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Abigail Sipe

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BLACK-EYED

By  
Sarah Abigail Sipe

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS  
May 2022

Approved By

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Advisor: Professor Tom Franklin

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Reader: Professor Beth Ann Fennelly

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Reader: Dr. Caroline Wigginton

This is a work of fiction.

Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Sarah Abigail Sipe

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*For Hunter, who told me I should write “alligators wear shoes” in my dedication to him.*

*Also, for my parents, who will have to forgive me for listing them after that joke.*

*Soli Deo Gloria*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Tom Franklin, for accompanying me as I wrote *Black-Eyed*, and Rowan's journey even before it was named. His belief in me and my character both helped to bring this novella to life. His instruction has been invaluable to my development, both academically and as a writer. Also, I would like to thank my second and third readers, Beth Ann Fennelly and Caroline Wigginton. These two women were some of the best professors I have encountered at the University of Mississippi, and I am thrilled to have them as a part of Rowan's development. I'd also like to thank the rest of the University's English Department, as so many professors have poured into me over the past four years, to give me the confidence to write this novella. Thank you also to the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College for allowing me to spend the past four years at home there, and the past year writing *Black-Eyed* as part of my education. Finally, I'd like to thank my mother, who convinced me that Rowan's story needed to be written. Without her, Rowan would have never made it onto the page, and may have disappeared altogether.

## ABSTRACT

*Black-Eyed* tells the story of Rowan Mae Baker, a ten-year-old girl dealing with too-big-for-a-ten-year-old problems. In the past year, Rowan moved from Jackson to Winona after the unexpected arrest and sudden death of her father. Then, almost a year later, Rowan is sexually assaulted by an older boy from her school. Rowan understands neither of these things. Throughout *Black-Eyed*, Rowan spends twelve hours running away from home while trying to figure out how to talk to her mom about the assault. Alone for the first time, she begins to observe and question the world around her, to process her grief and pain, and to redefine what it means to be brave for herself.

This novella was written to engage with its reader, to make them question the kind of Mississippi a ten-year-old girl may have to grow up in today, and to display how hard it is to face fears when you have no words to describe them. But Rowan's story is not only her fear. As the out-of-order narrative unfolds, the reader is asked to come inside Rowan's mind, to see the world through her eyes, and how she copes with it. *Black-Eyed* asks the reader to have a conversation that Rowan does not know how to have and to care about many stories like Rowan's that go unspoken every day.

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## Introduction

*Black-Eyed* is not finished. It has taken years of thinking and hundreds of hours of writing to get it to this point. But it is not finished, and I know it will continue to develop more the longer that Rowan stays with me. I intend to keep working with her for many years, to tell her story properly and to give it the time it deserves. But *Black-Eyed*, as it stands, represents the culmination of the past four years of writing at the University of Mississippi for me.

I always knew I wanted to write a book for my senior thesis. It was why I came to the university, to begin with. Seeing the thesis library in the Honors College made up my mind for me. But I didn't know what that book would look like, initially. I spent the past four years writing a number of other pieces, looking for my thesis project. In my sophomore year, I wrote my first short story featuring a child narrator. It was a comedic piece, called, "The Cove." Then in my junior year, I wrote another, titled, "When Stockings Run." I loved working with those narrators so much that I knew I wanted to write my thesis from the perspective of a child. The innocence, the accidental instances of humor, and the otherworldly observations that they could make inspired me to continue writing about children and their struggles growing up in a world that feels too big for them. But I did not want to write a story that was only intended for children to read. I wanted to write a story about a child that discussed larger issues than a child could understand, like I had previously read in *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons or in *Holy Ghost Girl* by Donna Johnson.

That's when I discovered Rowan and her story. I say I discovered it because it never felt like I was brainstorming for it or just trying to come up with what would happen next. When I



started writing, I knew certain things would be true about the story, including the story's purpose. I set out to write a story about a child who experienced sexual assault and then ran away from home. I knew it had to include this because this is, unfortunately, something that feels realistic. Many people experience situations like these long before they have the words to articulate them, and that was a story that needed to be written.

Another thing I knew was true for Rowan was the loss of her father and her family's move to Winona. A few months before I started writing *Black-Eyed*, I had visited Winona with a friend, and I knew it would be the perfect small town in Mississippi for a child to discover herself in. Most of the story relates to Rowan finding her own voice, and by being stuck in a rural Mississippi town, she is able to process her grief and pain in the quiet. Also, by making her unfamiliar with the new town she is living in, Rowan becomes more confused and lost more quickly than she would have by staying in her hometown. Soon, Winona was the only place I could imagine Rowan's story taking place.

Though some elements of Rowan's story felt true and were easier to recognize, certain elements of the drafting process took longer to develop and for me to face, personally. The cause of her father's death and its relationship to embezzlement was something that had to be suggested to me by Tom Franklin, as he helped me to push the character into more and more challenging situations in order to let her develop as a character. Before Tom suggested this to me, I would not have even considered it. I still wanted to treat my character kindlier, to the detriment of the novella. But once my own sentimentality was pointed out to me, embezzlement, and all of the shame and dishonesty that accompanies it, gradually integrated into my second draft.

Another part of Rowan's story that took longer to integrate into *Black-Eyed* was the scene involving Rowan's assault. Because it is deeply disturbing to think about a child going through that kind of scenario, I could barely force myself to write it at all. In early drafts, it was mentioned rather than shown. However, as time went on, it became clear to me that it needed to be shown, rather than alluded to. Out of the entire novella, this section was the one that I avoided the most and tried to spend the least time writing. It initially appeared about halfway through the novella, because I did not want to write it. Until February, it was over thirty pages into the novella, withheld for my sake more than the reader's. Fairly late in my process, I felt compelled to move it forward and to spend more time in that scene. I know in the future, I will be returning to this particular section and spending more time with it, but as it stands, this is Rowan's story.

Another drastic change that occurred in my drafting process of Rowan's story was a change in point of view. At the beginning of the drafting process, I was writing instinctively from first person, without any kind of critical thinking about why I was doing that. It was what I was used to, and it helped me to get familiar with the character, initially. My opening line for the novella was, "Summer started early when Finn punched Bradley White. I never knew you could change the seasons just by hitting someone, or I would have done it years ago." This felt like it embodied Rowan's lack of understanding of the world, along with her humor and relationship to both Finn and Bradley White. This first-person draft gave me a lot of great ideas for where the novella could go.

But, as time went on, it became abundantly clear that the first person was not working. Rowan was encountering situations that she could not articulate, and there were certain things that she could not pick up on as a child. Pushing back to a close third-person narrative made the

writing take on a slightly different voice than Rowan's, giving the reader the space to understand things that Rowan could not. Also, the third-person perspective allowed the story to take on more descriptive passages and more structural variety. Time became more fluid in the story, as I told the story of Rowan's father's death backward instead of sequentially. I made an outline of all of the sections in order to remind myself of the timelines that ran in contradiction to each other and kept moving forward. This sense of time being fluid was something I had encountered while reading *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in my freshman Honors 102 class, but had never implemented into my own writing until *Black-Eyed* switched into third person.

The first draft that I wrote in the third person only included the first section of *Black-Eyed*. But it was clear that the story had changed significantly enough to move forward. From then on, my goal was only to write the whole story from start to finish— to get Rowan to run away and then come back home, and to write everything in between. But that in-between bit caused an issue. I had planned the beginning of the story. I could see the gravel road that Rowan would walk down and the conversation with her brother. I had also planned the ending, or at least, what I thought was the ending. I could imagine her standing in a field, spinning under the stars, and talking to her dead father. This particular scene had several inspirations, including my astronomy classes I took in freshman year, and the book *God and the Astronomers* by Robert Jastrow. But in getting Rowan from her house to standing in that field, I was lost. I started consulting several child other stories with child narrators and main characters, including *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. I had read these many times previously, but was consulting anything I had access to, at that point in my process.

Then, one day, as I was in the throes of the writing process, I found myself unable to work on the novella in my apartment anymore. I needed to get out and to write somewhere else. I went to Lost Dog Coffee out on Old Taylor Road, about twenty minutes outside of Oxford. And as I was driving back, I saw a kitten in the road. It was tiny, orange, and hurt. I pulled my car over and got out to help it, but it was clearly injured. I went back to my car to get a blanket to wrap it in. When I came back to pick it up, a car flew around the bend, and even though they could see me standing in the middle of the road very clearly, they had no intention of stopping. They ran over the cat and almost killed me in the process.

Watching something so innocent die, I am embarrassed to say, did not make me emotional for very long. Rowan has a more raw and real reaction in the novella than I allowed myself to have in real life. I jumped back into my car and forced myself to drive on, hoping I could get to the next place that I needed to be on time that day. But the cat made me think about Rowan. It made me think about how she would react to a small innocent creature being crushed. And I knew that would be my turning point.

Throughout the beginning of the novella, Rowan comes off confident a great deal of the time, despite her feelings. She lies quickly, negotiates with her brother, and tries just about anything to get away from the truth. But after she sees the kitten get hit in the road, there is a drastic shift in her thinking. Confronted with death and suffering right in front of her, she becomes contemplative and begins to doubt herself. She starts allowing herself to feel. This is new and challenging for Rowan, as it is for most people. But this will ultimately lead her back to her mother and back to the truth that she was avoiding when she ran away from home. The second that I got home that night, after seeing the cat in the road, I started writing Rowan's

reaction to it. And that reaction made me feel Rowan shift her perspective. She changes at that moment, and her voice shifts into uncertainty.

At the same time, I was also feeling uncertain about my writing. I was starting to have second thoughts and doubts. To me, it seemed so brutally obvious that a child suffering through sexual assault and the death of her father mattered. It seemed like it should just be so easy to make people care about her story and to present it to an audience that did not just include children. And yet, I knew that wasn't the case, because simply by writing from a young narrator's perspective, I was putting this story into the "Young Adult" category of fiction. And I knew that if I didn't write it well, I wouldn't make anyone care. Eventually, I got so into my head that I asked my mother about the story. For the first time, I told her the contents of my novella, and about how I wasn't sure if I should write it. We were driving down a dirt road, about a minute away from a friend's wedding venue, and my mother fully stopped the car, turned, looked at me, and said, "You write that girl's story. Things like that happen all the time and nobody talks about it. You should write it."

With my own uncertainty managed, and Rowan's uncertainty growing, I began to develop Rowan's psychology in my writing. From her porch rituals to her constant counting, Rowan gained new ways of thinking and coping mechanisms the longer I worked with her. Over and over again, I read through the novella, and each time, something changed slightly about how Rowan saw the world. Eventually, the story became less focused on her father in the ending, and more concerned about her mother. Her current relationship with her mother had to be a huge part of her learning to tell her story and speak truthfully. In one of my original drafts, she thinks, "Her mother *would* believe her," in the second to last sentence, as though Rowan is still convincing

herself that this is true. However, in the form that the story now takes, that uncertainty in her mother is gone.

