“Pornography?” Treasure repeated, sending Tanya on another panicked tangent. Something about a selfie. Treasure listened to her, trying to follow Tanya's enraged rant.

The whole thing seemed incredulous, but something about Tanya's repeated mantra penetrated, “Get a lawyer, Treasure. Get one now. Get a lawyer, before they come to your door about this. You can't help Chloe fight this unless you get serious legal help.” Treasure hit Tad's number the minute she got off the phone with Tanya.

“Tad? Listen, sorry to call so late,” Treasure said. “Are you still in contact with Mack? The lawyer, McKendrick?” Tad, as usual, was good about answering the question without turning it around on her, interrogating her instead of answering.

He said, “Sure. I’ve got his number here. I can text it to you. He lives in Houston these days, still doing family law.”

“I think I may need legal counsel,” Treasure said. “Do you think he’d take my call?”

Tad laughed. “Yes, he’ll take your call.” Treasure could doubt, after everything Mack did to help her and Natalie? How could she be so oblivious, he wondered. “Is everything okay, Treasure?”

Treasure couldn’t help herself. She felt guilty comparing Tad’s attitude toward her with Darren’s, but it was impossible to ignore. “I don’t know yet. I just got off the phone with Tanya Broussard who warned me to get a lawyer for Chloe. If I understood her correctly, she thinks Chloe may have gotten caught up in something big, when she went missing after her foster mother kicked her out, in Houston. It was confusing and I don’t have any facts yet.”

“What does Chloe say about it?” Tad asked a logical question.

“I haven’t asked her.”

Treasure did not want to approach Chloe until necessary. And then, she wanted the approach to be supportive, nothing that could be misconstrued. She thought questioning the girl would deliver the wrong message and put Chloe on the defensive;

and then there was her face when she'd said she'd done what she had to, those weeks she'd gone missing.

Treasure remembered the comments and veiled questions, the doubt, and how everything she said got so easily twisted. Treasure remembered that Andrea and Jon once admitted they'd felt it too, stuck in the position of verifying what happened in their home. Treasure wouldn't put Chloe in that position. She couldn't stop it if things went that direction. But it didn't have to start with her.

"No point putting the kid through it until we have to," she told Tad.

"Listen, girl, let me call him for you," Tad said. "I'll give him your number and have him call you, tonight if possible. I don't want you up all night worried about this. Okay?"

Treasure sighed. "It's probably nothing."

"Tanya's not one to overreact," Tad disagreed.

"Yeah. I know," Treasure admitted. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Call me back after you talk to Mack was the last thing Tad said.

Twenty minutes later, Treasure told Tad thanks for his assistance. "Mack called, and from some of the things he said, I think we're right to be concerned. Apparently, Tanya's rambling made more sense to him than it did me. The fact that Chloe's in the foster system was a big red flag, he said. Apparently there's a huge scandal breaking about sex trafficking in Harris County. Did you realize Houston is a hub? He said he couldn't give me any details, but that I had his full attention and he would consider

himself retained—I guess that’s a lawyer joke. He said we’ll need to request he be appointed as Chloe’s *ad litem* counsel. I think that’s what he said. That’s our first step, he said.

“You’re still going to worry all night, aren’t you.” Tad said it with affection.

“What about your trip? Are you going to take a chance and try to head out as planned?”

Treasure sat on the side of her bed. Fortunately, both she and Chloe had retired early for the night, anticipating an early morning. She thought Chloe probably hadn’t heard anything of the phone calls, sequestered as she was behind closed doors and her ringtone quieted. She hoped she had not anyway. “I’ll have to play it by ear,” she said. “I’ll let you know. ‘Night, Tad. Thanks again.”

Chapter 12: Treasure, Andrea, Jon, and Chloe

A Rocky Start

Treasure decided to say nothing and pretend the phone calls of the night before had never occurred. She and Chloe planned to leave as soon as each finished her task list at the nursery Saturday. They met up in the breakroom late afternoon, Chloe asking Treasure if she needed her to do anything else. Treasure shook her head, smiled a shy smile, and said that was it for the day. They headed to the house, Treasure trailing behind to turn off lights and set the alarm system. At Treasure's, they picked up bags they'd already packed: Chloe had a small backpack she thought looked too new; Treasure had a beat-up rolling bag that looked too old. They tucked both bags into the car with them, as well as a small cooler loaded with snacks. Neither looked particularly pleased to be setting out on their journey, the teardrop trailing behind.

Chloe looked at the dashboard clock when Treasure stopped to open the gate. It was 4:37 p.m. and Chloe thought, maybe, it would take them a little less than two hours to get to Bryan for the night. Chloe thought Treasure seemed cool most of the time, but today Treasure seemed on edge. Maybe it was just where they were headed.

One of the things that seemed to rattle Treasure most was dealing with her kids, Andrea and Jon. Chloe could see whenever Andrea called or whenever Treasure talked about her kids—either one of them—Treasure got nervous. Or irritated. Or both. It was hard to tell. And Treasure hadn't regained much color since her visit the night before

with her brother Darren, when they went to get the teardrop camper. Which seemed weird to Chloe because Darren and Janice seemed nice enough. They talked a lot about church and about people Treasure seemed to know, about a cousin named Tad and somebody Chick something. Chloe hadn't listened too carefully, trying to see the dynamics rather than get lost in the words thrown so fast. They hadn't seemed like holy rollers, despite how much time they spent talking about church. They asked Treasure about a dozen times if she'd found a good church yet, and Treasure looked more tense every time they said anything about it. But still, they weren't like door-to-door Bible-thumpers or anything. The lady at the last house Chloe was at—the one who caused the big ruckus, locking Chloe out, the one that resulted in Chloe getting paired up with Treasure which wasn't such a bad outcome, now that she thought about it—that one was always lecturing Chloe on what Jesus would or wouldn't do. And apparently Jesus not only wouldn't do anything Chloe might choose to do, he wouldn't like any of the things Chloe did either. Fact is, the woman outright said, "Jesus hates you." Chloe had waited for the usual "right now" or some other qualifier since Jesus was supposed to love everybody, but the woman never added another syllable. That woman was the biggest hypocrite ever, stealing from the kids she kept. Janice and Darren were nothing like her. Chloe eyed Treasure, worried.

Treasure was nauseated. She felt green and gaseous and on the verge of another embarrassing episode involving the vain attempt not to splash vomit on her own pants or shoes. She had more than the beginnings of a headache, and she wished she hadn't

committed to supper with Andrea, Jon, and Jon's roommate. Treasure had the idea that Andrea disapproved of the trip with Chloe. She hadn't said so, but Treasure had a strong sense Andrea thought Chloe and Genecia and Delancy would be better off if Treasure were nowhere near them. And Jon had started up again, whining about giving him and his roommate room, board, and jobs for the summer. Each with a higher weekly salary than Treasure paid her full-time hands. Treasure had never met Jon's roommate, but she definitely did not approve of Jon's entitled behavior and somehow it seemed to her to be tied to the roommate. Treasure had Chloe to consider. The whole thing wouldn't have been such a big deal if Jon hadn't tried to show off, telling the boy his mother would have a place for both of them, even after Treasure said it simply would not be an option. Jon worried her. Treasure thought the question was behind them, until she heard the roommate yelling in the background on a recent phone call. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, she was worried sick about the police coming to arrest Chloe.

And, Treasure was overdue for a nice long visit with Naomi. She didn't like going without a session, even if Naomi said she was fine and didn't need EMDR every week anymore. Treasure didn't feel fine. She felt like a child riding a bike after somebody took the training wheels off. She felt wobbly and totally out of control. And if Chloe looked at that damned clock one more time Treasure thought she might scream.

"What was it like, growing up with Darren?" Chloe broke the silence to ask.

The hundred-pound weight on Treasure's chest lightened by five pounds or so. She thought about how to answer Chloe, and the two talked on the drive to Bryan about Treasure's childhood, her cousin Tad, camping, life in Houston—Chloe hadn't known she was raised in Houston—and her parents' deaths. In a car wreck at the same time. Treasure said their deaths had been hard on her. Had put her in a bad, bad place. It led to the hardest times of her life, except for the period with Tom Pense, and after. But, in some ways, the period with Pense was easier for her to take than when her parents died. Either way, it's the after that tripped her up. Treasure suddenly did not appreciate the turn in the conversation. She asked, "What was the best day of your life?"

Chloe was quiet for a full minute. "The day Delancy came to see Genecia the first time." She didn't add anything more, just let the silence speak of a moment's power and magnitude in her life.

Treasure found herself nodding. She wanted to leave it, be cool and not push, don't ask for information that wasn't offered, but she found herself captured by the image of Delancy the first day she'd met him when he applied for a job at her nursery, fresh out of the Marines and a brand new father of a bouncing nine-year-old baby girl. "What made it the best day for you?" Treasure heard herself ask.

"The mom in this home we were in, she was this smart-ass," Chloe said. "She told me to get out and leave Genecia alone with her father, but she was, like, sly about it. Trying to impress Delancy, trying to pretend like she was sweetness and light. But he saw right through her. He said to her, straight up said it out loud, 'you let these girls

alone. Genecia's never met me before, and there's no need to make her more nervous about meeting me than she already is. Her friend Chloe's got her back and I bet Genecia's got Chloe's back too. You leave them be and let them both sit right here until we all know each other better.' I thought that was great, you know? He wasn't afraid of her or anything like that. And he wasn't the type of guy who took for granted that there was some blood tie between him and Genecia and that everything would be fine if he said so. That was great."

Delancy, Chloe thought. He would make a good foster parent for Z. If only.

Treasure nodded again, keeping her eyes straight on the road. She didn't dare look toward Chloe. She gripped the wheel and sped through the dark, another mile closer to the disapproval she feared awaited her, another minute closer probably to Chloe's arrest.

This Just Might Work

It seemed to Treasure that Andrea was on her best behavior, welcoming Chloe and, in general, acting as if Chloe's introduction into the family was a long-anticipated, happy event. If she seemed to lay it on too thick, Chloe's response didn't reveal any suspicion. Treasure was not put at ease by Andrea's warmth to the young teen. If anything, it made her more anxious. Jon, however, behaved abominably. Treasure attributed his behavior to his roommate, a young man Treasure instantly disliked, something about his manner and his greeting that put Treasure in mind of Jon's father, Jared. She questioned her judgment in the matter. It was too hasty, right? She ought to give the guy a chance,

right? Her queasiness intensified. That's messed up, Treasure thought. But she didn't have another panic attack, and she didn't blow the visit. So far as she was concerned, a smashing good time was had by all, even if she stayed tensed and afraid of vomiting the whole evening. Jon's roommate acted moonstruck from the second he saw Chloe. Treasure got the feeling Chloe didn't like his behavior. But it's hard to tell with young people, Treasure admitted. She misread her children's reactions all the time, so they told her.

She "enjoyed" enough "family time" to say she'd done her part, then excused herself to the camper for her night's restlessness in the apartment parking lot. The wind was cool, and Treasure thought of the night she'd come to tell Andrea and Jon about Chloe, the night it snowed. The abrupt drop in temperatures resulted from a freak cold-front, plunging the area into an icy chill that glazed the roads and froze traffic to a standstill for days. Treasure shuddered, thinking about the ordeal. She didn't remember fighting the police or the EMTs, didn't remember the harrowing ambulance ride over freezing roadways with zero visibility. She remembered the overfilled hospital, the loudness, the chaos of an area unprepared to deal with the unusual weather. In the shelter of the teardrop, cold weather wouldn't matter. She had only to chock the wheels and crawl into bed, close the doors and lock out the world. She even had a bucket for a commode—in case.

Treasure pictured herself and the little camper, deliberately, at one of the remote campgrounds Pense had hidden her in. With Pense out of the picture the image pleased

her, surprisingly. She sighed a half smile, thinking Naomi scheduled celebrations for less significant benchmarks. She held a soft pair of shorts and a t-shirt in her hands, but the idea of changing into them did not appeal. Her nausea and tension lessened a bit as Treasure settled herself into the nest-like trailer, its proximity to an apartment complex filled with people oddly comforting.

The cozy interior of the model Darren and Treasure constructed sat on a larger frame than most teardrops, with a wider body and a taller roofline. It contained sleeping room for four utilizing convertible sofas that created a double bed on one side and two close bunks on the other. In seating mode, two thin tables could fit between the sofas; in sleeping mode, the pipes and tabletops stowed beneath the double bed. The space was tight, enough room to sit and stretch out a bit, not enough for an adult to stand.

Treasure slid to the middle of the main couch, touching the tabletop and remembering her optimism when she and Darren worked together building it. She sniffed, suddenly marveling at the freshness of the interior. How had Janice accomplished it? Treasure recognized the effort that Janice must have made to keep the long-stored trailer from mildew and must. Or did they use the trailer more than Darren let on? Treasure heard a muffled tap.

Chloe spoke, “Hey, are you going to let me in?”

Treasure slid across and manipulated the handle to unlock the door and open it slightly.

Chloe opened it further, complaining, “I went to the bathroom and when I came out, you were gone.” She scrambled into the cabin of the camper to sit opposite Treasure, closing and locking the door behind herself. She shrugged off her backpack, setting it on the seat, to open and peer inside it.

Treasure said, “I thought you were staying with Andrea. She invited you. I thought—”

Chloe grimaced. “Those guys will be playing *Final Fantasy* all night, and they said the couch was supposed to be my bed. No way I was staying in there when I have a perfectly fine place out here where I can actually get some rest.”

Treasure said, “I guess I assumed you’d want to play with them.”

Chloe shook her head. “Yeah. Not so much. Jon’s roommate—” Chloe stopped, pressing her lips together and darting a pregnant look at Treasure.

Jon’s roommate was a perv. He recognized her from kiddie porn pics on the Dark Web originally posted by her mother’s boyfriend, and he hadn’t even tried to pretend, although he waited until Treasure walked out to start talking nasty. He waited until Jon and Andrea were out of the room, too, before he outright asked, “That was you, right? It’s really you?” He described a scene in one of the pictures and made filthy suggestions for ways they could pass the time. Chloe couldn’t get out of the apartment fast enough.

“He seemed taken with you,” Treasure said. She noticed for the first time Chloe’s paleness, but she was emotionally overdrawn herself and didn’t stop to wonder beyond thinking the whole situation had to be weird for Chloe, too.