When the story shifted to include Rowan's mother more, in February of this year, the title *Black-Eyed* finally came into being. Up until that point, my drafts had included the working title, "Rowan Mae Baker." Well, my first draft had actually been titled, "Working Title: Rowan Baker (Idk what to call this)." However, when I started writing about the dark circles under Rowan's mother's eyes, I knew the whole novella had to be titled "Black-Eyed." I had already written the Black-Eyed Susans into the beginning and end of the story as a symbol of Rowan's "early blooming," along with their relationship to justice and motivation in flower symbology. I also thought that using Black-Eyed Susans would be thematically appropriate as a symbol since Rowan punched Bradley White in the eye. But I didn't want to feel like the whole novella was named after Bradley. But once Rowan's mom became more of a central figure, the name "Black-Eyed" stuck.

I faced several major challenges when it came to writing *Black-Eyed*, mostly of my own making. The most obvious challenge was that this was the longest creative project I have ever written for any audience but myself. Though in years past, I had written many projects that never saw the light of day except on my own computer screen, *Black-Eyed* is the first novella I've ever written for other people to read, because I thought it contained a story that deserved to be read. And even though that was exciting, it was also coupled with a massive fear of failure. As a student and a new writer, I found myself second-guessing a lot of my choices and stagnating when I didn't have outside input. I was scared that Rowan's story didn't really matter, and then, once I'd convinced myself that it did, I was scared that I couldn't write it in a way that would

display that to others. I had to push myself harder mentally and emotionally to write this novella than with any other project I've worked on.

The pacing of *Black-Eyed* was also challenging. I knew that Rowan's life was going to be wrapped in layers of grief, pain, bravery, and change when I started writing. And that complexity is what made the novella exciting to write. However, balancing exposition and action was extremely difficult for me. Thankfully, I had my advisor to help me with recognizing when things were dragging and when more detail was needed. Almost at the end of my process, he passed me a copy of John Updike's stories, "The Alligator" and "Pigeon Feathers." Both of these helped me to add new, interesting observations from Rowan into my story, as she takes in and questions the world around her.

Overall, the most difficult part of writing *Black-Eyed* was the content. My life is drastically different from Rowan's, and I haven't experienced many of the traumatic things that she has experienced. I have never felt the loss of a parent, but she has. I have never experienced the shame of having a parent arrested, but she has. And, Rowan has also experienced sexual assault, and I have not. All of these things were not easy to write and made me sometimes have to pause, get up from my computer, and just take some time away from it. But I didn't write all of these things just to be a "sadistic" writer. I didn't write them because I thought it made the story more interesting. I wanted to write about all of these things and the interaction between them because I wanted my readers to think about the world young girls have to grow up in. I wanted to think about the Mississippi that Rowan is encountering, to help change it going forward.

In the last few weeks of writing *Black-Eyed*, I spent nearly all of my time going back through the entire novella, adding details, and cleaning up issues within the text. And I consistently found that there was always one more thing to change, one more thing to edit. Having never written a project like this before, I had no clue when to say that enough was enough. I still don't. But recently, I had the opportunity to talk to another writer, who goes by the pen name of Sarah Helen. After reading one of her stories, I asked her when she knew she was done with a project. She told me that a story is never done and is always yours, long after you publish it. She also told me to not be afraid to let a story exist as it currently stands without worrying about reaching perfection before a deadline. So, I am taking her advice. I believe that *Black-Eyed* is as developed as it can be today. I firmly believe that this is a project I will return to and seek to publish in the future, but right now, it is as done as it can be. And now, I'd like to sit down on my own metaphorical front porch and rest for a bit, because I know once I do, I can return to Rowan with a new perspective.

For now, Rowan's story stands as an invitation. I hope that when people pick up *Black-Eyed* and meet Rowan Mae Baker, they do so with open ears. This is a story that needs to be told because there are far too many others like it. Real people, experiencing real trauma, and I hope that this story can lead to a more open discussion of those issues. Honesty is one of the crucial themes of the novella, along with the bravery that honesty requires. I hope that one day, Rowan Mae Baker can help others to face the frightening world we live in, and inspire others to be brave and to hear more stories like hers.



## **Black-Eyed**

As Rowan Mae Baker crunched down the road to Nana's house, she finally understood how it felt to be a piece of gravel. The irregular pieces clattered over each other and crunched under the boots of her brother Finn walking behind her, and the shifting sounds of stone scraped her ears. She paused and the quiet of the country road rushed into her eardrums. This was the first time she had stopped moving since she and Finn ran out of the school, and the air that had been suffocating her now felt like it was cleaning out her lungs.

She looked up and saw the world around her again. Tall, bright green wild grasses shot up around rusted mailboxes and sweetgums clumped between each of the wood-paneled houses. Battered Black-Eyed Susans clustered around a neighbor's stoop. They had bloomed early this year, and she counted them every time they walked to the bus. Today, she knew, there were twenty-three of them. The Susans waved back and forth in the April breeze that had sprung up. The sky was already changing colors as the sun slunk downward, making a blue sky pink.

"What?" Finn asked, stopping behind Rowan. He had trailed her all the way from the school, whether she was running or walking.

She took a breath. With Finn's footsteps gone, a brief moment of silence hovered over the road. Then the neighbor's porch swing shifted slightly in the breeze, making the chains shriek.

"Sorry," Rowan said. "Keep walking."

But eyes on the gravel, always watching her feet, Rowan started reconsidering her decision. She had run out of the principal's office, out of the school, and turned towards Nana's house. It was the only route she knew by heart, in Winona. But for what? Were they really rushing home just to own up to Bradley White's black eye and fat lip?

No, they needed a plan. Something else to say. Because if they told about Bradley, they'd have to tell about the rest of it. About the bathroom.

One, two, three more steps. A tiny rock in the road a shade blacker than the rest. A piece of asphalt that had been carried down a gravel road. It was out of place, all the way down here. Rowan knew it must have been picked up by a tire, because no one else would have carried it all this way. No other kids lived on this street. It was a street for old people to live and die on.

When they first moved here, Momma had to ask the school bus to come by special, just for her kids. Had to remind the school district that their road existed at all.

Rowan's thoughts swirled. She couldn't tell her momma about the principal's office. About being questioned and having nothing to say. She couldn't tell her mom about how Bradley White had gotten to go home early, riding in the passenger seat of his father's cop car, while she had sat alone, silent. While she had made them miss the bus and get home late.

But Nana was sure to tell their momma.

Rowan cleared her throat. "Hey, Finn?"

"Yeah?" he asked around the Marlboro in his mouth.

He had been twitchy the whole time they were in the principal's office, but out on the road, smoking, his hands had stopped jittering. Rowan used to laugh when he got like that. Call him "nicky." But it hadn't stayed funny.

“What do you wanna tell Nana?” Rowan didn’t like watching him smoke and refused to turn her head while she talked to him.

Finn was fine with her not watching. Momma didn’t know that he or their daddy ever smoked at all. The less Rowan saw, the better.

“You don’t want to tell Nana the truth?” Finn said. His voice cracked near the end.

“No. We’re not.”

“Shiiiiit…” Finn said from behind her. He said it slowly like his hick Winona friends did. But Finn had just learned to blend in. “Look, there’s going to be a whole police report and everything. I mean, I’m sure she’ll hear about the fight somehow. And… everything before it.”

“She may hear about it, but I don’t want to tell her. Come up with something.”

“Why not?”

“Because, Finn! We’re not talking about Bradley! Keep it to yourself!”

Finn’s boots stopped crunching behind her. Rowan paused too, her eyes drifting up from her shoes to her shorts, then her shirt. Her legs started shaking. Not enough for Finn to notice, but enough to make Rowan realize she felt sick to her stomach.

Finn stamped out his cigarette, and Rowan turned around. Her older brother had his hands on the back of his head. He rubbed his dark hair to stand up on end and then pushed it back down. He picked at an acne spot on his narrow cheek. He was formulating.

“What we could say is-- What we could say is that the Merriwethers picked us up, and decided to bring us home with them. And that they wanted us to stay for dinner.” He took a minute, considering. “And also, my phone has been dead since lunch, so we couldn’t call and tell her we would be out.”

“Has your phone been dead since lunch?” Rowan pulled on her shirt, the Winona Public School logo. The texture made her wish she could wash her hands.

“Well, I haven’t been answering any texts since lunch,” he said, getting out the phone to show her. He held it by the corner where the screen wasn’t cracked. Rowan did feel bad about that. It’d dropped on the ground during the fight. He loved that phone, even though it was at least three years old. And they both knew Momma wouldn’t buy him another one right now. They couldn’t afford it.

“What percent is it on?” Rowan asked.

“Seven.”

“Then just kill it while we walk, and we can go with that,” Rowan said with a nod. “She probably won’t ask too many questions, anyways.”

Rowan turned as Finn pulled another cigarette out of his pack and kept moving after she heard the lighter click. The pair carried on towards Nana’s house, which Mom said was their house too now, for a while.

Nana had always said the opposite. Her house was her house, they were just living in it. As soon as their momma got her degree, they’d be back out of there. She never wanted them to get too comfortable and no part of the house would be changing for them. It was complete and utter horseshit, when Rowan, Finn, and their momma didn’t really want to live with Nana anyway. It wasn’t like they wanted to be there. But Nana always had to say it. She had always been an isolationist. At least, as long as Rowan had been alive.

They went by four more neighbors’ houses. Two more dented trucks in driveways. And then, as she passed one dead raccoon with a popped-out eye on the road, Rowan noticed that Finn wasn’t following her anymore.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, turning.

When she looked back, Finn was different. Before, he was slouched over, one hand in his pocket. The other, bruised, hanging by his side. He was even more bent over than usual, eyes stuck to the dead raccoon. “I don’t think we should lie to Mom,” he said. He took a big breath, looked at Rowan with their dad’s sharp blue, serious eyes, and said, “Look, we can lie to Nana no problem. I bet she barely even noticed we were gone. But, with Mom... We’re in too deep, Rowan. The cops are going to be involved. I don’t want to lie to Mom this time.”

“Just tell her about the fight, then.”

“That doesn’t explain the shirt,” Finn said. He pushed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, in that way he did what he knew he was right. It was his most self-righteous face. Rowan hated it.

“Come up with another explanation!” Rowan snapped. “You’ve gotten into plenty of dumb fights after school over practically nothing. You can’t lie to her for me, just about this one?”

“And tell her what?”

“I DON’T KNOW!”

Rowan’s voice echoed down the road. The gravel, the dead raccoon, and the Black-Eyed Susans looked on. They seemed a little more hesitant about these kids than before. They didn’t like the noise.

“Hey... it’s okay, Ro,” Finn said. He looked down, using his black boot to stir up the dirt from beneath the gravel. The boots really used to be black, but were filthy from walking in the country. “We’ll come up with something. Just... what happens when we can’t go back to school tomorrow? Or when the principal calls her? We should be the ones who talk to her about it. Not

just the principal. You know she's gonna call." Finn paused a second, before saying, "Plus... I want to tell her."

"Shit."

"Stop saying that," Finn said. "Don't you know how to act ladylike?"

"We have bigger damn issues than me talking like a lady, Finn. And we have bigger damn issues than what you *want* to tell her."

"You know she'll help."

"Yes, I do. If she believes me," Rowan said. She felt herself back in the principal's office. Feet dangling from her too-big chair. And the pinched nosed, graying haired principal hadn't believed her for even a second. Because she was a ten-year-old in middle school, and maybe a little too young to be trusted. It also didn't help that she was a Baker kid. Who would ever believe the daughter of Andrew Harding?