Chloe avoided meeting Treasure’s gaze, pulling shorts and a t-shirt from the bag. It had happened before, a few times, when male foster parents searched for Chloe’s pictures when they learned of them—it was a big give-away, that they even had the connections to find the photos. From what Chloe had been told, it was no easy matter to access and obtain the pictures. Chloe tried to tell herself it was no big deal anymore, tried to talk herself out of her mood. She studiously examined the shorts and tee she held, then looked over the interior of the camper with an intensity that bordered on furious. “Hey, I’ve got a curtain I can pull,” Chloe said. Her irritation turned it into an accusation.

“Yep,” Treasure said, looking at Chloe again. “Makes it like a cocoon in there.”

Chloe sighed, a sudden deflating sound. Her shoulders dropped and the tension that Treasure hadn’t seen left her body in an abrupt transformation. “Treasure, I’m done for. Do you mind?”

A half smile curled at the sides of Treasure’s lips, and she said, “Not at all. I feel you.” It was something Delancy said a lot. Treasure reached to pull the curtain away from the wall on one side of the bunk and Chloe adjusted the other side.

Treasure said, “They’re not very nice, are they?”

“Wait, what?” Chloe asked. “Jon’s roommate?”

“Well, Jon and his roommate. But Andrea, too. Sometimes—I think—” she stopped.

“Jon’s roommate—he’s a perv. You know?” Chloe darted a look at Treasure.

“Oh, thank God, I thought it was just me,” she said. Relief showed in Treasure’s face. “They’re always telling me I misunderstand.” She bobbed her head toward the apartment, toward her mostly grown children. “Darren and Janice, too.”

“Uh. No.” No misunderstanding there. Chloe was relieved she didn’t have to pretend.

The two occupied themselves changing into what both deemed appropriate nightwear, shorts or sweats and a tee. With the scant space between them as a buffer, the two confined their movements. Treasure debated converting to the double bed. Chloe debated converting her side, since pulling the back of the seat up to form the top bunk would give her more width. Both stretched across the seats, satisfied to leave things be. Chloe changed, tucked completely behind the curtain on her seat; Treasure sat up and stretched her legs into the center zone between the beds, wiggling out of her jeans and changing rapidly before she warned Chloe she would turn out the cabin’s dome light. Chloe clicked on a dim reading light in her bunk, then clicked it off. The two spoke softly for a few moments before both fell into exhausted sleep.

Chloe thought she’d barely gotten to sleep before being awakened by thrashes and moans from the bunk beside hers. Chloe cautiously pulled at the curtain to peek through a slight break between panels of fabric. No one had broken into the trailer;

Treasure wrestled an unseen demon. Chloe lay in the bunk, tense, motionless; Treasure didn't know she was there. To Chloe the thrashing and the low keening and the muted sobbing seemed to last hours. It probably ended sooner than she thought, but when Treasure quieted, Chloe felt profound relief. She'd seen night terrors, before, on more than one occasion. A foster kid in a room she had shared, before overwhelmed foster parents decided two sets of problems was too much to deal with and she had been shuffled to the next location. Chloe read adults could experience the phenomenon, too. At least Treasure hadn't bolted upright to a standing position and screamed bloody murder, like her previous roommate had. When Treasure calmed, Chloe turned to the outer wall and tried to sleep. She lay thinking until exhaustion overtook her once more.

Chapter 13: One for the Road

Breakfast

The next morning Andrea's gracious façade showed signs of wear. Chloe took one look at Andrea's bleary-eyed confusion before turning to Treasure and saying, "We're eating out for breakfast, right? You promised." If Chloe's bluff confused Treasure, she never let on. The two queued up for the bathroom, each murmuring thanks and goodbyes to Andrea while the other occupied the room.

"I wish you and Jon had been able to come along," Treasure offered. She pretended she didn't know they could have. The University's spring break coincided, and for once, neither made plans other than hard-core gaming after classes let out.

Neither did Treasure mention the fact that Jon and his roommate were staying the week at Andrea's since their dorm was closed. That horse had already been beaten to death, by Darren, who had taken Andrea's inhospitable response to Treasure's legitimate need for shelter as a personal attack on his parenting skills. Darren and Janice, both, administered what they called a "come to Jesus" meeting with Andrea and Jon after the incident, "We raised you better than that." Darren, reportedly, went a few steps farther, going off on Andrea. At a remarkably loud volume, so Treasure heard from Tad later, Darren pointed out that never ever, ever had Treasure done anything to deserve such disrespect. "She's spent every minute of her life since the day you were born trying to protect you. How could you do this to her?"

Andrea seemed to behave better, since. But she never once told Treasure she was sorry.

Treasure and Chloe pulled slowly out of the parking lot. Treasure smiled and lifted a hand to wave once to Andrea who stood outside watching as they departed. It was a little thing, but Treasure accepted it as another benchmark.

Chloe said, “I guess I’m lucky I didn’t have siblings.”

Treasure sighed. “You think?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Probably not,” Chloe admitted. “I kind of envy her and Jon. They seem close. I don’t like the dynamics, I guess, but it’s nice they have each other.”

“Maybe I didn’t say it outright, but I’m glad I have my brother Darren. And you’re right: having a sibling makes some things more complicated.” Treasure laughed. “But clearly you already know that.”

Chloe laughed. “Yeah. I’ve gotten a clearer picture the last few days. We don’t have to stop yet, right? I just didn’t want to hang out while Andrea cooked us anything, you know?”

“I gathered.” Treasure made an uncomfortable half-laugh. “We’ll play it by ear, stop later, when we want something. You tell me where to go.”

They discussed the route, Chloe in the role of navigator, the Texas map Treasure gave her folded in her lap. Insane, Chloe thought, to give control over routes and

timelines to her—a kid who doesn't know a thing about the area or, even, how to read a map that well.

“You're the boss,” Treasure had told Chloe when she gave her the map. “I tell you the destination, and you tell me how and when to get there.” Treasure thought it a clever ploy to explain her refusal to give CPS an exact itinerary for the trip. “This is about her education,” she'd told them. “Geography, social science, math—a trip like this gives her so many learning opportunities.” And, if I don't know the route, and you don't know the route, it's safer.

Chloe feared the pleasure Treasure's weird ways of doing things gave her: she'd never stayed long in the homes she'd loved. She immediately picked a fight with Treasure, using the map like a stick to poke Treasure, her eyes glinting with unshed tears.

Treasure had only laughed at her, said to her, “Pitch all the hissy you want. You're still in charge of navigation.” TeeJay and Delancy had laughed, too. They'd pulled her aside, explained to her not to put any of her route-planning down on paper, but to study every possible alternate route and just choose one at the start of each day on the trip. “It's better for Treasure this way,” TeeJay said.

Delancy nodded, “Treasure really does want to give you some control and a say in things, but TeeJay's right—it's important for her. Treasure needs the trip to be unpredictable and random. So be random and have fun doing whatever you want to do on the way. The more random and unpredictable, the better to Treasure. Tom Pense is in

jail for what he did, but Treasure has always been scared there might be others her crazy ex talked to about her.”

“And girl, you don’t know how big this is, for Treasure to give you the map.”

TeeJay and Delancy both laughed and high-fived.

Chloe hadn’t figured Treasure would go through with the deal. Yet here Chloe was, actually navigating, and the farther down the road away from Andrea and Jon the two went, the more Treasure seemed to relax. Not having a family sucked, Chloe thought, but having one often seemed worse. She fingered the map and watched for road signs, taking her job seriously. Enjoying the responsibility.

They hadn’t gone far when Chloe spotted a sign advertising “Fresh Do-nuts.”

She asked, “How about some for the road?”

Treasure obediently pulled in, and they went inside to purchase a dozen plain glazed. The doughnuts were indeed fresh, hot, unusually delicate, and delicious.

Treasure enjoying food was a sight that pleased Chloe.

Chloe thought of how glad the crew at work would be, seeing Treasure away from home but as relaxed as she usually only was when working behind her fences. Again, Chloe felt a bitter doubt. She was doomed, she thought. This won’t last long. Better enjoy it while it lasts. Which it won’t. Still, Chloe smiled at Treasure when Treasure looked at her for instructions at the next turn after they left the pastry shop. Chloe couldn’t help herself.

Meandering

Despite choosing a circuitous, wandering route via Farm-to-Markets and backroads, the two made excellent time, arriving at their night's destination too early to check in at the campground. Chloe suggested they try, regardless, saying sightseeing would be easier untethered from the trailer. Unless Treasure thought otherwise, Chloe added.

Campground hosts, Chloe learned, are a thing. The hosts at the campground welcomed them but said they had no spots available at that hour. Chloe felt foolish, since Treasure told her they weren't likely to have a free campsite.

But the couple, sitcom grandparent-like, simply brushed off Chloe's apology and offered a parking spot for the little trailer. "Thing's no bigger than a minute. You can just unhook it right there." The man pointed at an out-of-the-way graveled parking slot beside a small shed. Apparently, Treasure didn't mind leaving the trailer parked there, giving Chloe more confidence in her judgment of the hosts. Treasure pulled around and backed the teardrop into the space, Chloe standing to one side, motioning with her arms to guide Treasure in.

Inside the small office and mini-convenience store, Chloe and Treasure could see the trailer clearly from the large window. They chatted for several minutes, neither correcting the couple's assumption of mother and daughter relationship. "Isn't that nice, hon. Mother-daughter camp-out for spring break. Where all're y'all going this week?" The question, clearly a matter of campground etiquette, their vague answers of no

importance whatsoever. Chloe and Treasure paid in advance for the night's lodging and went on their way.

"Do they let kids tour vineyards," Chloe asked Treasure.

"Probably, if you don't try to taste the product," Treasure said.

"I read, at the library, they've got vineyards near here," Chloe hoped the excursion might interest Treasure as much as it interested her. Horticulture, something that had never really made her radar before, now seemed fascinating.

The afternoon passed too quickly. That evening at the campground, after another comment by Chloe about family (after Treasure grimaced through texts from Andrea and her brother Darren), Treasure gave a brief defense to Chloe, "You don't get how complicated the situation really is." Treasure explained, not a long explanation, but enough. "Don't judge them harshly," she pled. Chloe had already seen enough, and she didn't buy into Treasure's unyielding willingness to take blame for the strained relations. She wanted to shake Treasure, say something, like "They take advantage" or "They don't give you the respect you deserve." Chloe thought of all the do-gooders she'd encountered, sitting on the sidelines in their safe houses, judging her for her choices when she only ever had a choice between bad and worse.

She let it slide.

And the next day passed, pleasant, with bits of information shared, knowledge gained, a soft companionable bridge being constructed between them. Privately, both

conceded only to herself the likelihood that the fledgling trust they built was bound to be broken.

The next night, Chloe listened as Treasure thrashed and cried. Grateful for the past research she'd done on the topic of night terrors, Chloe planned to catalogue Treasure's behavior, distinguishing between nightmares and night terrors by the time of night each occurred. She bought a cheap watch that day, something to help her keep track, but she forgot to buy any paper, or a pen. She thought it unlikely for Treasure not to know already about her night time activities—but she might not, and the information affected treatment approaches, Chloe knew. When Treasure went to the bathhouse, she searched the trailer's cubbies and compartments, hoping to find something to jot down her observations, like a science experiment.

What kind of woman, knowing her nights so chaotic and troubled, voluntarily takes a kid on vacation? On a camping trip, no less, after being traumatized in an RV? Chloe had learned that Pense, at one point, kept Treasure locked inside a posh, stolen motorhome and took her a long way from Texas, camping in remote areas—a fact that ultimately worked in Treasure's favor. The teardrop in no way resembled the fancy rig Delancy described to her when she asked, that was true. The more Chloe considered the facts, the more she doubted Treasure's awareness of her night terrors. Treasure knew about the nightmares, attributed them to PTSD, Chloe remembered. She'd been alone a long time, that much Chloe had figured out. Which brought her back to why Treasure was willing to be inconvenienced by a foster kid. In Chloe's experience, people don't

go out of their way to be inconvenienced. Chloe was a huge inconvenience for anyone—she'd been told so often enough to know—but for Treasure especially.

She found a batch of composition notebooks stashed in a compartment built into the deck that was Treasure's bed. She almost missed it, the compartment well crafted, almost invisible, unlike most of the other open nooks and crannies dedicated to storage. She looked around, wondering if there were more, and found another two hidden spots in the floor between the sleeping areas. They were stuffed with old towels, some clothes and bedding. She pulled out the notebooks, looking to see if any had blank pages. One was mostly empty, so she took it and returned the rest, putting everything back in order.

Chloe tried to figure out the timeline: if the Pense attack came during Katrita, that meant Treasure's marriage to Jared had been before 2005. How old is Treasure, she wondered? She didn't know how long she was married or how long between the time Jared died and Pense attacked, but Treasure said something about "crazy patience." Chloe thought about the details Treasure provided, vague as they were. Jared killed two women, and from something Janice said, it was at the same place Darren worked now—some big fishing camp or something, with cabins. Delancy once said Treasure was married a long time. What would it be like, married to a crazy man? He had to have been crazy, right? Why hadn't Treasure left?

Chloe asked Treasure, back from her shower, if she had a pen. Treasure offered her several, and Chloe chose one. She asked Treasure if leaving the light on in her bunk would bother her, and when Treasure said no, it was dim enough for her to sleep with it

on, Chloe arranged her curtains strategically to be able to watch though the part if Treasure woke up. Chloe went to sleep, pen and pad close.

She felt she'd barely gotten to sleep when Treasure's restless cries woke her. Chloe watched and made her notes, glad the night wasn't as rough for Treasure. She clipped the pen to the page inside the notebook and tucked them under her pillow. She fell asleep, sleeping well, until Treasure's early morning nightmare. It, too, was a little less active, and after Treasure apologized to Chloe for waking her up, both laid still and fell back to sleep.

They slept late, neither rushing to get out of bed or stirring until the other showed signs of wakefulness. Treasure complained to Chloe of a sense of grogginess, "I think I slept too much. I don't ever lay in bed like this." I'll bet, Chloe thought. "You ever have insomnia?" she asked. "Most nights" came Treasure's reply. "Yeah. Me too." Something they had in common, it seemed. They ate take-out breakfast on their way to the San Antonio zoo after both showered and changed for the day. It was another good day for both. If Treasure seemed distracted at times, Chloe didn't notice. She had her own things to think about. She assumed Treasure had plenty to think about, too.