"You know Momma'll be different," Finn said, putting his hands on his knees and lowering himself to Rowan's height. "She'll listen."

Rowan blinked hard, and her mind was back on the road. Rational, reasonable, and unemotional. He was right, probably. But that didn't mean she wanted to talk. Even if momma would believe her... she shouldn't have to deal with another problem child. Of course, Rowan wouldn't say that to her brother.

"Stand up. You look ridiculous."

Finn pushed himself back up. "Well, if we don't tell her, and we don't go to school, they could arrest her."

"They already took our money. What would they want our Momma for?"

"It wasn't *our* money. You know that."

That's what people had told her. But it had seemed like their money when they were spending it, and when everything had made sense. Back when her family had lived in Jackson, and she had gone to a regular public school where she could be in the fifth grade. Back when her mom could stay-at-home and be a bottle blonde, and go to PTA meetings. Back when she and Finn had been named Baker-Harding.

Now her momma was working a job for the first time in Rowan's whole life. Waitressing at a Denny's during the day and going to community college at night. She had developed bags under her eyes that, combined with many creases and smile lines, made her face look much older than it had a year before.

"She'll go to jail if we don't tell her?"

"Not right away," Finn said. "But yeah, maybe. Probably."

They kept walking, and as they got closer to Nana's house, Rowan's throat started closing up on her.

"What do we tell her?" she asked. Finn didn't answer right away, and for a moment, there was no sound but the rustling of the tree branches in the breeze. The scattered elm trees turned to oaks planted in even rows, and they formed a tunnel leading to Nana's driveway. The branches draped over the street like lazy arms.

The Baker family had planted these trees generations ago. They had owned all this land, acres and acres of it. Rowan didn't know what constituted an acre, but she knew they had at least owned the whole street, and everything else she could see from the house. They had been the proudest family in Winona. It was why Rowan's momma had only hyphenated her name when she got married. None of the Baker women ever did. But now, there was a lot less pride in the Baker name. Only the one little house was still owned by the Bakers. Nana, specifically.

“Honestly?” Finn said, pulling out another cigarette, but not lighting it. “I can’t think of anything to say.”

Liar.

The final bend in the road. The brown gravel transitioned into gray. The driveway had been put in new. Nana’s mailbox, shiny and bronze, stood at the end of it. And then, only the house remained. Not the original house that had been on the land, but the air-conditioned two-bedroom white house that Nana’s parents had built. A house that wasn’t built for children. Nana always reminded them of that.

Rowan halted at the bottom of the steps. Her feet stayed stuck in the gravel while Finn opened the screen door and then the white wooden door behind it. He held the door for her, looking back.

She had to take a second before crossing the porch.

It was a little thing, just a few feet wide, stuck to the front of the white-paneled house. It had little sagging picket railings on either side of it, with narrow columns to hold them up. It was tiny. Barely even an afterthought. But Rowan was stuck anyway.

“Come on, Rowan.”

Then, when Rowan didn’t move fast enough, he shrugged his shoulders and acted like he was going to go in without her.

“Wait!” she yelled. If the door was closed, it would take her an extra five seconds to get inside the house. One, to find the handle of the screen door. Two, to open it. Three, to get around the first door. Four, to open the second one. And five, to cross into the house. Five seconds that were entirely too long to linger on a front porch. Rowan took a big breath, held it, and then raced across the porch into the house.



“It’s just a porch,” Finn said, as he did every day.

“Tell Daddy that,” Rowan said.

As the screen door slammed behind her, a gust of wind blew out the candle on the coffee table, rose-scented and color-coordinated to the burgundy curtains. The living room was pristine, as always, with plastic coverings on the furniture.

“What have I *TOLD* you about slamming that door?” Nana yelled from the kitchen.

Finn rolled his eyes, but said, “Sorry, Nana!”

Nana called, “Rowan! Make yourself useful! Come in here and help me fix this tuna casserole!”

“Yes, ma’am!” she said. “I’ll be there in a minute!”

As Rowan walked through the living room, she passed the indent in the carpet that had never gone away where Nana’s grandfather clock once stood. Though it hadn’t been there for as long as Rowan had been alive, the floorboards still dipped where the massive, polished piece of furniture had once stood. For years, it had ticked away in Nana’s living room, golden pendulum twitching like a tail. That is, until Rowan’s momma stole it when she ran away to get married.

The clock had stood like a badge of honor in the Baker-Harding home in Jackson, ticking away like it had never been relocated. And then, when Emily Baker-Harding couldn’t make their house payments on her own anymore, the house had emptied out. First, the pickup vanished from the driveway. Then, the great furniture exodus began. Piece by piece, their home had drifted out of the front door, sold to pay the bills, until the house had become empty. Soon, the Bakers were sleeping on one mattress on the floor, with only the grandfather clock in the living room and the picture frames on the walls.

Finally, the grandfather clock left the house. The only nonnegotiable had been the pictures. And seeing her home empty had drained Emily Baker-Harding. She said it was like seeing a turtle shell without the turtle, with the ridges of the spine still exposed. She had called her mother and asked to move back home. Her mother had said only if she was ready to repent.

And then, when they showed up, Nana asked where her clock was.

Rowan shook her head at the impression in the floor. All that contention over a clock. She was careful to step around the tripping hazard in the floor as she crossed the living room into the short hallway, where a row of photographs of her mother hung on the wall. These pictures showed the abridged life of Emily Baker, as told by Rowan's Nana. There was one picture of her as a chubby, spitting baby with a shock of curly brown hair. Another, as a frowning toddler in a church-appropriate dress. A few of Emily in elementary school uniforms. One of her at twelve, mouth pinched into a straight line as she stood between her parents. And then, there was one of her at her high school graduation with Nana and Pop (God rest his soul) beside her.

Rowan's momma had started dyeing her hair blonde in high school. When she was little, it had looked like Rowan's. Brown and curly. And then she started dyeing it and never stopped, and it had never looked like Rowan's again until they had left Jackson.

There were no pictures of Rowan's mother after high school. No pictures from when she had gotten married. No pictures of her pregnant or with her kids. And no pictures of Rowan's daddy. Even though Rowan knew that her mother had packed up a million of them when they moved to Winona. Even though she'd labeled the box specially and carried them into the house herself.

Rowan wished Nana would let her momma hang at least one. But then, a chill ran down Rowan's spine, and she thought maybe she wouldn't like to see her daddy after all. She could only hold her breath for so long. She didn't need him inside of the house.

When she reached the bedroom that she and Finn shared at the end of the hall, she took a second to take in the mess on Finn's half of the room, on top of the air mattress. It had a slow leak that whistled constantly, but Rowan had adjusted to the sound. She could even sleep through him running the air pump, now. He'd been reinflating it every night for over a year.

The air mattress looked tired.

Rowan climbed over the mattress to the sliding doors of the closet. She pushed them aside and then reached into the bottom left-hand corner. Her hand brushed soft fabric, and she pulled out her dad's XXL Vanderbilt sweatshirt.

It was the only thing of his that she had kept. Nana didn't like it. Momma didn't like it. But the whole house was so drafty that Rowan wore it anyway, like a massive cotton trash bag. It went all the way down to her toes, covering almost her entire body. She took a second to observe herself in the immovable, full-length mirror in the corner of the room.

The cotton trash bag made her look even smaller than before, her face and cheekbones narrower. Like Finn's, but without the acne. The whites of her eyes were reddish from crying. But besides the redness, she looked the same as she had that morning, before she left for school.

It had been a normal day. Finn had gotten her up out of her little twin bed at 7:00 a.m., and had told her to get dressed while he got them breakfast. Rowan had checked where Momma had slept the night before. She found her on the couch, having collapsed before she could make it to her childhood bedroom. Rowan had crept back down the hallway and gotten dressed as quietly as possible. Rowan had put on her favorite Kool-Aid man T-shirt, her red shorts, and her

matching red socks. She had walked out of the house, holding her breath, and gotten her sneakers from the front porch. Finn had passed Rowan a Honey Bun as they walked down the road to meet the bus. A normal day of school.

Now, minus her favorite T-shirt, plus the sweatshirt, she still looked the same in the mirror. But when she moved her hand in front of the mirror, Rowan felt a little surprised when her reflection moved with her. When she'd left for school today, she hadn't looked like someone who would punch anyone.

"What do you think, daddy?" Rowan asked. "Do you think that was brave?"

Rowan's eyes started to fill up, and she swiped at them. She ripped the rubber band she had gotten from the principal's office out of her curly, sweaty hair and threw it onto the floor.

"Rowan!" Nana called again. "Get in here! I need help finishing! Your mom is getting home early tonight!"

It was like lightning had struck the house. "What?!"

"She said she got a call from your school and that she's going to come home between her classes. She'll be home by 8:00!" Nana said. "Come help me get dinner done!"

The room was a boat rocking, all of a sudden. Her heart pounded against her ribs as she ran into the living room.

Finn was on the couch, laying on his back. He had been charging his phone with his black boots up on the sofa. Now, he turned his head and looked directly at Rowan, her eyes pleading with him.

"No," he said.

"You just *want* to tell her you punched someone. You just *want* to cause problems with her again," Rowan whispered.

He shook his head.

“Rowan Mae Baker! Get in here!” Nana yelled.

“No!” Rowan yelled back.

Finn’s mouth dropped open.

*Shit.*

Rowan ran through the house, flung the two front doors open, and, after only a second of hesitation, darted across the front porch. She threw herself down the steps and hit the gravel driveway hard. She fell and caught herself, and rocks stuck in her palms. At the last second, she looked back over her shoulder and saw her brother standing at the door, blue eyes wide, hair half-up and half-flat.

“Don’t tell Momma,” Rowan said. “Please. Don’t tell her.”

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Rowan didn’t slow down until Nana’s house was far behind her. She had almost made it back to the twenty-three Black-Eyed Susans when she stopped to catch her breath. She needed to take a second and to roll up her daddy’s enormous sleeves. They dangled past her hands like limp elephant trunks.

On the left side of the road, she saw the entrance to a long driveway, long enough that the house it belonged to was completely out of sight. But the opening still caught her eye. The driveway had been built up over a ditch, with a small round drain running under it. From the road, it would be nearly invisible except as a slight dip in the grass. Rowan stopped, turned, and crawled into the neighbor’s storm drain.

Curled up inside, she started dealing with the excessive amount of fabric trailing from each arm of her sweatshirt, rolling them up past her elbows. And then, as she moved from her

left sleeve to her right, Rowan realized she was farther from Nana's house than she'd ever been on her own.

Since they had moved to Winona, going anywhere on her own had become strictly against the rules. Whether she was going outside to play with Finn, or going to the bathroom at a restaurant, being unsupervised was forbidden. Even if most of the time, Finn was her only supervisor.

Until now. For the first time, Rowan was alone except for the spiders. Small, dark, hanging from webs and crawling through the ridges in the metal. They skittered away from being crushed and jumped across small pools of water in the bottom of the drain.