Wondering

Chloe sat in her bunk that night while Treasure showered. Chloe liked a morning shower; Treasure seemed to shower both mornings and nights. She offered to keep Treasure company at the bathhouse that night, but for whatever reason, Treasure didn't mind being by herself there. Other women wandered in and out, and Treasure didn't

seem to mind. Chloe thought that was weird, but she didn't want to hover. Let Treasure do whatever she can do, she thought. It's what Delancy and TeeJay would have told her, she was sure; but she offered, just in case.

She pulled the notebook out, opening to the page marked by her pen, and read the notes she made. She'd been right: Treasure woke about thirty minutes after going to sleep, night terrors. An hour or so before dawn, she had her nightmares. Idly, Chloe turned back the pages of the cheap notebook. It hadn't been used much, why she'd chosen it. She flipped her way backwards toward the front, scanning what appeared to be sporadically dated entries—August 17, 2005 was the date on the last entry. She read it—something about Treasure's disappointment that her kids hadn't liked the camping trip she took them on and begged her all week to take them home—to Darren and Janice's. She read another, about graduating with a second degree in horticulture, until it dawned on her what she had in her hands. Treasure Montgomery had kept a journal. Chloe looked at her watch, figuring she still had ten minutes or so before Treasure was likely to come back.

Hastily, she rummaged Treasure's bunk, exposing the hidden compartment. She pried the lid up, lifting the other composition notebooks. This time, she scanned the entries to establish a timespan for the journals, 2003-2005. She scanned a few entries, one eye on her watch, overly aware of the time. Damn, Chloe thought. She wrote this shit down. She wrote it like it was a letter to someone. Chloe had only minutes to decide. Put them back? Treasure had looked directly at the composition notebook

earlier, making no comment. Chloe examined the covers: none had distinguishing marks. One might not draw a remark, but ten—Chloe counted. Seven, only seven. Still. She couldn't risk plopping them into the open shelving in her bunk. Treasure hadn't blinked—no way she knew what Chloe held.

Chloe stuffed the notebooks into her own bag, pushing them to the bottom and arranging her gear over them and zipping the bag closed. She popped the lid over the compartment, putting everything back exactly as it had been arranged—not her first time at this game, clearly. Chloe remembered other times she'd risked herself in order to investigate house parents' private activities. You never knew when you'd need leverage—although, using it was tricky. It backfired as often as it worked. She'd learned it was best to be informed, but usually not to reveal what she knew—unless exactly the right situation presented itself.

Chloe was dressed for bed, kicked back in her bunk when Treasure returned, her hair still wet from the shower. Chloe watched Treasure divide the reddish-gray mass of tight curls with a chopstick into three strands, nimbly weaving them to form a fat braid. "I didn't know it would be so long," she said.

Treasure sighed. "I should probably try to find someone to cut and style my hair. It's been years." She'd been cutting it herself, she admitted. She fell silent, contemplating things she did by rote—things she ought to re-think, if she wanted her new beginning to mean anything. Cutting her own hair was a habit she developed after leaving Jared—a tiny rebellion, at first. Something entirely different at this point.

Treasure thought of the rapid flashpoint of fear she'd felt when that man had rushed up to the car, begging in the parking lot of the restaurant. God, she was sick of being afraid. She wondered if other people felt so god-awful constantly fearful. She didn't think so. TeeJay, Celia, Juanito—even Delancy. They didn't. She wondered if Chloe did. “Are you ever afraid?” she asked.

Chloe answered, flippant, “Never.” She said it with the right bravado, the right tone to make Treasure smile. Chloe thought of a hotel room, the girl with her there gone forever, she was quite sure, disappeared with a dark-haired white man, never to be seen again. She thought of Malik who she didn't like thinking about and Z who she did. But, if the hotel room taught her nothing, it showed her that things with Malik weren't simple either. If he was a bad guy, a blackmailer and a victimizer, a pimp or, maybe, a pornographer, he'd been in the same boat as her and Z, back when he was fourteen—same as they were weeks ago, before they aged up. If she could say about those weeks that she did what she had to, then what about Malik? Fourteen at the time, he'd had a little kid to take care of. He still had a kid to take care of.

As endless as the nights seemed, the days passed too quickly. Before Chloe or Treasure were quite ready for them, Delancy and Genecia were due to arrive.

Chapter 14: Treasure, Chloe, Delancy, and Genecia

Thursday Friday Saturday

Last week, they'd talked about renting a room. After a number of exchanged texts and a phone call early in the week, Delancy and Genecia rolled up to the campsite next to Treasure and Chloe. Genecia said they'd decided to save their money, skipping the expense of a hotel. Both seemed content to camp. Delancy said he planned to bivvy near, letting Chloe and Genecia have the tent they'd brought with them, unless they preferred staying with Treasure.

They'd been lucky to get two campsites together during spring vacation, but the host told them the reservations were unusually light that week, "Must be the weird weather we've had. Cool as it is this year, people must think they'll get snowed on again."

First things first, Chloe thought. At the first possible moment, Chloe conferred privately with Delancy and Genecia about Treasure's difficult nights. "I don't think she even knows," she said. "And, Genecia, really I don't want you to freak out, if you bunk in the trailer with us. Maybe it would be better if you just stay in the tent with your Dad and I stay with Treasure."

Between them, they debated it

Delancy suggested leveling with Treasure, “Come clean and give her the choice.” He praised Chloe, “You’re right. If she doesn’t know, she needs to, because the right treatment helps.”

Chloe startled, realizing Delancy, too, knew about night terrors.

When Treasure returned to the campsite carrying a bundle of firewood she purchased from the campground store, Delancy and Genecia looked at Chloe, and Delancy announced, “Time for a group meeting.” ‘

Treasure said, “I thought a fire would be nice.” She dumped the wood beside the fire ring. A couple of cut logs were placed around it, like makeshift stools.

Chloe popped the hatch on the teardrop, peering beneath it into the galley for a packet of fatwood and the lighter. Chloe said, “You missed the tour Saturday before we left, didn’t you, Delancy?” She took the items to the fire ring and squatted to build the fire. She piled the wood expertly, as Treasure had taught her, while Genecia and Delancy examined the neat kitchenette concealed by a rear hatch on the tail-end of the trailer.

“I had no idea all this was under here,” Delancy said.

The raised hatch provided shelter above the galley kitchen, and Treasure pulled an additional canopy from its storage place. Delancy helped Treasure set it up, and in minutes, the camp had a more established, homey atmosphere.

Treasure pulled two three-legged stools out and put them near the fire ring by the stumps.

Chloe snorted, “Like Treasure would leave home for a week without a kitchen.” At everyone’s good-natured laughter, Chloe ached, wishing for the improbable happy ending. People got them sometimes, right? Was it too much to ask?

Delancy spoke, “I called you all here—” He laughed, looked at Treasure and said, “T, actually, we’d like to discuss the digs for the night, rations, KP, that sort of thing.”

The teens sat on stumps near the smoldering fire, fanning at it like a bellows to encourage a blaze. Treasure and Delancy joined them, taking the three-legged stools.

“Go for it,” Treasure encouraged.

Delancy hesitated, knowing things would get dicey momentarily, when Treasure learned how scared Chloe must have been each night, witnessing her angst. He opted to start with kitchen duties. “It’s our night to treat you. We’ve got a cooler loaded with a green salad and a fruit salad, plus there’s potatoes to bake and steaks to grill on the campfire. I brought charcoal and a grill. I didn’t realize we had a commercial kitchen available.” He ribbed Treasure. “It’s not your cooking, T, but it won’t be too bad. I figured you could use a break from the chores.”

Treasure exhibited rare glee. “Actually, I haven’t done the chores. Chloe’s done them this whole time. And, yeah, she could use a break.”

“Treasure, that’s not exactly true. You had to do everything to teach me how.” Chloe didn’t want credit when it wasn’t due.

“Please. That only took a few days. You’ve done things yourself, since.”

Chloe shot Delancy a disconcerted glance. "I have? I have." Delancy and Treasure shared amusement over Chloe's sudden cognizance.

Delancy said, "Okay. That's settled. We need to decide whether we're going to the movies tonight or staying in camp to play dominoes or whatever. Which will it be?"

Chloe voted, "Camp. Takes a while to bake a potato over a campfire." She spoke with the confidence of newly acquired experience. Tomorrow we can see the movie." Genecia seconded.

Delancy said he planned to bivouac there, pointing to a spot he had picked out for himself. The girls could take the tent, he said, so they wouldn't bother Treasure with their gabbing.

Treasure spoke up, "There's plenty of room in the trailer. Chloe, the back of your couch raises up to make an upper bunk. It's tight in there, but it's not too bad, is it?"

"I may want to look that camper thing over for myself before I decide," Genecia smarted off after Treasure indicated she did not see the girls as a bother.

"Fair enough," Delancy said. "Here's an idea. We'll set up the tent, but the girls can decide later which to use." Heads nodded. "Genecia, you and Chloe take a shot at putting up the tent yourselves, okay? Me and T, we'll sit over here and watch."

The girls rolled their eyes and pretended to object before hopping up to comply. Neither wanted to stick around for the discussion they figured Delancy would initiate.

Powwow

He waited for the girls to walk away before tackling Treasure's night terrors. "T, you ever heard of night terrors?"

Treasure repeated the term. "Like when little kids wake up screaming, only they're not really awake, they're still sleeping?"

Delancy nodded. "That's it. Your kids have 'em when they were little?" He'd heard they sometimes ran in families.

Treasure frowned, "Not that I know of." She didn't mean to be curt, but Delancy's question made her think of a period when her availability to her children was every bit as constrained as it was today—during her marriage to Jared, he'd told her she could spend her day time caring for the kids if she wanted so long as she completed tasks when he requested, but the evenings and nights were exclusively his. He hired a series of *au pairs* to deal with the children at night, but Treasure could not recall any of them complaining about nights spent awake. Certainly, she'd never heard a ruckus, and in those days, she and Jared spent most nights cloistered together in their first floor master suite. Later, that had not been the case, but the kids were older. "Don't they grow out of that, past the toddler stage?"

"Not necessarily. In fact, even adults can have night terrors. Sometimes, PTSD causes them, even when someone doesn't have a history of them during childhood."

Treasure emerged from her bitter recollections to catch Delancy's somber tone. "What? Repeat that, please?"

“T, even adults can have them and sometimes night terrors are caused by PTSD.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“Then why’d you tell me to repeat myself?” Delancy grouched.

“Sorry. I get the feeling you’re trying to tell me something, Delancy. What?”

Delancy told her of Chloe’s nightly observations. He tried to find a way to abort Treasure’s habitual self-incrimination. He didn’t find one. “She’s kept a log, T. I looked it over earlier. It’s for real. It’s night terrors, not nightmares. Although she says you’ve got those too. Those are later in the night, though. You know?”

“No. I don’t know.”

Delancy explained what he knew of PTSD-induced night terrors, things he’d learned from time spent with other vets not from his own experience of PTSD. “So they could run in your family. Maybe you’ve always had them and they’re worse since—or maybe you got them after Pense, or whatever. But this is something you need to talk to your doctor about, your counselor too. It’s important, T. This can be treated.”

“Treatment,” Treasure snorted, bitter. “Drugs. I haven’t had good experiences with drugs.”

“Not necessarily,” Delancy said. “But, yeah, probably.” His voice faded off as he realized the futility of trying to sugar coat the situation for Treasure. She’d either deal with it or not, but she seemed invested in Chloe and maybe, for Chloe’s sake, she’d

deal with it instead of burying it. He stared toward the girls, watching them handle the parts of the tent puzzling together how to set it up.

Treasure wondered if perimenopause might play a role in this, too. God, she was sick of this. She watched as Chloe and Genecia figured out the tent set-up, tightening guide lines, realizing they ought just to start over if they wanted to eliminate the sagging. They struck the tent and began again, finding a rhythm and doing a better job on their second try. “Scary stuff, huh?” she said to Delancy. “They’ll be grown before we say boo.”

Delancy let her change the subject. She’d talk about it when she was ready or she wouldn’t, he knew. No need to make it worse. “Yep.”

“Got a call Thursday night,” T said. “Some case down in Houston is causing a stink, and unless something breaks soon, the police will probably arrest Chloe for child pornography when we get back. Because of a stinking selfie. Can you believe that?” At Delancy’s shocked expression, “I know. Right? Is that as stupid as anything you’ve heard in your life?”

Delancy’s pained grunt sufficed.

“Blame the victim, same old same old.” Treasure paused. “I’ll fill you in when the girls aren’t around. Okay?” Another pause for Delancy’s irritated nod. “Is it the same every night? The night terrors, exactly the same? Did Chloe say?”

Delancy forced himself to follow Treasure’s topic change, tried to tamp the hope. Maybe Chloe’s presence does make a difference, he thought. “She said they’ve

gotten better, shorter maybe, the last few nights. The first night, outside of Andrea's, that was the worst, she said. Ten minutes or so the last few nights, maybe thirty to forty-five minutes after you go to sleep. Then, if you have nightmares, too, which you do sometimes, those are in the—"

"Morning, early early in the morning, yes. That I know." Treasure wore a rueful smile. "You think it would scare Genecia? I don't scream, do I? Seems like somebody would have noticed by now, if I was screaming." Treasure thought of her hospital stay.

"Not screams, no. More like moaning and crying, that sort of thing, I think; you're terrified, Chloe said that's real clear. I don't know. Probably scare Genecia. But she'd have Chloe with her, and with you knowing what's going on, that's got to make it a little easier on them. Knowing they can talk to you in the morning, joke about it, I guess. Maybe it'll be more like an experiment or something. That's what Chloe said, that she made it an experiment. Maybe we ought to let them try to wake you up, see what happens."

"Would that work? I thought they say not to wake little kids."

Delancy shrugged. "I don't know. I read as long as the person doesn't fight you, you can try to wake 'em up. If it works, cool. If not," he shrugged again. "I don't know."

Resigned, Treasure said, "They shouldn't try to wake me up. I have a history of fighting when I'm out of it." She told him details she'd kept to herself about the incident in Bryan. "I can't be sure what would happen, and I don't want to hurt them.

Delancy, it scares me how much I like having Chloe with me. How reassuring it is, having someone else around—even a kid, like her.”

“Aw, T, life is better when you have someone to share it. Ain’t easier, but it’s better.” He eyed Treasure, listening to her snort through her nose. “Yeah. Alright, it depends on the person.”

Treasure laughed, but the sound was not as bitter as Delancy expected.

“Let them stay in the tent if they want,” Treasure said. “Give Chloe the chance to rest.” She watched Delancy’s nod.