Hopefully there weren't any snakes in here, too. She had been told a thousand ways to die in Mississippi, and most of them could survive in a storm drain. Every day, before their mother left for work, she gave the same list of warnings. Spiders, snakes, strangers, tetanus, ringworms, rabies, and whatever else she wanted to make up that day. There hadn't been nearly as many warnings while they lived in Jackson. Maybe, maybe, "Stay where I can see you?" But once they moved to this country town, the list of warnings had grown long, and all of them ended with "Stay with Finn." It was practically all her momma could say these days.

"Snakes," she muttered, quoting her daddy quoting his favorite movie. "Why does it always have to be snakes?"

He would laugh if he heard her.

Rowan listened to her own breath echoing through the pipe. She counted the ridges in the corrugated metal around her to get it to slow down, but the storm drain made the sound rattle as she sat in the pool at the bottom of it. The water seeped into her shorts and into her daddy's sweatshirt. It sounded too loud, down in the drain, for it to only be her breathing.

Did her breath smell like peanut butter?

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Rowan Mae Baker had never been into a men's bathroom before, let alone a boys' bathroom. The faceless little stick-figure man on the sign stood with his arms by his pants, while the faceless little stick-figure woman held her hands flared out over a skirt. The school didn't even allow girls to wear skirts unless they went below their knees. No one ever wore them, especially not Rowan. But it still felt wrong to walk down the "Men" side of the hallway, even if she was wearing pants.

Bradley White had his hand on her shoulder pushing it forward, almost like an encouragement, as he said, "Finn is throwing up in the stall, and he doesn't want us to call the nurse." He seemed concerned while he said it. His eyebrows furrowed like he cared.

"He's a stubborn idiot," Rowan said, parroting her Nana's favorite insult combination. But she rolled her eyes and decided she had to brave the boys' bathroom. Being sick and not wanting any help sounded exactly like Finn.

Finn had told her about Bradley White before. He said Bradley was obnoxious and made too many jokes about their dad. And about Jackson. But Bradley was good for a vape hit when Finn couldn't get his cigarettes out at school. Apparently, Bradley was good at keeping secrets, just like Finn.

Rowan walked down the short hallway and around to the boys' bathroom. Inside, she found the normal layout of toilets and sinks that she was used to, but with an interesting addition. There were deformed toilets sticking out of the wall that looked like their jaws had dropped. These must be urinals, though she had never seen one in real life before. Standing around them were three boys, all the same age.

They were tall, with red acne marks on their faces and necks. Teenagers. Two boys with dark hair. One with a long blonde mullet. As she walked in, one of the guys zipped up his pants and took a vape pen from one of the others. The whole room smelled of fake mango and mint. Much sweeter than cigarettes.

“Where’s Finn?” Rowan asked, looking under the stalls for his feet. His black boots would be easy to spot, if they had been there. But the stalls were empty. The floor tiles were dirty. The boys laughed.

“I can’t believe ya got ‘er to come with ya,” Vape said, blowing a mango cloud out of his nose.

“Of course, she did, she’s from Jackson. They’re all raised this stupid in the city,” Bradley White said, grinning. He had a pimple on his jaw and he seemed much uglier than he had seemed a few seconds ago.

“Just like her brother,” Zipper said.

“Bet she thinks she’s better than us, too,” Vape said, pulling at his blond mullet. “You skip a grade and you think you’re better than us?”

Rowan turned. It only took two seconds.

Bradley White was holding her by the back of her shirt. And then by the front of her shirt. And he was holding his hand over her mouth. One, two, and now her face was against the concrete wall of the bathroom as Bradley rubbed himself against her, up and down with his pants. She felt his jeans against her back. Something in his pants. Her legs shook beneath her and she gasped into his hand. He started laughing, saying she was too short for him. Or he was too big for her. It was a joke, but it didn’t feel like a joke.



Two seconds. His free hand was under her Kool-Aid Man T-shirt, the other still on her mouth. Both gripped tight over her. They hurt. Rowan tried to yell. It made a noise, but not enough. He took his hand out from under her shirt and grabbed at her red shorts, pulling on the waistband. As his face got closer to hers, she could smell his breath, even through the mango clouds. It smelled like peanut butter. She wanted to scream. She wished Finn were there. She wished her dad were there.

Were they laughing again?

Before Bradley could pull her shorts, Rowan bit Bradley White's hand. Then, before he could grab her again, she shoved his hand off of her shoulder and started running. He snatched at her, his hand barely swiping past her. In two seconds, she had run back down the bathroom hallway and back into the main hall.

Students were milling around between classes. A few looked over at her as she stood, frozen and panting in the hallway. As they started to turn and mutter, their eyes on her, she ran again, looking for a place to go to escape. She found her next classroom's door, empty except for the teacher. She threw herself into the heavy door, which opened more slowly than she wanted it to. People were staring.

When she finally got into the classroom, Rowan found the nearest desk and curled up under it, still trembling.

The teacher had gone to get Finn.

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Rowan pulled up her sweatshirt over her mouth and checked her breath. No peanut butter. No mango vape. She pulled her knees even tighter, beneath her sweatshirt and beneath her Winona Public School T-shirt. It was a scratchier fabric on her knees than she had been wearing

this afternoon, when she had been curled up under the desk. She really was too tiny for middle school. It seemed inhumane to put her in the same building with the teenagers when she could fit down here.

The texture of her red shorts pressed against her bare stomach. Rowan shivered, but didn't pull her knees away. She wished she were big like Finn. When she had told him, beneath the desk— when he had found her— it seemed like he grew three feet taller. His eyes, their dad's eyes, had convinced her.

“Tell me what happened. You gotta be brave for me, Kiddo.”

Finn's voice was so adult sounding. She had hoped, maybe, he would understand. He could make sense of this... thing she felt. It was disgusting. The hands were still grabbing her, and the skin on her back and her chest crawled, and even though she had counted the floor tiles beneath her desk four times, the feeling wouldn't stop. A corner of one of the linoleum tiles had gone missing, displaying the concrete blocks was just below the surface. It was the exact same material that the walls were made of, just with a different skin over it.

Rowan had stared at the crack as she told Finn about the bathroom. He listened, hands on his knees, head craned beneath the top of the desk to hear her whisper. And when he was done listening, he had changed. He hadn't explained why Rowan's skin burned on her body. Instead, he had refused to speak. Fire in his eyes, he had turned around, stood up, stormed out of the room. He had been going to find Bradley. Maybe going to kill him.

Part of her hoped he was. Even now, the burning on her skin hadn't gone away. But if Finn had killed Bradley, the police would have gotten him. And then it would just be Rowan, her mom, and her Nana.

She didn't know if she could take that. Nana and Momma would fight all the time. Without Finn, she might as well stay in this drain. This seemed like a good enough place to be buried. They wouldn't even have to dig or pay for a coffin or anything.

Rowan's head dropped to her chest, and she saw the Vanderbilt logo again. Her hands were cold, but not that cold. She shook her head, as if dislodging her more existential thoughts from her skull.

"I have to be brave," Rowan said to herself and to the spiders. "This isn't the time to be afraid." She removed a tiny arachnid, smaller than the nail on her pinky, from her knee. It crawled on her right palm for a second, and then she lowered it onto the bottom of the storm drain to let it escape. It struggled on the ridged metal, but its eight legs still crawled as fast as they could over the humps. They would both get out of here together.

Rowan swung her legs out of the storm drain, but didn't jump out quite yet. She had to figure out where to run. She wasn't friends with her classmates, who were all older than her. Some of them knew her fine, but no one had wanted to be friends, really. Not with the new, tiny ten-year-old. She was such a freak. What, did she think she was better than them just because the school let her skip a grade?

But Rowan didn't have any other family in Winona. They had all moved off ages ago. And she couldn't go back to Nana's house. If she went back now, Nana would *deal* with her.

If she hadn't been in too deep before, she was now.

And then, a thought dawned on her—*the Merriwethers*. They were the only family that had helped Rowan's family after the move to Winona. Anne Merriwether had been friends with her mom since elementary school, and seemed to be the only person in town who didn't agree with the public shunning of the Baker family. After all, it wasn't Emily Baker's fault that she

married that “lying, no good piece of... crap.” Anne Merriwether always had the decency to censor herself when children were around.

Of course, Rowan should go to the Merriwethers’ house. Anne Merriwether had been extraordinarily helpful to Emily Baker-Harding. Anne would give them car rides home from school every once in a while, when they couldn’t take the bus. She had brought them back to her house a few times, too, when their Nana had gotten sick of them. Said she would babysit to help out. After all, she had a daughter herself that wasn’t too far apart from Rowan in age. Lily, a fourth grader, could surely get along with Rowan, a misplaced sixth grader.

It was a lie that Finn had made up, that they didn’t have a choice but to go. But all along, secretly, Rowan and Finn had been using their back field as a hideout for months. There was a hill far enough away from the house that it couldn’t be seen, where the pair would go so Finn could smoke while Rowan kept a lookout. It was their one square of grass, raised up above all of the rest, where they could experience true unadulterated freedom. They had gone there at least a dozen times. Sometimes when Anne brought them to her house. But often, when Rowan rode there on the pegs of Finn’s bike.

Up above the drain, she heard the rumbling of a car approaching from the direction of the house. It hummed smoothly and barely sputtered, unlike most of the cars in town. As the engine noises were getting closer, Rowan knew she had to make a move. She could make it to the Merriwethers’ house much easier in the car, and there weren’t going to be many cars coming down this road. If she didn’t go now, she might not have another chance. She took one last, big breath, counted down from three, and pushed herself out of the storm drain, where she could peer up to see the car coming down the road.

It was Nana’s Buick.

Rowan ducked back down, throwing herself into the grass, hoping Nana was driving without her glasses again. She could only see about three feet ahead of her without them on, but hated wearing them out of the house, since they were several inches thick.

The car flew past, and the Vanderbilt sweatshirt was dirty when she sat back up. Rowan dusted herself off and watched Nana's car drive away. Its blue backside seemed to creep slowly around the curve, and then it had faded from view. The road wouldn't be safe to walk on anymore, with Nana driving around looking for her. She'd get caught or hit.

She wished she had brought a watch. Or a hair tie. Her neck was getting sweaty.

And then, Rowan heard the rumbling. Another car from the same direction. Maybe from the house at the end of the road?

It was a white van. It was covered with grit and grime, and its left headlight dangled out of the front of it. For a second, Rowan wished that she were brave enough to run out in the middle of the road and stop it, and get a ride anywhere she wanted to go. Then, before she had even stopped wishing, she had jumped out of the ditch and run into the middle of the road. She planted herself in the middle of it, and the white van rolled toward her like it was considering not stopping, before braking with a grinding sound.

The driver, an old white man with heavy eyebrows, rolled down his window and leaned over the words "Stewart Brothers Plumbing" on his door. The man looked about as dirty as his van, with the paint peeling off of the sides of it.

"What the HELL are ya doin' in the middle a' the road?" he asked in a voice like an old cowboy in a Western. Or a chain smoker.

"Hey, can you help me? I'm a little lost," she said.

"Lost?" he replied, slowly, as if it had two syllables.

“Yes. Can you help?” Rowan asked. She curled her hands into fists and then released them.

“Whatcha need, girl?”

“Well, I was playing hide and seek with my cousin, Lily. You know Lily?”

He scratched a white hair that stuck out of his eyebrow.