They continued to talk, rambling, not sticking to a subject, about the ravages of beavers and children and family, laughing when they recognized the theme of complaint over things that cannot be controlled. The girls wandered up, adding their opinions to the mix. Complaining it would be midnight at this rate before supper was done. Maybe they should just go to the movies and eat popcorn and nachos for supper. So they did, leaving steaks and explanations (about the request Treasure submitted Monday for the court to appoint Mack McKendrick attorney *ad litem* for Chloe) to the following day.

Bug-Out Bag

Friday afternoon, after a day spent shopping at the factory outlet malls, Treasure needed some sort of tool she didn’t have. She said she’d go and get one, but Genecia laughed and said her dad probably had one in his bug out bag.

Delancy walked up a few minutes later, and Genecia called to him, “Hey, Dad, can you loosen this up for Miss T?”

Treasure showed him the part, a bolt that seemed frozen in place, something that should slip on and off easily to allow an extension to fit into place.

“Yeah, I think I’ve got something,” Delancy said. He opened a door to retrieve a military-style backpack.

“Why do you call it the bug out bag?” Chloe asked.

“You know—in case of evacuations or emergencies, or something,” Genecia said. “You know, like emergency preparedness? You’ve heard of that, right?”

Chloe pushed Genecia, “Yeah. I’ve heard of emergency preparedness. I’ve just never met anybody who prepared—not that I know of, anyway.”

Delancy laughed. “You think this is prepared?” He pointed at Treasure, “That woman right there is the emergency preparedness queen.”

Treasure good-naturedly allowed Delancy to tell stories on her.

He said he’d kept a backpack ready since his days in the military, not knowing when he might be deployed. By the time he met Treasure, however, he was lax about keeping it prepped and ready, since by then he had a daughter and a house to live in. Seeing Treasure’s fortifications and stockpiles, however, had made him think. What would he do in an emergency? How would he keep Genecia safe and fed in the power went out or a natural disaster occurred, food and water hard to come by? He told about watching Treasure check one of her bug out bags and how, after, he’d gone out and restocked his own.

Genecia said they had two bags now, one for the house and one for the truck.

Treasure grimaced when Delancy grinned and asked how many bug out bags Treasure had stashed around the nursery. “A few,” the only answer she would give.

Later, after dinner, after she and Genecia went to the bath house and took showers and laughed talking about old times at the group home they’d shared, after they talked half the night away in their tent, when Genecia was fast asleep and Chloe laid in her bedroll pretending, Chloe thought about bug out bags. That would be handy. But it would do her no good. She never had notice, never had enough time to take her bags with her—and anyway, her bags were always searched and anything of value always got taken away. A bug out bag sounded nice, but it was a luxury she’d never be allowed.

Even so, she asked Delancy the next day to show her what he kept in his.

Internet Café

Delancy, Genecia, Treasure, and Chloe made a mid-morning stop at a downtown shop for pastries and coffee, noticing a sign advertising how to log into the place’s wi-fi. Delancy and Genecia retrieved their laptops, settling in to check social media and catch up with the world.

Treasure took a sip of the coffee, grimaced, and said she’d seen an antiques place a few doors down. She waved Chloe off, told her to enjoy the break, and walked out the door leaving the full coffee cup sitting.

Delancy and Chloe laughed. “It’s not the worst coffee I’ve ever had,” Delancy said. “The worst and the best cup of coffee I ever had, I had in the military.” They

laughed again. Delancy browsed the Internet, checked e-mail, replied to a few messages, and hit his social media, doing the same. After ten minutes, he passed his computer to Chloe. "I'll bet you've missed being online."

Chloe pulled the computer toward her. "Yeah. But it's weird, I kind of get why Treasure likes being disconnected. I mean, I guess she likes it. Anyway, she always finds stuff to do, without computers and the internet. And doing stuff, that feels good. You know?"

Delancy smiled at her, "It does. We've got a few minutes. Enjoy yourself." He nodded at the computer, standing. "I saw a store next door I want to look at, had a weird display in the window. I want to know what they sell there. You two sit tight and enjoy the relaxation. Treasure will have us running again in no time." He headed for the door after touching Genecia to be sure she noticed he was leaving.

Genecia wore headphones and was lost in music and connectivity. "Yeah, Dad, whatever."

Chloe rolled her eyes. She logged into her email account, the one only Z knew about, hoping maybe she'd have a reply from him. She had several. She scrolled back to the earliest, reading the emails, her expression growing graver by the line.

Z in danger. Malik in danger. Chloe in danger. Talk to no one about hotels and other girls or things related to connections made in the fostering system. Don't talk about Malik. Don't even respond if anyone asks anything. Look confused. Shrug. Say nothing. Stay up there, far away, hidden. A little longer and everything would be over

and, maybe, they'd all be safe again. Maybe. Don't use this account. Don't email him again. Don't trust anyone in the system. Ever. Watch the news. She'd know when things were over and she'd be safe then. Maybe.

When she finished reading, she deleted the emails. She deleted the account. She closed the laptop, looking vaguely through the glassed storefront, to the street outside the shop.

Genecia never noticed Chloe's grim expression.

Chapter 15: Treasure and Chloe

Back to the Grind

They returned to Treasure's place Saturday afternoon around dusk. School would start back Monday, but they had Sunday to themselves. Treasure let Chloe sleep in Sunday, staying in her room late to keep her clattering around in the kitchen from waking Chloe. Treasure did not know Chloe woke early, waited in her bedroom for the permission of Treasure moving around.

Finally, Treasure left her room, cooked breakfast, and they ate. Treasure told Chloe she wanted to check the greenhouses and the fields, see how everything did while she was away. Chloe trailed around after Treasure, watching her check gauges and look over the plants with an experienced eye, thrusting a knowing finger in soil here or there to test the moisture level. Treasure said nothing, but she was both pleased and appalled to see how well her employees did without her to watch over them. I could travel, she thought, the memory of a thousand dreams of seeing the world echoing back from her lost girlhood. I could take Chloe to see the national parks, or monuments, or the Smithsonian or something. Chloe would like that. Treasure told Chloe she needed to check the pond, see what was happening with the twigs and the beavers. Treasure left the golf cart sitting and walked.

Chloe followed, absently noting Treasure's route and how she stopped at odd spots, pausing, looking around, taking stock. Chloe tried to see what Treasure saw, but

nothing stood out to her. They hiked to the back fence, Treasure cursing the damage she saw—the beautiful shrubs that provided colorful twigs that people paid so much for were gnawed to knee level.

Treasure stood at the fence, pointing, “Vicious bastards came from there.”

Chloe looked toward a distant pond on the adjacent property. Trees were gnawed down in the same weird way between the pond and the fence, and now from Treasure’s fence to her pond. “I didn’t know beavers did so much damage,” Chloe said.

“They do,” Treasure said. She shrugged.

“Are they all over here now?” Chloe asked.

“Maybe. Probably not.” Hands on her hips, Treasure stood in one spot and slowly twirled, taking a long look at the landscape. “No, there are more of them. They’ll be here and we’ll just have to deal with it.” Treasure said she was heading back to the house.

“Do you mind if I stay out here for a while?” Chloe asked.

Treasure smiled, “We may make a country girl out of you.”

“Right,” Chloe said.

Treasure hiked away, laughing.

Chloe waited until she was gone, a sudden intuition about Treasure’s pauses along the trail. If Treasure had bug out bags stashed all around the property, maybe she’d been looking for signs some of them had been tampered with or something. Chloe looked around the fence line, but nothing stood out to her. If Treasure had anything

hidden out here, Chloe couldn't see where. She walked slowly back the way they'd come, searching. She was fifty yards from the back greenhouse when it dawned on her, she hadn't even considered the sheds.

Treasure had little sheds for tools and equipment spread around the property—she said she thought it was a waste of time to cart everything around eighty acres.

Chloe retraced her steps, considering the boundaries of the property—so that's eighty acres, she thought. She stopped at the first shed she passed, looking in it. Sure enough, two bags sat on a shelf, plain and in site. Treasure did not try to hide it, Chloe thought. She pulled the backpack down to the ground at her feet, zipped the main compartment open and looked inside. Camping gear and a few clothes were visible, but she didn't want to disturb it too obviously. She saw something called a platypus, to hold drinking water, outside the main section of the pack. She zipped it up without touching it much, checking exterior pockets. So that's what Treasure's bug out bag looks like, Chloe thought. She checked the second bag. It held first aid supplies, water, and some additional gear. Both would be useful in an emergency, but a hiker could probably only take one.

Chloe headed to the house, thinking about Treasure's diaries. Maybe she would read them. Without a television, she had plenty of time.

Treasure's Journal

I got a call, a social worker with the Child Protective Services, telling me I could have a supervised visit with my children Saturday morning. I was shocked. I thought I'd never

be allowed to see them again, given the things the things that came out during the investigation of our living situation.

We got through the depositions, but it was a nightmare. Me, Natalie, Jared, and three more lawyers in a room together—Jared doesn't seem to be hiding what he's done so much as bragging, playing to those three male lawyers, titillating them with stories about me and Natalie—his stories never portrayed us kindly. He made us out to be whores—incompetent whores. Untrustworthy, worthless women who deserved to be discarded.

I met Janice and Darren with the kids

Naomi was present, a social worker, too. The seven of us met up at the Dairy Queen, and once we'd gotten Blizzards, we sat at a table in the middle of the dining area. Jon crowded me tight on one side and Naomi hugged me close on the other.

Naomi told me not to be surprised if the kids reacted with anger toward me. She asked if they'd been angry when we were together those days when Natalie and the kids left Jared and came to find me, but they hadn't. They'd been glad to see me. Naomi said it wasn't uncommon for children left in the custody of an abusing parent to become extremely angry with the non-abusing parent. She said it was called "parental alienation syndrome," that it often occurs when the abusive parent portrays the other parent as evil and unloving because he or she chose to leave.

"You need to understand, if he gains custody again, he *will* alienate the children from you," Naomi told me. "I'm not trying to frighten you, I just need to know you

understand what will happen. I've seen this too many times. It's crushing, even with warning."

I hadn't needed the warning.

"How's school going?" I asked.

Andrea rolled her eyes, "Okay, I guess."

The two had been taken to the public school near Janice and Darren, and the class sizes were much larger than at the small, exclusive school they'd attended. I was sorry the transition was so difficult. I wished there was another option, but I didn't know of one.

Jon said, "It's stupid. I learned this stuff three years ago. And my classes are full of jerks."

An exaggeration, I figured. Surely his class wasn't working on material he learned when he was six. But the social worker Tanya Broussard agreed, "I can't believe how far ahead of the school he is. That private school must have been something." The social worker leaned out from the next table over to speak to me. "Your children scored very high on the admissions test, Ms. Montgomery. Of course, we place the students according to age, not test scores. But I'm sure the school will find appropriate advanced level work for them as things go along, providing they stay here."

The thought that she figured they might not was chilling.

She settled back into her seat and continued a conversation with Naomi.

“Mama,” Andrea said. “They ask me lots of questions. All the time, they just ask me things over and over.”

“I know, baby,” I said.

“I’m not a baby anymore, Mama, and Daddy would be mad if he knew they were asking us this stuff,” she said. “He said we can’t talk about any of it with anyone.”

“Yes. I know,” I said. “But do you think that’s right of Daddy?” I held my breath.

This was new territory for us, to question anything Jared dictated.

Jon spoke, “I don’t think it was right.”

“No,” Andrea said. “But he’s going to be so angry and you know how he gets when he’s angry. What if—”

I sighed and said, “Listen to me carefully, both of you. The truth might make some people angry. And Daddy probably will be angry when we talk about things he told us were private. But even if we don’t talk about those things, Daddy still gets angry. He gets angry at us anyway, doesn’t he? He gets angry with me, remember?”

The kids were silent, neither fidgeting, both eating one spoonful of Blizzard at a time and listening, thinking about what I said.

“He’ll still be angry,” Jon said.

“If we tell the truth, maybe someone will help Daddy learn to handle his anger better,” I said. “But if we don’t say anything, we know—absolutely—that no one will help. Don’t we?”

Andrea leaned her head against my shoulder, in seconds going from rigidly tense to softly relaxed, “We should just tell the truth, Jon.”

“I think Daddy has some problems he needs to deal with and if we don’t tell, he might never get the help he needs,” I said. “It’s one way we can serve him even though we aren’t living with him anymore.”

Even as I said it, the idea of telling Andrea and Jon they needed to serve Jared sickened me. But I knew, for now, those words were necessary. Until the kids were old enough and distant enough from Jared to understand how twisted and wrong his ideas are, I had to reach them with the paradigms we’d all been accustomed to. I hated that I had to manipulate my kids the same way Jared did, but I was scared to death of what would happen to us if the kids didn’t open up and talk about what went on in our home.

Jared’s version of what went on at our house was nothing like the stories Natalie and I told to authorities. Everything hinged now on what the kids themselves said. A little while later, I hugged them as we said goodbye. “Just tell the truth,” I said. “Just tell what really, truly happened. It’s okay to talk about the things that happened.”

Settling In

Treasure took Chloe to school the first day, to get her registered and settled. Chloe wasn’t in the same buildings as Genecia, but they were on the same campus. That was different for Chloe, accustomed to huge school districts in the Houston area with only a few grades on a single campus. The respect people gave her, too, was different. Being the new kid made you a curiosity, but people didn’t make assumptions about you,

Chloe learned. They had their cliques. Some people were more open than others. A few people were truly rude, but it didn't seem so bad—although she was sure she just didn't know enough about them yet to distinguish good and bad in this new environment. Maybe it was just small, maybe that's what made it seem better. The drug use was obvious to Chloe. Kids used drugs the same in the country as the city. But kids are kids wherever, it seemed, even if they did talk about some things differently.

With Chloe situated, Treasure drove home and checked in with Naomi by phone, filling her in on the vacation and Chloe's nighttime observations. It was unfortunate, Naomi said, but not exactly shocking news. Treasure mourned. Why? Every step forward, she made seven back, it seemed.

"Treasure, there's no exact recipe for recovery," Naomi said. "You've made remarkable progress—and, yes, you were stalemated for a long time there, it seemed. I can't tell you why some people seem to take extreme trauma in stride—go on to enjoy productive jobs and relationships—and, others don't. We know factors that help," Naomi shrugged, "and factors that don't help. But every person's journey is unique and the timeline for how long it takes a person to grieve, to absorb what's occurred and find a way to continue, instead despite because—" Naomi paused. "And some people never heal. Some people can't find their way back, ever. Some can't find the will to live. It's not something I can explain—what makes the difference? I don't know—I can't always accurately predict."

Treasure said, bitter, “I guess I’m just one of the cockroaches of the universe—I’d take an atomic blast and keep on trying, too stupid to know when to give up and stop.”

Naomi said, “It’s one of your most charming qualities.”

They talked until Naomi’s first personal appointment of the day arrived.

Treasure called Mack to ask if there was any news.

He had nothing to tell Treasure, the scuttlebutt had gone suddenly, ominously quiet. He held her on the phone longer than their other calls, curious to know how she was doing, really. He wondered if she realized how much she’d impacted his life, for the better. He doubted it—Tad said when she called asking about him, she’d called him “McKendrick, that lawyer.” Treasure could be so oblivious, when she needed to be. He didn’t grudge her that necessary oblivion, but he ached for her to be allowed to move on.

“Do you want to meet her, talk to her?” Treasure asked.

“Not until she’s officially my client,” Mack said.

“What should I tell her?” she asked Mack.

“What do you think you should tell Chloe?” Mack asked.

“I don’t know. Nothing. Maybe,” she said.

“Trust your gut, Treasure. It’s kept you alive so far, right?” he said.

*

Treasure and Chloe each enjoyed an unparalleled streak of good fortune, wondering frequently when it would screech to a halt, thankful when it lasted another day.

Chloe got her first ever A in high school from her new English teacher, who suggested Chloe bring in any old essays she'd written at her previous school to see where she stood in her English studies. Chloe brought the one on hurricanes Katrina and Rita, since her school work was discarded, along with many other things, by the foster parent who kicked her out.

Her new teacher suggested a couple of structural changes, revisions that significantly improved the paper from Chloe's perspective. After marking it with an A, her new teacher remarked that, in her opinion, the paper hadn't need any revisions to earn the high grade.

Chloe wasn't sure that was true, because she liked the improvements the woman had recommended. Still, Chloe found herself unnerved when the teacher asked her to read the paper to the class, since the other students already knew about each other's essays but none knew anything about hers and besides, it made a great introduction for her. Chloe stood, as asked, and presented the paper essentially from memory as she had in Houston. She was shocked, after, when her new classmates applauded and hooted and told her "that was great."

In addition, a few came up to her, after, to tell her they'd moved to east Texas themselves as a result of the hurricanes. It was cool, they said, to hear more about the storms since they didn't remember the hurricanes either.

She and Treasure went to Lufkin, to Sam's Club and Best Buy, shopping for a television. They walked out with three, two for their bedrooms, one for the kitchen. Treasure only laughed when they got home and discovered they had no reception, her property in a low spot and densely surrounded by a mixed hardwood forest. Someone suggested an antenna.

Juanito said to check into satellite services. TeeJay named the one she subscribed to, Delancy named a competitor. Celia, however, got on her smartphone, got someone on the line, and by the end of two days, Chloe and Treasure had five hundred channels of mostly nothing but re-runs. Not that Treasure had seen much of anything that aired in the last dozen years, or even before that, really. She was appalled; sitting with her mouth open after a single half-hour sitcom Chloe said was very popular. Chloe said, it's not that good, I guess. Treasure said, no, but it's probably not as bad as I'm making it out to be. Chloe asked, what did you used to watch? And they flipped through the channels until Treasure found The Addams Family.

"I guess television's always been kind of lame," Chloe said.

"Yeah, I guess," Treasure said.

Not one channel played news from the Houston area, Chloe noted.

Treasure didn't watch much television for a few days until she discovered she could listen to stations with nothing but music. She played music in the kitchen and in her bedroom, too, most of the time. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, she watched

episodes of cartoons or television shows that aired when she was young. She never, ever watched a newscast.

Chloe checked online for news when she had the chance at school or at Genecia's. She saw nothing, wondering if she would ever know anything about what Z and Malik were going through. If she would ever know if they were safe, what happened to them, whether or not she was really in danger or what that danger, specifically, was. Trust no one in the system. Did that mean Malik knew or thought someone in the foster care system might be part of the problem? Foster kids disappeared all the time, Chloe knew. Run-away was the usual explanation. Chloe knew first-hand that wasn't always the case.

During those same weeks, Treasure joined forces with her employees to fight in the war against beaver aggression. The crew mounted increasingly complex schemes to deter the massive rodents, but their efforts seemed doomed. Another egress left more trees hacked off two or three feet above ground, distinctive evidence of the beavers' damaging teeth. Treasure and her crew observed evidence of new construction at one edge of the pond, a mass of tangled limbs just under the water's edge.

Chloe said it was fascinating. And what was wrong with beavers anyway? But she ran around the property after school and on the weekends, following instructions issued by the others.

Treasure's nightly rest period reflected her increasing distress over not hearing positive news regarding Mack's representation of Chloe. By day, Treasure worked,

tireless it seemed; by night, she wrestled in her sleep, her nightmares increasing, her exhaustion snowballing. She forced herself to wake early, fix Chloe a nourishing breakfast, pack her a lunch that was fast making her the butt of envy in the school lunchroom, and hit the greenhouses before anyone else arrived at the nursery.

By May, it was clear to everyone that something bothered Treasure. It was equally clear something bothered Chloe, too. Neither seemed aware.

Delancy, beyond advising Treasure to ask Naomi for more couch time, did not betray Treasure's trust by telling the others what he knew of the situation. Anything Celia, TeeJay, and Juanito knew, eventually Genecia would know, and whatever Genecia knew, Chloe would find out. Delancy tried to find out what was up with Chloe. He got nowhere on that front either. Genecia was oblivious. Chloe wouldn't even admit something was wrong. He asked her how things were going with Treasure.

"Treasure?" Chloe said, a surprised expression flitting across her face. "She's great. Why?"

Delancy said, "Just checking in." Whatever was bugging kid, he doubted it had to do with her new living situation.

He checked with Treasure.

Treasure remained adamant: she didn't think Chloe should have even more on her plate to worry about. Knowing arrest was a possibility would not help Chloe adjust to her new school. And the minute she could, Treasure said, she would arrange for a

visit with Naomi in person. Now was no time for her to be gone for hours at a time out of town. What if they came while she was gone, arresting Chloe?

“Shouldn’t we just ask her what she knows?” Delancy voiced the question.

“If she knows anything,” Treasure countered. “But why go there, if we don’t have to. You know as well as I do, Delancy Perkins—”

“Wait. I’ve got an idea,” Delancy explained what had been brewing for weeks in his head. What if Chloe “accidentally” overheard a conversation Treasure had about the situation in Houston, about the ongoing investigation of teen sex-trafficking and any alleged involvement of members of Houston’s foster community? What if Chloe volunteered information, without knowing they wanted to arrest her?

Treasure said, until she could be sure of having a skilled ally like Mack on Chloe’s side, she didn’t want to risk learning something that might precipitate events. Or that she might be called to tell under oath. Besides, the police—like so many others—tend to question everything, treating everyone equally like perpetrators. The conversation dead-ended there, both Treasure and Delancy too worried and too realistic to continue.

On another front, during the week before finals in what students at the University called “dead week,” Jon suddenly renewed his campaign to force Treasure to accept him and his roommate with open arms and pocket book. He called repeatedly, each time stipulating a shorter amount of time they would spend working while simultaneously increasing the pay he demanded for their work. No, they didn’t want to

find an apartment or a house to live offsite. They wanted to occupy the remaining guestroom, across the hall from Chloe, to “save money.” Treasure didn’t buy it for one mean second.

To her eternal grief, Treasure recognized the techniques of manipulation and gas-lighting Jon had begun to practice on her. She’d seen the techniques practiced by his father Jared. After so many years of second-guessing and analyzing, Treasure could see the manipulations clearly. She acknowledged the uneasy feeling his actions gave her, admitting to herself the changes she’d seen in him since he’d moved in with the other boy, the one Chloe said was a pervert.

She would never allow either of them to live directly across the hallway from Chloe.

She called Jon back five minutes after receiving his latest phone message. “Jon, listen to me,” Treasure said when he answered and launched immediately into another attack. “The answer is no. Absolutely, no. Neither you nor your roommate will be allowed to live in this house with me and Chloe. She’s a minor, and I don’t trust your roommate. I’m not sure I can trust you around her, either, Jon. To be frank. I have decided I will not give you a job. Period. End of discussion. I’m sick about this, Jon. You only want to see me or talk to me when you want something from me. As far as I’m concerned this discussion is done. If you ever want a real relationship, call me.” She hung up on her son.

She arranged for Chloe to spend that night, a Friday, with Genecia and Delancy. She needed time to think, without Chloe to worry about. Tonight would probably be a doozy, as far as her night terrors went. She didn't want Chloe around for it.

She thought about what she would have to do next. The shit would hit the fan, when Jon complained to Janice and Darren. Maybe she needed to have a sit down, or maybe a knock-down, with her brother Darren before planning to schedule the same with Jon. She considered who should serve as witnesses to the confrontations, and advantage she'd never had with Jared. Would Naomi be part of an intervention? Maybe Andrea and Jon and Darren and Janice should all be present, with Tad there, too. Maybe even Chiclets. God knows they were just as affected by the strained relationships as she. She went to bed, Chloe safe at Delancy's, and slept. Treasure woke, profoundly exhausted and groggy, but seeing daylight outside, realized she'd slept better during that night than in years. Fat lot of good it did—she was more exhausted for it.

Treasure waited, wondering what the fallout from her family would be, but too fatigued to instigate further drama. She heard, a few weeks later from Janice, Jon was living with them for the summer, working with Darren at the camp.

One week followed another, no news on any front, and nothing new to report. Social workers popped in and out, scheduled visits and surprise ones, looking in cabinets and under the sinks, wandering as was their appointed right. Treasure and Chloe anticipated each visit like a death-row prisoner might anticipate the final administration of their penalty. After every visit, social workers proclaimed all well.

Treasure and Chloe each closeted herself away for a day or two, suffering headaches and nausea. Neither Treasure nor Chloe accepted the statements at face value, but both were relieved to have whatever reprieve they got.

Neither could express that truth to the other.

Their routines were simple. Each kept a certain emotional distance from the other—neither felt the liberty to complicate things. Chloe rode the school bus to and from each school day. Treasure offered to drive her, but Chloe refused, saying the bus went right past the place, why not take advantage of taxpayers' money.

Treasure, daily, tried to tell Chloe she might be arrested, until Treasure thought of herself suspended in the hospital, interrogated, question after question, no one listening to the answers. Even the case with Tom Pense—as straightforward and provable as it was—derailed for a time, Treasure's history presented in the worst possible light. Pense claimed their "relationship" was consensual, that Treasure had contacted him through a private chatroom on the world wide web, initiating the relationship. It didn't hold up, but the questions came, unrelenting, and the damage—in the end, the jury may have ruled against Pense, but they hadn't thought Treasure truly innocent in the situation. And they hadn't liked her, not at all. If he hadn't promptly killed a man after his incarceration, he would probably already be out on parole. Chloe's mother's boyfriend would likely be paroled soon.

Treasure thought, once I tell her, once it's hanging over her head, she'll think I think the worst of her. Still, after a while, Treasure began to feel guilty. Her nights

became more restless, difficult. Another shift in hormones kicked up her sexual appetite, and after so long of feeling nothing—disgust maybe, with herself and the idea of sex—Treasure felt restless, perturbed, always itchy and anxious, aware. She redoubled her daily workload, making herself scarce by choosing tasks farthest away from her crew.

Chloe arrived at the end of each school day, one of the last on the bus route, sometimes arriving after 4:30 pm. She went straight to the nursery, spending an hour each weekday doing chores, adding another eight hours of labor over each weekend, and each time she deposited her paycheck, she socked a portion of the cash away, into a hidden pocket of her backpack—she kept the school backpack with her all the time. She wished she could have her own bug out bag, but the weight would be impossible to carry to and from school—especially if she put all the things she now owned and wanted to keep inside it. Except, looking at the items one evening, Chloe admitted they wouldn't all fit anymore. For the first time in her memory, she had more than a couple of bags could carry. She hyperventilated.

The next day, she took a few things to school, gave them to a kid she could tell needed them worse than she did. She did it several days, until Treasure noticed. She told her what she had done, thinking this is it, the end of that. Fine, then. But Treasure patted her arm, gave her this sad smile, and only said, “That’s good. A lot of people out there, needing help. Don’t ever forget there are people out there who can use your help.”

Chloe shrugged, but she stopped giving things away—for a week or so. She studied the news reports and saw nothing.

One day Mack called and said it was done. He, officially, represented Chloe. “Maybe it’s time to schedule a visit with her?”

Treasure asked him to send her a dozen of his business cards, express. “School will be out soon. Can’t it wait just a little longer? You haven’t heard anything, have you?”

Mack let himself be convinced.

When the cards came in the mail, Treasure held one in her hand. This, she thought, I can at least do this for her. She sat Chloe down, handed her the card, and she said, “This man, Morton McKendrick, Jr. has been appointed by the court as your attorney *ad litem* if there ever comes a time that you need an attorney. It’s fairly routine, really.”

“What does that mean?” Chloe asked.

“That means if anyone ever tries to question you, about anything, you say ‘I can only talk to you with my attorney present.’ And you hand them one of Mack’s business cards.”

“Mack. So—” Chloe had read the name in Treasure’s journal. “Like—you know him? For real, not just he’s a lawyer you heard of.”

“For real. He’s a good man, Chloe. He—he—his legal counsel got me through a rough patch, after Jared killed Natalie and—after Darren shot Jared.” Treasure didn’t realize what she’d admitted.

Chloe read that part, in the diaries. She knew the lie they’d concocted, that Darren had left the rifle with her, when he found out that Jared abused Treasure and still stalked her. They said Treasure shot Jared in self-defense, after she saw what he’d done to Natalie and the other woman, his new paralegal. She only wrote about it once, in a short entry after she was acquitted of any wrong-doing. “You like him, this guy Mack?”

“I do,” Treasure said. “He never judged me, you know? He never—he’s a good person. I think you’ll like him. I guess I need to explain that he represents you, not me. Your interests not mine. If anything comes up, if I can’t be with you—you keep one of these cards with you all the time, hear me? And don’t answer any questions without your lawyer, without him present,” Treasure peered at Chloe, “Just—trust me on that one. Don’t say anything except the words ‘I want my lawyer.’ If you want, I’ll schedule a visit with him so you can meet him and see what you think about him for yourself.” Treasure motioned to an enveloped.