“You know Anne Merriwether?”

He nodded this time, smiling, showing his teeth through his patchy beard. How could he have such thick eyebrows and such a thin beard? His teeth were yellow, and Rowan thought he needed braces. But the smile was a good sign. A gullible sign. “Yeah, I know Anne. I fixed her pipes three weeks back.”

“Well, her daughter and I were playing with some friends and now I can’t find them. Can you take me back to her house?”

“That’s the other side a’ town, kid...” he said. “How’d ya get all the way out here?”

“Bike chain broke,” Rowan said. “I had to leave it a couple roads back.”

He squinted his eyes for a moment before nodding. He climbed out of the van, lumbering out like he wasn’t used to walking on two legs. Or maybe he was just used to walking with a cane. He pushed himself up on the side of the van and propped himself up all the way to the passenger door, which he pulled open. “Come on, then.”

“You want me to ride in the front?”

“No seats in the back,” he said, pausing for a moment, before finishing with a wheeze, “Except maybe toilet seats.” He paused, raised his eyebrows, maybe expecting a laugh. He didn’t get one. He said, “Get in or I’m going.”

Rowan walked to the passenger side. The inside of the van looked grimy, with a layer of filth crowding every corner. And then, behind the front seats, there were the toilets in the back of the van, looking even filthier than the rest of it. Rowan had no clue why he would keep commodes that had already been used. But she couldn't stop now. Rowan Mae Baker climbed into the front seat of a car for the first time in her life, knowing she would go however far this van would take her.

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Rowan had followed Finn out of the school. He slammed through a fire exit, and the alarms started going off all throughout the school. Kids started screaming, but Finn and Rowan didn't hear any of it. His whole face had turned red along with his vision.

When he saw Bradley White standing next to the bright green school dumpsters, laughing and vaping with his buddies, Finn didn't hesitate. Bradley turned towards him as he walked up, still smiling as Finn swung. His fist landed solidly against Bradley's pimply chin. The other boy was knocked back, still silent from shock. Then, Finn swung again, his fist landing in the other boy's stomach. Bradley buckled over, holding his gut. He seemed like he couldn't breathe.

Rowan stood just a few feet behind Finn. But after the second punch, Bradley's friends jumped on him. The two brown-headed boys grabbed his arms to stop him from flinging himself at Bradley again, but the impact of the third boy with the blonde mullet had finally taken him down to the asphalt. He struggled beneath them, trying to get up from beneath the pile of grabbing hands and struggling legs.

Finn was stuck, unable to throw another punch. Rowan stepped forward, closer to the struggling boys.

"Hey! Let him go!"

Bradley White, buckled over, turned towards the sound. Rowan took another step forward, towards Finn. But then, Bradley stumbled another step closer to her and breathed in her face.

She smelled his breath. Still peanut butter and vape scented. And she knew Finn wouldn't get to throw another punch. She was the only one still standing in front of him. The only one who could hurt him the way he deserved to be hurt.

She had started screaming. The loudest, highest, angriest scream her lungs could produce until they ached. And then, when she was out of breath, Bradley White looked up at her. And Rowan's whole body burned. She stepped back away from him, forming a fist, just like her daddy had taught her. And then, she had punched him in the eye.

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The van sped down the road much faster than it had before, jolting and jerking over the road. Despite the loose seatbelt fastening her down, Rowan floated off of the black torn fabric seat with every bump in the road. She tried to grip the door handle, but kept getting thrown backwards, her head bumping just under the headrest. When she finally steadied herself, feet pressed into the dashboard, Rowan looked back over her shoulder at the road behind, and she could see a massive dust cloud on their tails.

Once he reached the main road, the old man drove even faster. Everything was rushing past the windshield so fast that Rowan couldn't keep up. Streets, houses, neighborhoods, they all flew by in a blink. She had never cared how fast someone drove before, strapped into the backseat. But seeing it now through the windshield— she didn't think her stomach could take it. For the first time, she could see the whole world zooming past. Rowan hated it.



She looked for something to count, to take her mind off of the blurring world. She had to get her stomach settled. Maybe she could count something in the van? All she saw were the rattling toilets in the back, and the fat brown moles on the back of the man's hands on the steering wheel. She didn't know which was grosser.

Another pothole in the road, and Rowan started counting moles.

The man slowed at a left-hand turn, and Rowan's focus returned to the road. They were turning away from the direction of the school and away from Nana's church. Rowan knew those were to the right. She had been to school what felt like thousands of times, and to church at least a million.

"I know, honey, they're insufferable," Rowan's momma had said to her, as she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands. Emily Baker's eyes had bags under them, dark gray. "I grew up listening to each and every one of them. And I haaaated it. Why do you think I don't go to church anymore?"

"But why do I have to go and you don't?" Rowan had asked.

"Well, I'm sure my momma would find a way to force me," Momma said with a yawn. "But you know I have the morning shift at Denny's. And they don't take Sundays off. That's the only way I get away with it."

"It just doesn't seem fair when you don't even believe any of that stuff."

"Well, it's not like I don't believe any of it..." Momma said.

"We never went to church in Jackson."

"Hush, you. Your Nana's coming. Don't let her hear you sounding like a heathen," Emily Baker-Harding said. She was always much more concerned about Nana's feelings than Rowan was. Rowan saw Nana's feelings about church as her own damn responsibility. She felt a

perverse sense of pride when the van turned away from the church. Turning left meant, somehow, maybe she'd never have to go back there again. Maybe she'd never have to go back to the school again, either.

For the first time, Rowan felt a flicker of hope in her chest as the toilet van trundled on. Still, even though she knew they were going away from the church, Rowan wasn't quite sure it was the right way. She'd never paid attention to the drive to the Merriwether's house before, with her momma and Nana driving. And she had never had to get there without Finn by bike. Maybe she knew enough how to get there, but she couldn't be sure she had it straight. Rowan held up her hands into the shape of Ls to keep track of their turns and to make sure she wasn't getting confused.

"I'm glad you know how to get to the Merriwethers' place from here," Rowan said, not wanting to just listen to toilets until they got there. "I got all turned around during our game."

"Oh, yeah," the man said, scratching his wisps of beard. He looked at Rowan's hands held up in front of the dash and chuckled. "I known the Merriwethers a long time."

"Everyone who lives here seems to," Rowan replied, laying it on thick. She knew everyone in this town was obsessed with who knew who, and who had known each other the longest. Really, the greatest way to trust somebody was to have known them since before they were born, and then to gossip about them.

The principal and Nana both agreed on that particular point. That was why Bradley White had to be trusted. He was known. His daddy, the sheriff, was a town treasure. He'd never do anything wrong, not a White. The principal had questioned every word she'd said, just because Bradley was from Winona and she wasn't. Just like her daddy.

“If only your momma had settled down and married that nice Johnson boy from my church,” Nana had said. “He was a Winona boy through-and-through, and we would have been only twenty miles apart. But *no*, your mother had to go off and marry that no-good *LYING WRECK* of a husband instead. And look how that turned out.”

“Well, not all of us want to marry the first available option, mother,” Rowan’s momma would respond. “Just because you think I’m a whore doesn’t mean I am one.”

Of course, Nana had never actually accused her daughter of being a whore. She wouldn’t say that word. But she had accused her son-in-law of a lot worse. Even before the arrest, she had told her daughter to not marry that awful Jackson man.

Thinking about her momma and Nana fighting made Rowan’s stomach hurt. But she knew they would start fighting again the second her momma got home. And probably about Rowan running off. Her momma, worried sick about her, was sure to snap. And Nana was never a woman of few words.

Once Nana knew about the fight with Bradley... At this point, Rowan would be surprised if she wasn’t spreading the story to the whole town. Her whole church probably knew already, and not just the women either. She’d probably called up the pastor already so he could sermonize her next week.

But how much would Rowan’s momma know? And how much would she tell Nana? That was the main question Rowan couldn’t answer. She knew the principal had called and had told Momma what happened. But the Baker family was not known for their communication abilities. Her momma couldn’t know everything, that she was sure of. There was no way the principal had explained Rowan’s side of things. But out of what she knew, what would she tell Nana? And what would Nana tell everyone else?

Rowan hated church, but she wished she could pray for Nana to keep her mouth shut right about now. And she wished she could pray that her momma would believe her.

They made three more turns in rapid succession, pulling Rowan back to the car ride. Left, right, left. She started listening to the man again, and he was saying, “Everyone in this town is too damn nosy. Always trying to be up in everyone else’s business. There’s no way to have any privacy.”

The way he said it caught Rowan off guard. “Don’t you like people knowing you?” she asked. She thought Winonans liked the magnifying glass they kept on everyone. She hadn’t ever heard someone who was from here say anything about privacy.

“Town’s too small. Once people know one thing about you, they’ll never let it go,” he said. His voice sounded like the van’s engine.

“That makes sense,” Rowan said. Her stomach did a flip as they went over a bump in the road. But she forced her eyes to stay open. She needed to stay present, here and now. “They don’t know everything.” She continued to count the warts on the man’s hand in her head.

“What was that? I’m hard of hearing in my right ear.”

“They don’t know everything, really!” Rowan said, louder. “No one here knows me at all. I just moved last year.”

“I thought the Merriwethers were your cousins?”

“Well, besides them, I mean.” Shit. If he knew she was lying, she would end up right back at home and back at school tomorrow morning. Nana’s pastor may hate her, but she had to keep up her lie just long enough to make it through this drive. She couldn’t let him turn back around now.

“What’s your name, girl?” he asked.

“Macy.”

The man stared at her in the mirror, tilting his head slightly to the left and narrowing his eyes. Rowan thought she had been made. He couldn't be this quiet for this long and not be suspicious.

Finn would never be caught by a man like this. He could lie without a blink, after being accused of it so many times. Their momma, specifically, loved calling him a liar every time he messed up. Every time he'd gotten an F when he'd studied or stayed up too late on his phone. Every time he'd let Rowan out of his sight after promising he'd watch her. Eventually, he'd stopped trying to prove he wasn't lying. Instead, he had just done it. And gotten good at it. Clever. Maybe he was under the magnifying glass, but he wasn't going to get burned up like an ant.

Rowan didn't want to be an ant either. She would lie to survive. And she hoped Finn was lying his ass off for her right now, too, as she fidgeted with the edge of her sweatshirt. She kept counting their turns and tried to focus on the speed of the van.

“Well, I've never heard of a Macy Merriwether before. I thought I knew everyone in this town. Or at least their pipes.”

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it with the windows rolled up. Rowan looked away, to not make him uncomfortable, but he didn't seem to mind smoking in front of her one bit. He wasn't keeping it a secret. Soon, she was surrounded by the smoke. It swirled around her, making the air thick in the van. They drove past a Dollar General on the left, then a gas station on the right, and then a Dollar Tree on the left again. But the roads they took were still small and out of the way. Only four or five street lights on each of them, each starting to flicker on as the sun crept down over the horizon.

“What’s your name?” Rowan asked.

“Mack. Just Mack.”

“Oh.”

The smoke kept curling around the inside of the van, forming gray ringlets and waves in the air. They were blown away only by the sputtering AC. Rowan coughed. She noticed her fingers were fidgeting, and she gripped them together to still them. But once she wasn’t moving her hands anymore, she couldn’t get rid of the feeling that something was wrong.