Chloe picked it up, looked inside to see a stack of the same cards. She dipped her head, an acknowledgement of Treasure’s advice. She took the cards, tucking some into her bag, sticking one in the back of her school ID holder, others here or there where she might easily find one if needed. “Maybe. I’ll let you know.” She was afraid of what she might accidentally ask, or reveal, if she talked to him.

Before Treasure or Chloe knew it, the last day of the school year arrived. Summer break officially began at two the following afternoon, when the school would let out early by an hour and a half. They had a good laugh over that: why bother? Treasure speculated, how many kids won't even show up? Chloe bet her a lot of her classmates wouldn't be there. They decided, at the last minute, they ought to take the teardrop on a short trip, a celebration of sorts: Chloe survived her first year of high school; Treasure seemed to be doing better with her night terrors, although she had refused the drugs Dr. Stinson said might be helpful. Said she'd tried drugs before, hated the way they made her feel. She didn't say they reminded her of the old days, when Jared drugged her to ensure she wouldn't refuse doing the things he wanted. Roofies or GBH or other things. Not the same, sure. She couldn't, was what Treasure said.

“Hey, can I invite Genecia?” Chloe asked.

Treasure said, “Might as well. We're not going far.”

With plans made, Treasure and Chloe retired for bed Thursday. Treasure was exhausted, and Chloe said she needed to get some sleep before she and Genecia had their marathon all-nighter. Treasure had smiled, remembering with fondness the girls' gabfest in the trailer next to her, the one night they bunked in with her. Their reactions to her gasping out loud a few times when she forgot she was supposed to be asleep. Treasure prayed before laying down for the night, “Make the bonds last. Make them last.” Thirty minutes later, she got a phone call from Darren bitching about Jon, blaming her for saddling Darren with Jon for the summer instead of stepping up and being his

mother. She should never have let it ride. She should have followed through with her plan to set Naomi on them. Treasure hung up on her brother and turned her cell phone off. She laid in her bed several hours, tossing, turning, and terribly bothered. She felt hot one minute. Cold the next. And then, she shook for half an hour, thinking of Natalie and getting madder by the minute over her impotent, irrational arousal. She fell asleep hours into the night, too little time before her alarm would go off.

Shortly after, she decked Chloe when the girl tried to wake Treasure, thrashing and screaming a shrill, horrified shriek at the top of her lungs. Chloe placed an alarm clock inside Treasure's doorway, set it to ringing, and closed the door, safe outside in the hall. Treasure got up, smashed the clock, and squatted next to it. But she woke some time later, to Chloe repeatedly calling her name, knocking loudly on the wall outside Treasure's closed door. When Treasure was lucid, she turned on a light, opened the door, and completely freaked when she saw Chloe's face, one eye fully swollen, the other half shut: the upper half of Chloe's face a grisly reddish purple.

The inevitability of this eventuality, Treasure acknowledged, should have precluded anyone trusting her with the life of any child. How could she explain this to Chloe's school? There was no simple way, and that fact alone should have broken Treasure once and for all. Instead, Treasure stood in the doorway, glaring at Chloe—who appeared literally to have a spot of blood in her half-open eye. “Didn’t I tell you *not* to try to wake me?” Treasure yelled.

At Chloe's high-pitched, indignant squeak in the affirmative, Treasure began to laugh. She opened her arms to the girl who walked into them, clasping her tightly full around her waist and held on for dear life, "I was so worried about you."

Treasure thought, I should be vomiting right now. I should be puking my guts up, the way she's holding me, with everything that's happening. She said, "I know, I know. I'm so sorry, Chloe. Your face. Your poor, poor face." She pushed the girl out to examine her face more closely under the light. "How in the world are we going to explain this?"

And Chloe, who should have been as broken by the hit as Treasure, laughed back at her. "That's your problem."

They adjourned to the kitchen to build an ice pack, each knowing it was far too after-the-fact for that remedy to be effective. They speculated over whether anyone would say anything if Chloe simply didn't show up for the last day of class. They decided Treasure would call in, claiming illness, and Chloe would stay home from school. Thank God for summer. One missed day, what would it matter?

But that was already on the agenda for Chloe, and the need for explanations dire; they just didn't know it, yet.

Chapter 16: All of the Above

Eye Level

Treasure and Chloe were dragging, having fallen asleep together watching TV in the living room, barely waking up in time to call the school at the last minute to say Chloe would be absent that day due to a stomach virus. They were telling awful jokes that involved eyes in the punchline when Juanito called Treasure.

“Um, T, there are deputies at the gate,” Juanito said. “They said if I don’t open the gate to let them in, they’ll bust it down. They said they have a warrant, something about child pornography.”

The fear in Juanito’s voice spurred Treasure, “Cooperate, Juanito. Let them in, and tell them they’re welcome. We’ll open whatever they want to see. Tell them I’ll be there as fast as I can.” She sounded rock steady and solid.

Chloe asked her. “What’s wrong?”

“Honey, deputies are at the gate with a warrant. They’re—I think they plan to arrest you on a charge of child pornography because of a selfie you sent. They’ll probably arrest me too once they see you. I should have told you. I knew it was a possibility, but I hoped—” Treasure shook her head.

“A selfie?” Chloe sputtered. “You mean the picture of me Malik took in that hotel? He sent it to himself.” Insurance, he’d said, that first night. He told her he wished

he'd never done it, later, when he let her go. It was bad, that photo. The wrong people would see it.

"I should have told you this might happen."

Chloe stared at Treasure, helpless rage building. "You knew? You knew! And you didn't tell me?"

Treasure said, defensive, "I was stupid for hoping we could avoid this. Stupid for wanting you to have just a few good weeks. You know? You could have handled it, I guess. I should have told you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I just wanted you to have a few good weeks."

Chloe simply repeated, in a dead voice, "You knew."

Treasure couldn't stop herself, even knowing better, knowing when she said it the damage it would do. "Did you know that girl? She was in the foster program, but she disappeared about the time you got kicked out of the last place. They found her body—Mack said a policeman told him you knew her, and they want to know what you know. About *it*, whatever it is. We don't have time. I have to go down there. Are you coming with me?"

Chloe's mouth dropped, "They're just now trying to figure out what happened to her? It's been what, months?" Chloe seethed. "They didn't give a shit about her then. The cops, I mean. And CPS. They said she was just another runaway. Like runaways don't matter anyway. Clean it up, brush it off, like shit on a shoe—like none of us matters." She was furious.

“So you do know something?” Treasure tried to make it a question but it wasn’t. “Mack can help. He’s paid to represent you. Only you. You can trust him—even if you can’t trust me or them or anything else—I’m sorry. Chloe! Say something. Say you understand. Say you don’t. Just—don’t say anything, you hear. Don’t say anything until he’s with you, okay? Absolutely nothing.” Treasure and Chloe left the house through the back door, Treasure scooping up a large ring of keys from a hook as they passed by it. Treasure reached to lock the door, stopped, “Run grab my wallet, would you?” Treasure looked at the utility control panel for a second, thinking. She deactivated the circuit that operated the electric fence. The last thing she needed was a fine if a deputy got into her fence by mistake, trying to get on the property.

Chloe backtracked, heading to get the wallet with Treasure’s driver’s license and her checkbook. Abruptly, she ran to her own room, looking around at her duffle and her backpack. She consolidated, putting the contents of both together and taking it. She picked up Treasure’s wallet on the way out. “We’d better hurry,” Chloe said. “They’ll tear this place apart if they think you aren’t cooperating. They’ll probably think it no matter what we do.” Chloe held her hand to her face, and then extended it toward Treasure. “I’m sorry, too, Treasure. I—I wanted—I shouldn’t have tried to wake you.” Her eyes hardened, that fierce frightening look Treasure remembered from the day Chloe said she did what she had to.

“Honey, this isn’t your fault. It’s mine. I should have done something about this, weeks ago.” Frustration clogged Treasure’s throat and her eyes. She led Chloe to the

golf cart, searching her phone's call history for Mack's number. He answered before Treasure heard it ring, "Treasure. I just heard. It would be best if you bring her on down and we'll take Chloe in together, to turn herself in."

"Mack. Mack." Treasure tried to get a word in. "Too late. They've executed the warrant here. They're arresting her here. Probably me, too—I've been having night terrors, Mack. Last night Chloe tried to wake me, and—it's bad, Mack. I hit her and her face looks awful. I need to call an attorney for myself. Can you come up here? How quickly can you get here?" Treasure and Chloe pulled up beside the floral delivery vans, on the back of the lot, out of sight of the deputies.

"Stay on the line with me, Treasure. Don't hang up."

Treasure said, "I have to talk to the officers, Mack."

"Just don't hang up. I want to hear. Put me on speaker phone."

Treasure followed Mack's advice, motioning for Chloe to sit still in the cart. "Stay," she barked. Treasure swung herself out of the cart and sped to the shop door. She stood in front of it, waving her key ring at the officers.

One deputy, noticing her sudden emergence from nowhere, pulled his weapon out, motioning with it. He yelled to Treasure, "Stop. Do not resist. Chloe Baldwin, you are under arrest for child pornography . . ." he recited Miranda rights.

Treasure was terrified. She saw Juanito's mouth open, saw when he made up his mind to say something. "Juanito, don't. It's okay, Officer, I'm not resisting." Treasure jiggled keys to the buildings and vehicles, showing her wallet and the phone.

The officer yelled, “I will shoot you! Drop it. Drop everything in your hands. I’m going to handcuff you. Drop everything!”

“I’m Treasure Montgomery, not Chloe Baldwin,” but she dropped everything as instructed. Nausea nearly overwhelmed her as two additional officers surrounded her, and the other shouldered his weapon and placed Treasure in handcuffs.

One officer bent and picked up her wallet. The officer holding her arms deadpanned, “How long have you operated under the alias Treasure Montgomery?”

Treasure said, “It’s my name, not an alias. My name is Treasure Montgomery. Look at my identification. I own this business, and my home is here on the property—”

An officer cut her off. “You make pornographic movies here?”

“No! I own a floral nursery. I grow flowers for florists!”

“Do you have any film-making equipment inside these buildings?”

“No! I—listen to me. You’ve made a mistake. Something’s gotten mixed up—my fifteen year old foster daughter is Chloe Baldwin. She’s a minor—she just turned fifteen years old. Her attorney *ad litem* is on that phone. Or he was—” Treasure looked down at the phone, studying it with nervous intent. “May I see your warrant?”

Treasure’s speech infuriated the officers who buzzed around her angrily.

“Says here Chloe Baldwin, 51 years old, red hair. Looks brownish-gray now, but I guess it could have been red before it grayed. Now shut your mouth. We’ll tell you when we want to hear from you.”

“There must be a mistake, officer. My foster daughter is Chloe. I’m Treasure Montgomery. And I’m 53, not 51.”

An officer shoved Treasure, a warning to shut her mouth.

Juanito stood with his hands over his head. “Officers.” He spoke desperately, but softly and too respectfully, as one who had reason to fear deportation might. “This is my employer, Treasure Montgomery.” He added, “I’m a legal citizen. Born and raised here, officers.”

Treasure cleared her throat. “All the corroboration you need is available. I have identification and my foster daughter’s attorney *ad litem* is on the phone.”

Three deputies closed in around her, one clapping his palms together forcefully in front of Treasure’s face, the others physically restraining her. “Shut your mouth.” The officers ignored Treasure, leaving the phone and the keys on the ground. Two additional deputies walked up, demanding to see Juanito’s identification, and he cautiously brought out his wallet.

“Officers, please, I’d like to see your warrant,” Treasure said.

“Be quiet,” another deputy said.

“I’d like a lawyer, please.”

One deputy waved his pointer finger in Treasure’s face. The others crowded closer, menacing her. “We’ll get to you in a minute.”

Sudden impotent rage filled her, and terror, and Treasure vomited, using it for once like a weapon. She felt herself shoved away, against an officer who shoved her

back, and Treasure stumbled, falling to the pavement hard, bouncing from one booted foot to another, shaking violently.

They won't listen. They won't listen. They won't listen.

No one noticed Chloe who slipped, silent and shaking, from the golf cart and headed, unnoticed, away from the action. Her vision obscured, Chloe stumbled along the trail sideways, peering forward and back and listening intently for the sounds of deputies. She headed to the back of the property like a kid crossing a pasture with a prize bull in it. Chloe loped in an inerrant line toward the back fence. Everyone seemed to have stopped at the front of the property by the nursery buildings. She stopped at one of the sheds, looking back, looking ahead, thinking maybe it would be better to trade her duffle bag for one of Treasure's bug out bags. That's what she'd do. She ducked into the shed, pulling the large backpack down. She knelt, pulling both bags with her under a worktable. She opened the bug out bag, wondering if she could fit any of her things. The main compartment, she realized, was divided and only the top half of the pack was filled. She stuffed her entire small duffle bag into the lower portion, zipped everything rapidly, fumbling. She listened. Nothing. Nothing.

Chloe stood, shouldering the heavy pack, and crossed to the door, slitting it open to hear. She stepped back into the sunlight, running for the fence which she climbed, showing caution only when she reached the top where the string of barbed wire along its length snagged her jeans. She scrambled to pitch herself over the fence, hearing the snagged fabric rip.

Chloe didn't have a plan. She could barely see and water streamed from her eyes down her cheeks. She didn't have a plan. Snot ran from her nose to her lips and chin, and it was a dastardly mistake to try to wipe her eyes. Her face throbbed with every frantic footfall. She didn't have a plan but if she stayed, she would have to answer questions. And no way anyone would think Treasure hadn't abused her. If she stayed, she'd be the one arrested, soon enough, for—of all things—child pornography? For one “selfie?” How did that even happen? Why did they think red-haired Treasure (who was not 51 years old) was blonde Chloe Baldwin, age 15? Why would Harris County send local east-Texas deputies to arrest her, and was there some sort of mix up in the descriptions or something? That had to be it—but it didn't make sense.

She thought of Z's email. Of Malik's warning to trust no one in the system. To take nothing and no one in that system as safe.

Nothing made sense. Chloe didn't have a plan. Treasure went nuts, when they restrained her. She was going nuts. She'd go nuts when she couldn't find Chloe. It was crazy, but Chloe couldn't risk getting caught. She didn't know who to trust, and looking like she did—it would only make things worse for Treasure. Leaving, that was her only chance. Leaving, too, she gave Treasure the only chance possible to escape the consequences of Chloe's stupid mistakes.

The deputies had to figure out their mistaken identity thing soon, right? Wouldn't they? If Treasure had an anxiety attack, would they call the EMTs? When they figured out Treasure wasn't Chloe, holy hell, Treasure Montgomery had enough

money to make them stand up and repent, didn't she? She couldn't let them catch her. She couldn't let them. They wouldn't understand. They would misunderstand the meaning of her face and her stupid mistakes. They would misunderstand two weeks in hotel rooms with so many different men. They would think she knew things she didn't.

Stupid. She was always making stupid mistakes. Stupid.

If they didn't see Chloe's face, they couldn't make things out to be bad that really weren't, right? And she wouldn't have to answer any questions. Everything would be okay if she could stay hidden, right? All she had to do was hide. Right? All she had to do was stay hidden. That's what Malik told Z to tell her.

Chloe ran until her breath hitched and her sides ached and the pack turned to lead on her back. She ran until she couldn't. She rested, sprawled in a patch of three-leaved plants, and she stroked the leaves between her fingers, putting her fingers to her face to wipe away the sweat that beaded. She stood, adjusted the heavy pack and began walking again. She walked, her pace slower by the hour. She weaved, this way and that, crossed dirt roads and spun into and out of sunshine and the gloom of heavy forest underbrush. She paused to rest, then pushed on again.

Unraveled

How does anyone navigate the unfathomable? Treasure Montgomery lay on a gurney, still handcuffed. TeeJay, Celia, Juanito, Delancy and an EMT gathered around her, speaking over each other in the vain attempt to be helpful. Two deputies stood near, debating whether to arrest them all or not, "If we're dealing with a pornography ring—"

Deputies looked at Treasure's wallet, and they could not argue with its identification of her as Treasure Montgomery. If she wasn't Chloe Baldwin, but she was approximately the same age and sex and description—although, the height was off, and the age—should they retain her anyway? This was serious, a case of child pornography—a heinous crime.

Weren't you given the particulars of the matter? Treasure asked the deputies. She offered to explain. They shrugged, ignoring her once again. "Talk to Chloe's attorney *ad litem*." She didn't figure Mack was still on the phone, probably the call had been disconnected. Treasure didn't know what had happened to her things. Maybe they still laid on the pavement outside her shop.

Delancy told the EMT about Treasure's PTSD. He said, "Her doctor is Maggie Stinson in Tyler. Dr. Stinson needs to be contacted. And her counselor. Naomi Barlowe. She needs to be contacted. And, I guess Treasure needs a lawyer." Delancy talked out loud, processing what happened, what needed to happen. "I need to call Andrea. Or Darren. Probably Darren. Or Tad. And I'll need to pick up the girls from school—God, T! The school—they don't even know—" Delancy stopped himself, praying no one would connect what he'd said.

Building by building, room by room, the deputies violated Treasure's safe fortress. She lay on the gurney, her face as battered as Chloe's, shaking, nauseated, spent. A misunderstanding. All a misunderstanding. When would they bring Chloe forward, demand to know what Treasure had done to her?

The sheriff arrived, with correct information, and he removed Treasure's handcuffs. "Depending on what we find out here, those may go back on, lady, hear?"

Treasure still hadn't seen the warrant, to know whether it was an arrest warrant or a search warrant, and anyway, at this point, it didn't matter what kind of warrant.

"Where is Chloe Baldwin?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't know," Treasure said. "She was here. She didn't feel well this morning, and I kept her home from school." Treasure didn't bat an eye at the small lie. "Chloe was probably terrified when they started yelling they were going to shoot me, especially since they were yelling her name. This circus does nothing to inspire confidence in the system—Sheriff, you know she isn't a pornographer, right? She's a kid, a young kid, and they only want to scare her into talking. Down in Houston. Someone told me this was about foster kids forced into sex trafficking. I really don't think she knows anything about it."

"What I know is there's a warrant for her arrest and the charge is child pornography," the sheriff said.

"I'd like to contact an attorney, please," Treasure said.

"Once we get you all to the sheriff's office, we'll get you squared away," he said.

Treasure, Celia, TeeJay, Juanito, and Delancy were transported in separate vehicles for additional questioning, Delancy, Celia, and Juanito released first. They

were returned to the property to get their vehicles and pick up their children from school.

Tad and Darren arrived as well as an attorney, someone Mack recommended. Neither said anything, only pressed a hand to Treasure's arm or shoulder. They let the attorney do her work, securing Treasure's freedom, coordinating with Mack to learn more about the sheriff's plans to pursue Chloe. Much later, they learned nothing incriminating was located during the search of Treasure's property and Chloe Baldwin was nowhere to be found.

The sheriff said area law enforcement would look for Chloe during their patrols but they planned no organized search for the runaway. "If you hear from her, you need to let us know," he warned. The warrant, when they found her, would result in her arrest. "You'd be better off to get with that lawyer, have her turn herself in."

Treasure thanked the woman, the attorney who said she was a friend of Mack's, once they'd left the building. "I appreciate your help."

"Glad to help," Jennifer Miller said. "Frankly, my husband and I have been curious about you. We'd just moved to the area when—" The woman diplomatically paused. "Mack speaks highly of you. He says you're probably the most remarkable woman he's ever met. I'm sorry this happened today, but I have to admit, I am glad to meet you." She handed Treasure a business card. "There's a lot to unravel with this. I'll be in touch shortly, but you call me if you need anything in the meantime."

Treasure watched Ms. Miller drive away. She climbed into Tad's dually pick-up between the two men, not noticing their startled looks that Treasure hadn't gotten into the backseat. She rested a hand on each man's knee, patting inattentively.

"Treasure, where's Chloe?" Darren asked.

Treasure patted his knee. "I don't know, Darren. She was with me when Juanito called to say the deputies were there. She was with me in the golf cart when I got to the parking lot. I told her to stay put in the golf cart. That's the last time I saw Chloe. She would have heard them arresting me. And I'm certain that would have scared her." She didn't say anything about the night's events, or mention Darren's late phone call.

"We'll find her, honey. Everything will work out, and she'll be fine. I promise." Darren spoke the platitudes unthinkingly.

"Darren, oh, Darren," Treasure shook her head. "Haven't you learned you can't make promises like that?" Her voice, soft and warm like a light summer rain, held only melancholy affection. "When this is done, Darren, we need to talk. About Jon and why I refused to let him work for me this summer. But it doesn't matter now. Not right now."

Darren raised his palm to Treasure, waited until she placed her hand over his. He laced his large fingers with her thin, delicate ones. "Treasure, I know now's not the time. But I think we have to tell Andrea and Jon the truth—"

She nodded at him, clutching his hand tight for a split second. "We do. We will. We have to, Darren. You're right. Not just about that day, but about everything before, too. I've never talked to them about it, and they need to hear it from me. But not today,

okay?” She held his hand, loose, forgiving, her mind already occupied, praying Chloe safe and sheltered.

Wracked and Ruined

Treasure, Darren, and Tad drove through the open gate to the main buildings without stopping to close the gate. Treasure’s remote lay forgotten on a table in her living room, and the open gate increased the despair she felt. Seeing doors left standing open on every building did not improve her disposition. The dread in her chest increased as they rolled to a stop in the parking lot. What would her house look like?

Tad and Darren exchanged a cautious look. “Should we—” Tad didn’t know what to say. The damage did not appear extreme, but until they looked in each building, they could not judge the extent of it. Based on their previous experiences with such investigations, the worst damage might not be apparent even after their walk-through.

Treasure’s chest tightened. “No help for it, I guess. But we’re looking for Chloe. Maybe she found a safe spot to hide. She’s small. She might fit in places no one would think to look.”

Darren exited, standing beside the truck, holding the door as his sister slid from the seat. “Any particular spots come to mind? Maybe we start with those.” Darren offered Treasure a hand and was relieved when she placed her smaller hand in his and squeezed it briefly before shrugging and striding off toward the main workshop. He shut the door and followed, not waiting for Tad.

Tad got out, pocketed his keys, slammed the door shut, and headed toward the nearest greenhouse. He noted plants dumped from their containers into the aisles. Sighing, he shook his head: child pornography charges, without any context provided to the officers and with the massive transpositions of information in the warrant, must have seemed quite urgent; the pots must have seemed over-large to someone unfamiliar with root systems. Tad stopped counting when his estimate of Treasure's potential income reached a loss of twenty thousand in that greenhouse alone. Insurance, he knew, could replace the income briefly, but losing mature flowering stock meant starting again, waiting a year or sometimes several years before being able to gain income from the plants. He shook his head. Why did kindness bring some people nothing but heartache? He looked for small spaces, storage areas, cabinets or shelves, any place that might offer small Chloe a spot to hide. Tad saw none, but he made another round through, looking.

"She isn't here," Treasure said, defeated.

They had ignored the chaos and damage, searching every small space in every building on the property and in every vehicle and in the teardrop camper—even in its galley. Hours had passed, and the day was fast losing its light.

"She isn't here," Treasure repeated.

They stood inside the last shed, the one farthest from the main compound, the one nearest the back fence. Treasure pointed. "But she was here," she said. "She took a bug out bag. Thank God. She has a bug out bag."

“A bug out bag?” Darren questioned.

Treasure nodded, explaining.

“That’s good, then, right?” Tad asked.

They walked outside again, looking to see if slight Chloe had left any trail.

Treasure led the way to the fence, and they paced one direction finding no clues, then turned back and retraced their steps. They started again, looking intently.

Darren spotted the small patch of ripped blue jean flying like a flag in the wind on a strand of barbed wire. “She probably went over here,” he said. He pointed at scuffs and shuffles in the dirt beyond the fence, but five feet past the fence any signs of Chloe’s passage ended. Dusk had fallen. Maybe someone could follow her trail, but not Darren or Tad. Not in the evening’s twilight.

“What do we do?” Darren asked, holding a helpless hand toward Treasure.

“The only thing we can,” she answered him. “We pray.”

*

Chloe decided she had to rest, she needed to stop and rest, she would rest after crossing two more fences and another road, after jumping two gates and walking farther into a heavily wooded area. She paused to rest, to take stock, to catch her breath and count the money she’d squirrelled away in her duffle and her book pack. She stopped in a quiet, sheltered spot in the woods. Chloe was dry-mouthed, spitless, and ravenously hungry, bitterly regretful that life with Treasure included regular mealtimes. The sun had moved

during her flight, from ten o'clock to straight-up high in the sky to a slanted two o'clock early dusk shadow.

She dropped the pack down behind her at the base of a huge pine tree, turning to lift the pack by a handhold at its top, sitting on the ground with her back to the tree, the pack at her knees. She started with her own things: pulling the small duffle from the backpack, opening it. She looked for her money first. Counted out six hundred twenty-seven dollars, the cash she'd been saving. She forced herself to breathe slow, to breathe deep. Hands shaking, she pulled out two t-shirts, a pair of shorts, a pair of pants, and a sweatshirt. She pulled three bottles of water, opening and drinking from one, making herself drink slow.

Her body hurt. Her shoulders, her back—the pack was too heavy for her. She was too small. It was her curse, being too small. She opened Treasure's bag, laying every single item out around herself, organizing things, looking them over, trying to understand what she had. She searched every pocket, every compartment, every cavity.

A lightweight backpackers stove, like one she'd seen boxed and tucked into a drawer in the teardrop. She'd asked Treasure about it, how it worked: Treasure showed her. It was only little folded sheets of metal, and cubes of a white solid fuel. She looked for matches, finding them with other kitchen-type gear. A plate, fork, sharp knife, spoon. A spatula and two serving spoons. A metal cup that could be set over the white flame in the tiny "stove" to heat water, a set of three small nesting pans with lids. An assortment of dehydrated meals—backpacker's foods—chocolate bars packaged tightly

in foil and plastic. M&Ms. Nuts. Raisins. A small box containing some kind of pump or siphon-looking device. The box said it filtered water. Chloe read the directions, resting. She looked at the Platypus, figured out how to fill it, how to pump water through the filter and into the bladder. How to place the bladder in its pouch nested into the edges of the pack. Another box, a “Nalgene” bottle—for water.

Water is important. Water is heavy.

Chloe finished one bottle, almost finished the second before she stopped, a sudden thought occurring to her. She hadn’t even considered the need for water. She’d drunk without thinking, not thinking beyond the moment. Stupid. Stupid. She had to use her head now. She hadn’t peed since morning. What did that mean?

Crazy. Treasure had everything imaginable in her pack, but so small—so neat and self-contained. Everything still boxed with instructions for how to use most things—like she’d need that, on the run, and sure, Chloe thought—in a panic you might need to be reminded. Or if you’d never camped. But in a panic, it’s hard to understand instructions. She was glad, so glad Treasure knew enough about panic to know somebody might need to be reminded how to use even simple stuff, on the run. There was a huge parachute-like thing. Big enough, it said, to serve as a shelter, like a tent or worn like a poncho over you and your backpack, covering both completely with a hooded opening.

She sat still then, without thinking anything for a half hour or more. She came to herself, startled by noise near her, looking up to see a deer peering at her curiously. At

Chloe's startled movement, the doe bounded away. The sun created a dappled, deep shade. Chloe stood, abruptly. She stumbled to a nearby tree, clumsily dropped her britches and pissed right there, wetting her shoes. Shaking, she wiggled back into her pants, disgusted, still dripping. She tried to walk, to move, rolling her shoulders, thinking. Looking above her, suddenly, she saw an odd shelter, a ladder and a structure like a tree house, island-like between three pines. It barely registered.

She looked at the backpack, the things she'd carelessly littered around it. It's too heavy. But I need it, I need everything. The little folding shovel, the flat-pack of toilet paper in its plastic zip-top bag—stupid, stupid, she could have used that—the sleeping bag, the flat length of microfleece with the opening in its middle—it could be worn or used as cover—the little first aid kit and every other thing, too.

She squatted, trembling, she fell into a seated position. She looked everything over again, resting. Finding things she hadn't opened yet. Opening. Looking. Sitting. Chloe opened a box, a Swiss army knife, the box said, but the box was bigger than required for a pocket knife. It did have a multi-tool knife inside it, but mostly, it held money. She counted, breathless suddenly, again. Holy shit. She walked away with a thousand dollars, stolen from Treasure, along with Treasure's diaries. Her diaries! She'd brought them with her, not even realizing—should she leave them? She didn't want to. She thought about unboxing everything, leaving the cardboard—that might lighten her load, but the trash would give her away. And no way would she want those journals just

laying out to be found and read by anyone. They might not understand. Better to keep everything for now. Figure out what to get rid of later.