“Where are we?”

“Getting close now. Just gotta turn onto the highway and we’ll be there in a few minutes.”

The highway didn’t sound right. The Bakers and the Merriwethers didn’t live that far apart. And you didn’t turn to the right to get there. You turn left towards the school, drive past the gas station combined with the Baskin Robbins, and then eventually end up there.

Rowan’s stomach was hurting again. She eased her left hand down to rest on the seatbelt latch. They were coming up on the highway. There were signs with numbers on them, and cars flying to the left and to the right. One, two, three, four– metallic blurs. He would have to slow down. He would have to stop, wouldn’t he?

He did. Just for a second. He paused at the yield sign, and at the moment that the outside world slowed and the van groaned to a stop, Rowan unclicked the seatbelt.

“Hey, put that back on!” the man said, turning to look at her for the first time. His voice got low, stern, and Rowan made direct eye contact with his exposed yellow teeth.

But the teeth couldn’t turn fast enough. She had already thrown the door open and landed on the pavement, her dad’s sweatshirt cushioning her hands as she hit the ground. Her wrists

took a jolt that ran all the way to her shoulders, but she was already pulling herself up and running from the highway, darting past the back of the van.

Her arms pumped hard, despite her sleeves rolled up around her elbows. The bottom of the shirt was even more in the way, catching around her knees. But there was nothing that could be done about it now. Was the old man shouting for her? She slowed and glanced back. Maybe, just a second, she could--

The van was backing up, turning around.

Off the road.

In the fading light, Rowan saw a cluster of trees on her right, behind somebody's tiny ramshackle house and even tinier ramshackle yard. There was a chain-link fence around one square of the yard, but otherwise, it was empty and the way was clear. She ran past the house and past the fence, and then, about twenty steps later, she reached the trees.

The sweetgum trees were packed tightly together, making the woods behind the house dense and dark. The undergrowth was thick and pulled at her legs. If she had been thinking about where to put her feet, it would have been nearly impassable. But she barreled straight through, pushing past poison ivy and other creeping vines. A branch of thorns caught in her right shin, and she inhaled sharply. Her eyes darted to her leg for a second, and she almost collided into a tree trunk. She ducked past and kept running, her legs burned with cuts and burrs. She only slowed down when she could look over her shoulder and not see the house.

She nearly tiptoed, listening for the sound of the old man or his van. All she heard was the deep barking of a distant dogs, and the squelching mud under her feet. It squished loudly, and slowing down had made her shoes stick instead of slide. They would be coated, soon. Her mom would kill her for taking her school shoes through the mud. They had had white laces.

A few more steps and Rowan had stopped. She could feel her tennis shoes were stuck. They were deep in mud, and every time she lifted her feet, it felt like she was about to lose her shoe in spiky, gumball covered quicksand. The sweetgums had already dropped their seeds, making the ground on all sides hazardous.

Instead of struggling forward, Rowan took the hem of her sweatshirt and tied it up in a knot, above her stomach, below her chest. It was the only way to get the massive wad of fabric to stay. She had to get it out of the way, but she wanted to keep it long enough to cover the Winona Public School Logo and her skin that was still crawling.

Not now. She had to think about not getting caught. Not by van man or anyone else. Why would he try to take her on the highway? What if he had kidnapped her? Or even worse, what if Nana knew him?

Rowan's hair was slicked with sweat, and hanging in her face until she could barely see her legs. She pulled the curls back with her left hand and reached down with her right. The row of thorns shifted slightly, and she winced. They hadn't gotten stuck in too deep, though.

One, two, three, and the thorns were out of her leg.

But while she was looking down, Rowan saw her right leg dripping with blood from a cut near her knee. As she tried to fight back tears, just a reaction to the pain, not real crying, she noticed a crashing sound coming through the woods. The man must have been chasing her, limping along.

“Hey, kid! Stop! I wasn't gonna hurt you!”

Rowan fell forward onto the ground, her hands splayed out in front of her. Her left hand hit a gumball and it rolled out from under her, leaving her face first in the dirt. As she pulled



herself up, her left shoe slid off in the mud. Shit. But she had to go. There was no time to dig for it. And no time to be nauseous.

Rowan's calves were burning and so were her lungs. The crunching of leaves and heavy footsteps behind her was swallowed up by her own heart pounding in her ears. Her legs caught on the undergrowth but she forced her way through it as quickly as she could.

She didn't realize the trees were ending until she was almost out of them. But up ahead, another yard. Another house. Rowan started yelling, calling for help, her voice breaking. Her feet took her past the treeline, through the yard, and straight up to the slanted green house's back door. Her fists pounded on it as she threw her whole body at it.

"Please! Help me!"

She wished Finn were here. She wished anyone, anyone who could help her was here, but she knew this was probably the end of the line for her, and there was no way she could get—

The back door opened, and Rowan fell through it.

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"Whoa, sweetie, whoooooa," the woman said to Rowan like she was a horse, holding her shoulders. Her hands were calloused and wrinkled, and they caught slightly on the fabric of Rowan's sweatshirt.

Rowan's breath was ragged. Her legs still felt shaky.

"What happened, sweetie?" she said, looking down at Rowan's legs that were covered in scratches and dripping blood.

Terror continued to wash over Rowan, but she knew better than to speak when she was this afraid. She stayed quiet, eyes darting around the room. She swallowed hard and started

counting floorboards. And then, a man stood from his seat at the kitchen table, still loaded with their dinner. When he started standing up, it seemed like it never stopped. He was mountainous.

Rowan knew she had to lie.

Her hands still shaking, she gestured to the door and spit out the first thing she could think. “There was a dog!”

“A dog?” the woman asked.

The man moved so fast it was like a landslide. In half a second, he had snatched a rifle from the corner near the kitchen table and disappeared out of the back door.

“What kinda dog was it, honey?”

Rowan kept on trying to slow down her breathing, but her heart was still thundering against her ribcage. She was beginning to imagine what could have happened if the man had caught her. What if he had been a pervert? A series of gunshots rang from the backyard.

“Here, drink this,” the woman said, handing her a glass of water. A piece of the woman’s red hair fell into her face and she tucked it back behind her ear. She had inviting eyes. But Rowan had to focus. Under no circumstances could Rowan tell this woman that she was being chased by a plumber. She swallowed and then forced her words out.

“I didn’t see the dog, but I heard it! It was right behind me!” Rowan lied. “It was acting like Yeller, you know, from *Old Yeller*?”

The back door slammed closed again, and the husband lumbered in from the back porch, rifle in hand. Rowan didn’t know anything about guns, but she knew she didn’t want the massive barrel pointing at her. “I fired some shots, just to scare it off,” he said, “but I didn’t see the dog. It’s probably halfway home by now.”

“Ya didn’t see it?” the wife asked, looking up at her mountain of a husband. He was one of the tallest and broadest men Rowan had ever seen. His shoulders were like a table. “She said it seemed rabid.”

“No, I don’t mean rabid. Not really rabid. Just really angry. It wasn’t foaming at the mouth or anything.”

“Well, I didn’t see it, but ya know it musta been Sal’s dog,” he said, clicking on the rifle’s safety and setting it in the corner by the backdoor. He had narrow glasses on, perched on the end of his thick nose. They felt too small for such a big man. He washed his hands for a second or two and then came to stand just a foot behind his wife.

“That man just can’t keep his dog contained to save his life. I mean that. It’s gonna run off and get hit one day,” the wife said, checking Rowan’s legs again, this time reaching to lightly touch them. She put a little pressure on the scratches, and Rowan winced. They stung awfully, even if they weren’t deep.

“More like it’s gonna bite someone,” the man said. “I swear to God, if that thing comes up in our yard again, I’m gonna shoot it.”

“Daviiiiid,” the woman said. She reached down and untied Rowan’s right shoe, still stuck on her foot. “What’s your name, Sweetie?”

“Rowan.”

Damn. She should have stayed Macy Merriwether. It would have been easier.

“Well, Rowan, these cuts look bad, but I don’t think they’re too deep. You take that shoe off, I’ll wrap your legs up, and my husband’ll call your momma. Ya don’t live around here, do you?”

“How do you know that?” Rowan asked. She kept working on steadying her breathing. She had to seem sufficiently terrified, but not call-the-cops terrified. She started taking in the house as she pried her right shoe off, including the horseshoe-patterned wallpaper and the barnyard themed hand towels hanging from the oven. The accents and the decor lined up.

“We know our neighbors and our neighbors’ kids. None of ‘em are named Rowan,” the woman said with a quick smile. “Lemme get ya some bandages, and you give David your momma’s phone number. We’ll get ‘er out here to pick ya up.”

“My momma don’t have a phone,” she said, dropping into a thicker accent. They certainly sounded gullible. They sounded like they were in a movie about the South instead of the real thing.

“You’re tellin’ me, in the year of our Lord 2019, your momma don’t have a cell phone,” the man said. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and bent over to look at Rowan more clearly. He took a step towards her. He was so big. If a cow had been inside of the house, it may have taken up less space than this one man did.

“We’re uh– we’re way out away from everythin’” Rowan said, acting like she was still a little out of breath to give herself more time to think. “Wouldn’t uh– be a point without reception.” She checked the clock on the wall behind him. 8:17. The break between Mom’s classes. If he called, she would pick up. Shit, no, that didn’t even matter. She was probably already home by now. Probably already looking for her. She could pick up any time.

“Tell me the truth now. Y’all must have a landline or something,” the man said, squatting down on his haunches in front of her. She hated that. His large nose, thick glasses, and chicken-scented breath were too close. He rested his hand on Rowan’s shoulder. His nails were dirty and

cracked. “I gotta call your mother. She’s gotta come get you. Or your dad, whichever one. But I gotta call ‘em.”

Rowan’s shoulder flinched. She didn’t mean for it to. She knew it would make her seem more guilty if she pulled away from him. But it flinched anyway. The man felt it and immediately moved his hands to his own knees.

Rowan’s breath was faster, now. That one touch, his incisive eyes locked on hers, and she could see that he knew everything. The whole day. Everything Bradley White had done. She could see him recognizing it. She could see him putting the pieces together, a young scared girl showing up on his back porch, far from home, with only one shoe on. His brain was working, and it was almost audible, the gears turning in his head. Even worse, she could see his pity.

She didn’t want it.

“Sorry, kid, I’m not tryin’ to scare ya,” he said, looking away and dusting his hands on his jeans. He stood up and took a step back, saying, “We just want ya to get home safe, that’s all. My wife’ll be back in a second to patch ya up.”

The man lumbered into the other room, and Rowan heard him talking to his wife in a lowered voice. About how scared this kid was. Something must have happened. Clearly, she was lying to them, but they didn’t know what to do about it. I dunno, David, what do ya do when a kid shows up a your house bleedin’ with no parents?

The walls were thin, and she could hear straight through their horseshoe patterned wallpaper. That, and southern voices are meant to be loud. It’s practically impossible to whisper and be understood when you’re only using half of your syllables to begin with.

Rowan’s legs were still bleeding, but when she looked down at the cuts on them, she knew they would stop soon. Worse than the legs right now was her throat. She coughed again,

trying to clear it. The running, the panic, the lying, all of it had dried her out quick. Her throat had already been hoarse before.

Rowan looked back to the kitchen table where the couple's dinner was sitting. Two plates, each filled with chicken and mashed potatoes. Cornbread. Two glasses of water. Rowan grabbed both glasses, sat on the floor at the table's corner, and drank them as quickly as she could. Her legs dripped onto the floor.

Rowan knew she couldn't sit for long. The rustling of the wife looking for bandages was gone, and now only voices were left. The woman, saying they should keep talking to Rowan, trying to figure out where she was from. The man, saying that if that didn't work, they would need to call the cops. It was getting dark, and someone must be looking for their kid.

She groaned a little. Why had everyone been trying to call the cops on her today?

Rowan stood up and wiped the floor with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. She grabbed a piece of white meat off of the table and shoved it in her pocket. Just a little one that they wouldn't notice. She glanced at the shoes by the back door, wishing they had any extras in her size. But they only had adult sized shoes, and she had little use for half a pair of sneakers. It would just slow her down. She left her right sneaker where it sat on the kitchen floor. Then, when she opened the door, she paused. They had a back porch.

"Where do you think you're going?" the man asked, standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the bathroom. His eyes locked onto hers again. If he could figure her out, that fast, with just a look, what could he figure out if she stayed?

She didn't want to know. Rowan held her breath and ran.

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Rowan Mae Baker was officially a fugitive. She knew the mountain man would call the cops the second she had left the house. If Nana hadn't already, if momma hadn't already, the police had been called by now. No rational adult would watch a bleeding child run out of the house and not call the police.

She'd run, just to be safe, because she thought he may chase after her. But neither of them had followed her. Rowan had looked back over her shoulder and seen them watching her from their back porch. The man raised his hand in a slow wave and folded his mouth into a straight line. His wife looked at him and then stared straight at Rowan. They didn't even yell after her. They just waited to see what she would do.

Rowan rounded the corner of their neighbor's house and the couple was out of sight.

When she stopped again, Rowan found herself back on the road. Maybe the same street she had been on before, maybe not. It was paved, at least. Two lanes with cracking paint. The lines had been bleached by the sun, and the years of wear had broken it down. Now, with the sun going down, it just looked like a massive black river running down the road complete with ripples.

It was much darker now than before. The streetlights at the far end of the road popped on as she walked, buzzing slightly as they first woke up for the evening. They would settle down once they'd been on for at least an hour, but for now, they flickered on as she walked between the pools of light they produced.

Rowan knew that, soon, blue flashing lights would appear on the road behind her. The cops were going to respond to the couple's call, and then start searching every street in Winona. There was no way they were going to leave her alone. It was only a matter of when, not if, for as long as she was in this damn town.

They were going to come get her, just like they had her daddy. Only this time, they wouldn't be arresting someone who was innocent.

He was. He wasn't. Rowan never knew. He had died too fast. There hadn't been a trial.

Rowan wanted to take off his sweatshirt as she went, but it was getting colder. She untied the knot she'd made in the front of it, and it dropped back down over her knees. Her legs had almost stopped bleeding, and they probably wouldn't stain the sweatshirt too bad. She wished she had worn pants today, though. Even though Mississippi is known for its heat, April is early spring in the South.

Rowan still wanted to avoid stepping in the grass, if she could at all. There could still be snakes, sticks, and broken glass anywhere, and she didn't want to risk stepping on any of that barefoot. But her feet felt raw and tender already. Grass would give her some cushion, but no guarantees about safety. Asphalt and streetlights were safer for everything but cops.

Rowan pulled her arms out of her sleeves and close to her chest. She wished she had something to calm herself down. She had never smoked before, but she wished she did, for once. She wished she could walk and smoke, and look collected, out here in the dark. Like a real adult.

"Don't tell Mom, Rowan," Finn had said to her, holding her shoulder seriously.

"Why not?" she had asked Finn.

"Because Dad told me not to tell. He said I could smoke with him if I just didn't tell. Mom will get mad if she finds out he smokes."

She had never gotten a Marlboro for staying quiet like Finn had. Daddy's cigarette had been a boys' secret. She could tell Finn felt more manly when he smoked, particularly when he said she was too young and female for nicotine. No, only he and dad could smoke together, and she would just not tell Momma because Finn said so.



“Stay with your brother, kiddo,” her dad had said in handcuffs. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back before you know it.”

But Rowan *had* known it. She had felt every second he was being interrogated and kept in police custody. And she had felt it when he came back to the house. His insomnia, his pacing, his secret cigarettes all became constant. Like the ticking of the grandfather clock in their living room.

She could still hear it. Every second drawn out unbearably. Each one that she counted marking how long it had been since the cops came, each one marking how long she had been walking down this street. Each tick waiting for her momma and daddy to start screaming again about where the money had come from to pay for this big house, this big living room.

“Well, someone had to pay for your lifestyle, Emily,” he’d said, spitting the word *Emily* like a curse word. He’d never sounded more hateful before.

“You’re telling me that you decided to embezzle because of *ME*?” Momma had said back. “Oh, no. I wasn’t consulted on the matter. What, did you think I would turn you in?”

“What was I gonna say?” Daddy asked, slamming his hands into the living room wall. “Where did you think our money was coming from?”

Emily Baker-Harding had many follow-up questions for her husband, mostly accusations, with each tick of the clock. How they were going to function, now that their bank accounts were frozen? Was the bank going to take the house?

Daddy never had to worry about the answers, really. He’d died too fast.

Each tick brought another gust of wind, and another streetlight to pass under. Another patch of darkness to wade through until the next light. Rowan was shivering.

Then, a police cruiser rounded the corner onto the road, complete with flashing blue lights so bright that they blinded her. She stepped to the side of the road, but kept walking coolly, knowing that if she ran, she would be caught. She felt a bead of sweat roll down from her armpit into her sweatshirt, but she held her hands together to stop them from shaking. Slowly, gradually, she acted like she was walking towards a neighboring house. She walked right up to it, as though she was about to go into the front door.

The smooth hum of the sedan's engine faded away, as the lights turned down another street. Rowan turned and started running again, down the strange driveway and back into the road. Her feet patted on the pavement, each footfall stinging from the force. She didn't stop until she reached the highway. At least, the sound of it. If the road before had been a river, the highway was a river with alligators in it, growling down the road once every few minutes to break up the silence.

Rowan looked up and saw that she had reached the yield sign where she had jumped out of the van. The red and white triangle loomed above her, and she felt obligated to pause even without a car, to take in the road ahead. There was a moment of calm as she craned her head to look to the left, and then to the right, the great swathe of asphalt running as far as she could see to both sides. It was lit slightly better than the road behind her, but not by much.

"Maybe the Merriwethers really do live this way," she said to nobody in particular. Maybe her red socks.

Rowan turned to the right. She needed to find a place to sleep soon, and she hoped she would reach the Merriwethers' before that happened. A car passed, and Rowan's hair whipped into her face.

Rowan's eyes felt heavy. They closed as she walked, until she tripped over a piece of a tire, the rubber shaped like an orange peel. She stumbled into the street. Her eyes snapped back open and she kicked the rubber into the road, spitefully.

But she was grateful her eyes had opened when she saw the cat. It was a little orange and white thing, a kitten, its fur barely visible in the moonlight. Its white patches formed little socks on its paws. It must have been only a few days old. It had been laying silently in the road, but as she moved closer, it mewed quietly and opened its eyes.

The tiny thing had been hit by a car. There was no other explanation. Its leg was bent and it wasn't moving except for its tiny fuzzy head. It lifted its head from the pavement as Rowan got closer. Somehow, it wasn't dead yet.

It was hurt and it was alone, and Rowan didn't know what to do. She looked around for someone else, anyone else, who could help. Any adult. But the stretch of road was empty, dark, surrounded by trees. Rowan stepped into the road toward the kitten. She got down on her hands and knees next to it, and it started meowing louder. She reached out with her hand, and the kitten sniffed her finger.

"Hey, kitty... are you hurt?"

Rowan reached for the cat, going to scoop it off the pavement. But when she touched it, it yowled. She jerked her hand away, knowing this little girl was hurting. She guessed it was a girl. It seemed like a girl.

"Don't worry, baby," she said. "I'm going to help you."

Rowan started pulling off her sweatshirt, getting lost in the folds of the fabric. She just needed to get it off over her head, and then she would use it to pick up the kitten. If she could just get this thing-- shit, her arm was hung.

There was a noise on the road ahead of her. Something was coming. Rowan gave one more fierce pull on the sweatshirt and she was free, but in front of her, there were headlights. It was going way too fast and it was almost here and--

Rowan jumped out of the way and the black sedan smashed the kitten into the asphalt.

“NO!”

There was blood on the road and on her sweatshirt in her hands. Was it the cat’s blood? Or was that just hers from earlier? She shook from the cold but she didn’t put the sweatshirt back on. Her Winona Public School T-shirt hung limply around her as she lowered herself into the gravel on the side of the road. Her knees first.

Rowan had almost died.

The kitten’s fur was shaking in the wind. She thought about its mom, somewhere out in the world, that would never find her kitten daughter. Rowan turned away from the road, facing away from it. Her legs folded under her. If she hadn’t put her hands down to steady herself, the rest of her body would go next. She didn’t want to lay down on the side of the road. She wanted to go home.

But she couldn’t, remember? She’d have to talk about what Bradley had done. Out loud. She’d have to tell her mom that her little girl had caused all of these issues. None of it had been ladylike. Getting expelled, punching a boy... the way he had touched her... And then, her mom would have to watch her rot in jail, too, once Bradley’s sheriff daddy charged her. They’d blame everything on her, just like they blamed it on her dad.

And maybe it had been her fault. She didn’t know. All she knew, for sure, was that the police had blamed her daddy so hard he’d died. She didn’t want to go home and die, her skin still

burning. It would be an awful way to die. And just one more thing for her mom to deal with, along with all of the terrible truth.

She wished she could just go home and lie. Wished she could just spin a story about where she was today, and make it all go away. But she couldn't. And even if she could, it wouldn't fix anything.

Her skin was covered with goosebumps, and her legs fought her as she stood back up. There were pieces of rocks in her knees, below the denim of her red shorts. Her hair blew into her eyes and into her mouth as she picked them out, and then she was picking damp hair out of her mouth. It just wouldn't stay where it was supposed to be. She turned to avoid the wind and saw the kitten again, and now tears were sliding down her cheeks. She couldn't keep them in.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she said to the wind.

There was no answer, and the tears kept coming. She couldn't help it. Not now, not today. There was nothing she could do to stop them, when her legs still ached, and her shirt wasn't her shirt, and her stomach felt like vomiting for the hundredth time today out of repulsion at the hands she still felt on her chest and mouth. Her bare toes and blisters scraped against the pavement, and her skin felt like it was covered with fire ants, and her throat felt like it was going to close from the nausea of peanut butter breath and mango vape juice combining. But still, she heard Finn's voice from when she was stuck under that desk.

"You gotta be brave for me, Kiddo."

Rowan walked away one step at a time. She cried, and she wished she had been a second faster to help the kitten. She hadn't even gotten a chance to name it. But she walked away from the kitten lying in the middle of the road, fur trembling long after she had gone.