She divided the cash, deciding it should be divvied up and hidden, in small stashes here and there: one box and another, in a pocket, in a pair of shorts, in her bra. Chloe was thinking it's going to be okay. It's going to be okay. She found her map, the map Treasure gave her, opened it and studied it.

But she couldn't think. She couldn't think. Which way had she run? How far? It couldn't have been far. She could run far, right? When she left it was morning. It was—it was late afternoon. She sat, looking around her in the dappled gloom of the forest. When did it get darker? She needed to watch for poisonous plants and snakes, Treasure had warned her. She needed to be smart.

She turned again to look, curious, at the thing that caught her attention after she peed. She got up to investigate, thinking if she didn't, if she didn't, if she didn't do it right then, she wouldn't. And it might be shelter. She needed to look. She climbed the ladder unsteadily. Found herself ascending into the trees, climbing out onto a platform, into an enclosure. Up in the tree, the sun was still slightly visible, only late afternoon. It was not a tree house, exactly, although it was up in a tree. Chloe puzzled, looking around. There were a few spent shell casings littering the floor and openings on each side. Some kind of place for people to shoot? Maybe hunters? She'd heard Delancy talk about hunting, once, on one of their visits to the zoo. He'd said something about building a deer blind, that's what he called it. A deer blind. And she knew from the

conversations of her classmates, many of them hunted, feral hogs, rabbit, squirrel, ducks and other birds, and deer, too. They talked about hunting blinds, duck blinds, deer blinds. A hunting blind. There were supposed to be plenty of them in the forests, her classmates had informed her.

Chloe sighed and climbed down, her legs almost failing her when she reached the ground. She stalked on spaghetti legs to the backpack, dropping to her knees to reorganize and repack the bug out bag, finally standing and shouldering it. She couldn't take its weight—not for much longer—but she didn't have to. She blundered to the base of the ladder, forcing her exhausted muscles to move, one rung at a time, up. Did they still use dogs to track escaped criminals, Chloe wondered. If they did, it wouldn't matter how far she walked, would it? And, here, here is shelter. At the top, she shimmied up through the hatch opening, up until she could let the pack slip off her back, let it slide off her shoulders to fall to the platform floor. Here. Here is good enough, for now. She could rest. Think. Here.

Exhausted and spent, Chloe rubbed her hands, thinking they felt warm, and puffy.

Lost and Found

Treasure's entry gate stood open, friends and family coming and going without hindrance, a social worker appearing and disappearing, solicitous and sympathetic. Treasure's family and employees offered their labor to complete the massive clean-up, assuring Treasure they would handle the worst of it. Janice and Chiclets handled

documentation and paperwork for the insurance claim, making sure the damage was photographed before clean-up obscured the reality of the situation. Someone wondered if insurance would pay the claim, given the circumstances. Treasure's new lawyer came and went several times as well, handling legalities, offering advice. They got most of it done in the first forty-eight hours. Tad and Darren went to Lufkin, to a large grocery and a warehouse store, carting groceries back to Treasure in paper sacks and boxes. Treasure manned the kitchen, magically transforming the raw foods into meals meant to comfort, to nourish those who worked so diligently on her behalf. Treasure ate sparingly, barely slept.

The situation was funereal. Treasure hated that it seemed like Chloe was dead, like many who came only came to mourn her passing. She didn't hold it against them.

Naomi arrived, the morning of the third day, holding Treasure tight. She stayed a few hours, talking quietly with Treasure, with Darren and Janice, with Andrea, with Delancy and Genecia, and the others before heading back to Houston.

Treasure sought Andrea out, after Naomi's visit, pulling her into a bedroom and closing the door. Quietly, she told Andrea things she had told only Naomi and Chloe. Quietly, she answered Andrea's questions, about things Treasure never thought to verbalize.

"I didn't know, Mama." Tears streaked Andrea's face. "I thought I knew it all. I thought I knew what was going on. I had no idea. I knew Daddy was controlling. I knew

he wouldn't let you—I didn't know. And Natalie! Oh, my God. Uncle Darren. I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

Treasure held her daughter, stroking her hair, her back. "I know, baby. I didn't want you to know."

"Do you think—could I be like Daddy?" Andrea hesitated. "Could Jon?"

Treasure met her daughter's gaze. "I don't know," she admitted. "That's a question Naomi may be able to help you sort out. It would be good if you would talk to Naomi. If you'd be willing. I'd feel better knowing you talked to a counsellor about this, and I trust Naomi. She knows—well, she's not going to mislead you about anything, that's for sure."

Andrea nodded. "I'll talk to her, if you want."

"Andrea, you're planning to be a doctor," Treasure said. "You understand the importance of self-care. This is a necessary part of that. Your life has been turned upside down, repeatedly, by your experiences—"

"My experiences!" Andrea exclaimed. "Don't you mean your experiences?"

"No," Treasure said. "I mean your experiences. You experienced this, too. And your experience of what happened is as valid as mine, it's just different than mine. You need to talk to a professional about it, Andrea. Clean out the wounds and get the care you need, so this doesn't fester, and later—"

Andrea nodded. She hugged her mother another time, a fierce tight hug. "I get it. I will talk to Naomi. We'll make the arrangement, once Chloe's okay."

Treasure didn't deceive herself. The conversation was no magic potion. It was a start. Only a start. Harder conversations were still ahead of her. She prayed for Chloe's safety, and for her children's safety.

On the fourth day of their vigil, Treasure received a telephone call from Mack. "Treasure, they found her. They found her. She's in a hospital in Palestine, in the ER. A guy went out to check his hog traps and he found her early this morning. She was holed-up in a tree, in his deer blind. He took her straight to the hospital, but they had no way to identify her. He went back out to the stand a little while ago, to check her stuff and found one of my business cards in her backpack."

Treasure's shoulders gradually dropped. She felt herself relax, her knees going lax. She dropped to a chair. "She's really safe?"

Family around her buzzed the message, "Chloe's safe, she's been found."

"I'm planning to head there now," he said. "I called you as soon as I got off the phone with the hospital. She'll be admitted into intensive care for now. She's in bad shape, Treasure, dehydrated and starved, covered in poison ivy. I figure you can get there a lot faster than I can, but I am on my way."

Treasure found Delancy and Genecia, asked them if they wanted to go with her to the hospital. The three departed fifteen minutes later, Delancy driving, Treasure holding an overnight bag, intending to stay at the hospital to be near Chloe. Treasure called the social worker from the car to let her know Chloe had been found.

Genecia cried when a nurse pulled back a curtain in the ICU cubicle to reveal an emaciated Chloe on the high gurney, a nasogastric tube and IV lines in place. Every exposed part of her body oozed. She was blister-covered, her eyes swollen shut, her face, neck, and arms clawed raw. An IV pole hung with bags of clear liquid stood beside the bed, and the line ran to a hidden point at Chloe's waist or legs. "Daddy?" Genecia tugged at Delancy's arm. "I've never seen poison ivy so bad."

The nurse clucked, sympathetic. "I've seen some bad cases, but your girl's definitely among the worst. And, of course, she's dehydrated. She's out, poor lamb. We've got her so medicated, she couldn't stay awake if she tried."

Delancy hugged his daughter. "Chloe, girl, we're here. We're here. You're safe now."

Treasure bent to Chloe's ear, "I'm right here, Chloe Baldwin. You didn't think you could get rid of me that easily, did you?"

Chloe released a huff of breath, her chest rose and fell in a deep, relaxed sigh.

"There now," the nurse said. "She knows you're here. I'll give you a few minutes with her, then you can hear what the doctor has to say. Keep talking to her."

They stood around Chloe's bed, emanating the inconsequential essentials that only those who love you most know to say. Chloe slept. The nurse crooked a finger, "The doctor will see you now." She directed them to a private area, where the doctor described Chloe's injuries and the treatment she received. "We'll know more by this

time tomorrow, I hope. Ms. Montgomery, I spoke with Mr. McKendrick. He is on his way here from Houston, I understand?"

Treasure nodded.

"You may stay with her, Ms. Montgomery. Others may come and go during the visiting periods." He waited for Delancy and Genecia to leave the room before describing how Treasure could gain information at any time, day or night, by providing code to the nursing staff. He took her cell phone number. "You don't have to stay with her the entire time. We will watch over her carefully. Ms. Montgomery, when did you last eat?" The doctor urged Treasure to take half an hour to eat. He accompanied Treasure back into Chloe's cubby.

A half-smile darted across Chloe's misshapen features. Her sleep did not seem restless or anxious to Treasure.

The doctor looked at Chloe's chart, compared the monitor readings to what had been noted there, nodded to Treasure. "This is looking quite good, really. Why don't you eat? Come back in half an hour or so. An hour or two. That will be fine. She's resting well, now. And, of course, we will call you, if anything changes or if we think your presence might be helpful."

Treasure thanked the doctor for his care of Chloe. She left the room, finding Genecia and Delancy in the waiting area. She made a face at Genecia. "Apparently, the doctor thinks I look hungry."

Genecia laughed. "He's not wrong, Miss T. You could use a decent meal."

Delancy said, “What’ll it be, Miss T? Hospital food, or do you want to get take-out?”

Treasure tilted her head to look at him. “Whataburger? I’d like a single meat with tomatoes, mustard, pickles, and French fries. No onions.”

“You want French fries on your hamburger?” Genecia teased. “Do they do that?” Genecia had worry lines between her brows, but for the moment, her frown was gone.

Delancy drove them to the fast food joint, convincing Treasure to eat in the dining room of the place. They made small talk while they waited, laughed when Genecia kept talking with her mouth full, laughed at a little kid sitting at the booth next to theirs, laughed at a comical exchange with a man at the drive-through window. Relief glinted in their eyes, and they ate laughing, celebrating the lost sheep returned to the fold.

Resolved

Chloe told Mack her story sitting cross-legged on the foot of the hospital bed in a private room, blue sky and sunlight shining through a large picture window, although Chloe’s eyes were bandaged and she could see none of it. She’d gotten poison ivy in her eyes. The wounds were healing, but she didn’t know the effects of it on her vision yet.

Treasure sat in a chair blocking the doorway for privacy. When Chloe finished, Treasure nodded at her, approving. Treasure spoke when she remembered Chloe couldn’t see her.

Mack said, “Here’s what I’ve learned. Malik made a deal to testify in exchange for protection, for him and for Ze’Chon. Two officers will come with me tomorrow to question you, okay? Just tell them what you’ve told me.”

Chloe said, “They’re okay, then? Malik and Z?”

Mack noted she hadn’t been surprised by the news. “I can’t promise you exactly what will happen next. I only know they’ve said their interest in you is in your ability to corroborate certain things Malik told them about the night Carol disappeared. Tell them what they ask, and we’ll see where it goes from there, okay? I’ll be here for you. Treasure will be right outside the door.”

“She can’t stay?” Chloe asked.

Mack smiled. “I’ll ask. We’ll see.”

“Maybe they’ll let me take you out of here soon,” Treasure said.

“Tomorrow?” Chloe said, hopefully.

Treasure and Mack laughed. Treasure sighed. “Don’t get your hopes up. Not about going home. I’m talking about the questions tomorrow. I don’t want you to worry. However, my experiences of this sort of thing haven’t been terribly positive.” She gave an apologetic shrug to Mack and threw a bitter half-smile to Chloe. “Just be prepared. This kind of thing can get hostile. It can leave you feeling judged and convicted—not in a positive way, not for the better.”

Mack said, “I wish she weren’t right, Chloe. But Treasure knows this from bitter experience. Hopefully, your situation will never get as nasty as hers did. She didn’t

have much support the first time around during her divorce trial from Jared. Most people aren't prepared for how rough these investigations can get."

But Chloe was shaking her head, a frown twisting her still-swollen and marred features. "Forget it. You don't have to sugarcoat it for me. I've been through this before, when I was just a little kid. I know how bad they treat you. I don't expect anybody will play nice."

Mack's lids dropped, shutting his eyes against the bitterness in the girl's voice. He thought he'd gotten immune. "You're not alone in this," he insisted.

Treasure agreed. "No matter what happens from here, whether some busybody tries to relocate you or anything else they might throw at us, I'm not stepping aside. Do you hear me, kid? You're stuck with me. Rain or shine, good times or bad. You're stuck with me."

Chloe pointed a finger at Treasure. "I think you've got that backwards," she said. "Next time, though, just talk to me. We were both worried sick about the same things, and if we'd just talked about it—"

"Yeah, yeah. That's a mistake *we* // never make again, us both being such paragons," Treasure said.

"I might not," Chloe said. "I learn faster than you, apparently."

"Like you learned 'leaves of three, leave them be,' right?" Treasure reminded Chloe of the daily lecture on poison ivies and oaks she'd given her Chloe's first week at the nursery.

Chloe grimaced. “Okay, I kind of missed your point, then.”

Mack laughed.

Chloe said, “Treasure—I—I—I just, you know—” The girl choked on her words.

“All right, don’t get maudlin on me. Hang on.” She moved to open the door, motioning at Andrea who stood at the nurses’ station, playing visiting doctor-in-the-making. She called, “Entertain this kid, will you? Naomi’s supposed to be here any time, so Mack and I are meeting her in the cafeteria for bad coffee and a piece of cake.”

“You even know what maudlin means, kid?” Mack asked.

Chloe sniffed. “Yeah. Do you?” She breathed, a long deep breath, her shoulders relaxing. “Hey! Bring me back a coke.”

Treasure crossed the room to Chloe’s side, breathing a soft “hey,” touching Chloe firmly on the only unblemished spot she could find. “I’ll be right back. Okay?”

“Take your time,” Chloe whispered. “I’m not going anywhere.”

VITA

Karen Perkins returned to Stephen F. Austin State University in 2013, more than thirty years after her high school graduation, to finish her undergraduate degree in May of 2015. She earned the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. The following semester, she entered the Graduate School of Stephen F. Austin as a Master's candidate studying English and Creative Writing. Her first year in the program she worked as an editorial assistant under the direction of Michael Sheehan, editor of *REAL* literary magazine. Her second year, she taught first-year writing courses as a teaching assistant. In her final semester, she was awarded a graduate teaching fellowship. She receives her Master of Arts in English in December of 2017.

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