Why did Finn have to say it that way? Kiddo was her dad's word. Finn's words were Rowan, Ro Ro, Mae, Mae Mae, and Stickbug. Kiddo was her dad's. Finn wasn't allowed to say it. He wasn't allowed to always be the brave one. He wasn't allowed to act like their dad.

She could see him standing over her on the front porch, his gray hair blown back by swirling winds. His hands were soft, and always rested lightly when they touched her shoulders. He was talking about the weather. There were tornado-like conditions tonight. He pointed out the swirling clouds far in the distance. But don't worry. He'd stay up all night, just like he always did. He'd help his daughter not cry and be brave.

Rowan couldn't do both. She couldn't be brave and not cry at the same time. Forcing herself down the highway, she cried and hoped she was still brave enough.

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Rowan didn't hide when the next car passed her. Or the next. They raced past, creating wind gusts in the pitch-black middle-of-the-night stillness. Going from silence to a roar once every few minutes was disconcerting, but Rowan saw each car that passed as another sign that she needed to keep walking. If she were supposed to stop, they would stop.

They couldn't help anyway. Rowan imagined a little old man driving the next truck that whipped by her. His name was Clyde and he hated children, particularly girls. He was driving in the middle of the night to tell his granddaughters that he was disgusted by them. He'd call a girl a know-it-all. He'd call a girl a freak if she was ten years old in the sixth grade. And he didn't stop because he saw Rowan on the side of the road and knew something was completely and totally wrong with her.

It didn't make sense. None of it did. Why would Clyde whip past her, headlights on, fully able to see her, and not stop?

She knew, if she stayed here, and didn't hide, eventually a car would stop. They would pull over and take her back home or call the cops. And until she thought of Clyde, she hardly cared. But she wasn't going to let some asshole like Clyde send her back home now, when she had already come all this way. When the next car rumbled towards her, Rowan ducked back down off of the highway. She needed to make it to the Merriwethers' house, and no one was going to stop her.

Rowan kept going, her eyes red. She had cried until she couldn't anymore, and now they just stung. Her legs shook, her knees threatening to give out. They were exhausted, but more than anything, just unstable. But she still couldn't rest yet.

“Hey, Kiddo.”

Rowan whirled at the sound of her daddy's voice, so clear and distinct. It had been behind her left shoulder, up a few feet. She heard it, and she knew he was wearing his pilled white turtleneck sweater, his brown jacket on top. She could see his khaki pants and brown leather shoes. She could see his speckled gray hair, his long, pinched nose. His blue eyes could switch from serious to spritely in an instant before the trial. She could have sworn, in that exact moment, that he was just a few steps behind her on the side of the highway, following her as she tripped over his Vanderbilt sweatshirt.

But when she turned, her daddy wasn't there.

The empty highway still stretched out before her, barely visible in the moonlight. It was just Rowan and the trees as far as she could see. She moved her fingers, feeling like she should count them again. But she was too tired to be scared, really. Too tired to count the fear away.

“Rowan! Get Finn! Call an ambulance!” her momma had said, pushing Rowan away.  
“Let go of me!”

Rowan hadn't reacted fast enough, still dazed. Her momma gave her one more good shove and Rowan's hands released her blouse. Momma went to Daddy's side, kneeling over him, checking to see if he was still breathing. Just a second ago, he had been talking to her. Telling her he wouldn't go to jail. The police had just misunderstood where his money came from. He had told her everything would go back to normal once the investigation ended. And then he had fallen.

"Honey, go inside and tell Finn to call an ambulance! Right now!" Momma said, glancing at Rowan. She stood frozen, still feeling her father's hand slip out of her own as he collapsed onto the porch. Why was he still just lying there? What had happened to him? He was dead. Rowan knew it. He had to be, with how he had fallen. His legs had buckled beneath him and now he was dead.

Rowan had stood there five extra seconds. And then she had gone to find Finn, screaming for him to call 911. There were five extra seconds the ambulance could have helped him, if he hadn't already been dead. Rowan knew he was dead.

The trees were getting sparser over time the farther she went. The oaks and elms didn't connect here, like they did over Nana's driveway. They seemed like they were barely even friends. But as they thinned, Rowan could see a turn coming up on the right side of the road.

"Are you here?" she said, louder this time. Her voice kept getting taken away by the wind, and she needed her daddy to hear her. "Is this my turn?"

Rowan's legs carried her to the turn, where she stood and tried to see down the road. There were no street lights that direction, and nothing recognizable. The moonlight wasn't enough to tell if this was the Merriwethers' road.



“Daddy... if you’re here... I need to get to the Merriwethers’ house. I know you probably don’t know how to get there, either. But can we go together?”

She turned right and kept walking down the dark road. She would just have to try.

“Did you see what happened at school today?” Rowan said. “Were you there, too? Or did you miss that part?”

An owl hooted in one of the treetops, cracking through the night air. Rowan jumped, and then pulled her arms inside of her sweatshirt. She crossed her arms against her chest, rubbing her hands against her forearms. She took a breath to steady herself again. The trees were getting tighter again, the road less visible.

“I don’t know why he did it, Daddy. Do you know why?”

Rowan’s feet were hurting again. And her skin was crawling, too. She couldn’t help but feel his denim against her back again. Would he have done that if Finn were there for real? She should have stayed with him, just like her momma told her to.

Rowan’s hair blew back into her face, but she kept her arms tucked in, too cold to take them out. Her arms were shivering now. But slowly, the trees began to open back up. And once they did, she recognized where she was. In the moonlight, she saw a mailbox off to the right side of the road. It was the green mailbox at the beginning of the Merriwethers’ road.

Rowan kept hobbling as best as she could, a bit quicker now. She knew the Merriwethers’ house was near. She decided to risk the grass, with sticks and rocks poking her feet. It was still too dark to see where she was stepping, but her feet just couldn’t take the faster pace on the asphalt.

She didn’t even think to count the steps it took to reach the Merriwether’s driveway. She just pushed herself forward. She turned down the gravel driveway. And then, to the massive

house standing at the end of the driveway with all of the lights off. Rowan felt a spark of hope in her chest as she limped towards the house.

It was big and paneled with grayish planks. Two stories. Lots of dark windows. A few wooden columns held up the roof around the front porch, and there was a railing around it as well. It went across the whole front of the house.

Rowan hesitated at the opening in the railing and held onto the column next to it. She considered holding her breath and knocking on the door, but she was too tired for her own ritual. Instead, she went around the side of the house, pushing herself to keep going for just one more minute. Slowly, she rounded the corner before stopping in front of the backdoor.

“I made it,” she said.

She reached for the wooden backdoor and started beating on it with her fist.

She knew, once the door opened, the running would be done. The Merriwethers would insist on taking her home. But she was tired. She almost didn't care. She could come up with a lie or an excuse by the time they drove her back. Maybe she could convince Momma that the principal was out of her mind. Nothing had happened today.

The door stayed shut, though. Rowan pounded on it again, calling out for them to open up. But no one came.

The house was empty.

Rowan backed away from the Merriwethers' door, the sides of her fists still stinging from the wood. How were they not home? It was the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere, and they were the most normal family she had ever witnessed in this backwoods podunk town. They were the kind of family that had dinner on the table by 7:00 p.m. every night. They were the family that would pick up someone else's kids to help out their Nana. They were the family

that she and Finn would make fun of from their field because they couldn't manage to stay up late.

Rowan turned from the door, looking out behind their house. There was nothing else out there. No other signs of civilization. The Merriwethers owned all the land around their place. All these hills were empty, except for their shed and their barn.

Rowan sat down on the stoop and buried her feet in the grass, rubbing them back and forth to itch her blisters. She peeled off her socks, dropped them next to the door, and planted her bare toes into the dirt and grass that was behind the Merriwethers' house. The dirt was soft and cool, and the night was quiet. The home stood peacefully behind her, sheltering her from the wind for a moment.

Slowly, like phlegm, Rowan's pride drained down her throat and formed a lump at the bottom. She had to hold back a choked laugh that sounded like a croak. Any other day, she would laugh at their routine, their schedule, just like she always had. See them as being a little silly. But living in the quiet was starting to seem lovely.

She imagined it for a moment. Being a Merriwether. Settled in this house, with a mom tucking you in every night. A father who made sure his kids always ate their vegetables. A house that lets you rest. And when you look outside, everything you saw would belong to you. Owning this grass. The Merriwethers had whole fields of it. Every direction that Rowan looked, there were trees that they owned.

Her family had done it, once. But that was a long time ago.

Rowan didn't understand why she had wanted to laugh at their absurd accents and normalcy. They didn't seem so bad. Accents aside, they were nearly the same as the Bakers-

Hardings had been, in Jackson. They still had their mom at home. But then, they were also like the Bakers had been long ago in Winona. Respectable.

Maybe they were the normal ones. And not just because they went to bed at the same time every night. As Rowan sat in that thought, in the silence of the night, she realized something that she had never thought of before.

Lily Merriwether was a normal, lucky fourth grader.

Rowan stood up and plodded out behind the house. The first part was covered in soft, mowed grass. A little lawn out here in the country. On her left, she saw their shed in the moonlight. It had a red door on the front of it and a lawnmower parked beside it. A big riding lawn mower, like they had had in Jackson.

Rowan kept going to the fence at the edge of their fields. It was barbed-wire, but the gaps between the wires were massive. It was just there to keep the cows in. Nine of them. Rowan mooed to herself as she climbed through the fence, and it echoed across the field louder than she thought it would. Everything was so much quieter at night. So much louder, too.

When she stepped past the fence, Rowan's feet brushed against a different kind of grass. Much more prickly. Taller. She had never walked barefoot through this field before. She had always been scared of snakes. But under the moonlight, she figured she could see well enough for the day she had been having.

At the bottom of the first hill, Rowan found the nine cows sleeping. She'd never seen a cow lying down before. Their massive bodies rose from the fields, forming their own little hills that sighed and moved up and down as they breathed. She walked on tiptoe, trying to get past their brown and white spotted sides without waking them. One huffed and lifted its head as she passed.

“Go back to sleep,” she said under her breath. The cow didn’t comply, watching her. Rowan passed one more hill, then one more. For a second, being worried about getting lost flickered across her mind. But then she found the cigarette butts at the bottom of the next hill and she knew where she was.

The whole place was covered with bike tracks, snack cake wrappers and Monster cans, along with the cigarette butts. Without those signs, this would be just another normal hill in this normal town, in the fields of a normal family. But there were a few, a select few boys, who would follow her and Finn to this spot every weekend. All the other boys would spend the afternoon popping wheelies to impress each other and drinking too much caffeine. A couple tried to pick up smoking from Finn. He would teach them (but never her) if they promised to bring two packs, one for themselves and one for him. Only one boy had gotten sick trying to learn, but he hadn’t told his folks, and their hideout hadn’t gotten busted.

That’s what they’d always called it. *Their* hideout. When Finn said it, it had made sense. Because the Merriwethers may have thought that these fields were theirs, and they were doing Nana a favor by taking Rowan and Finn away, but this hill was hers and Finn’s. No one could make them go anywhere. They were the masters of the hill, rulers of this one spot, and the Merriwethers would never know that Finn spent his weekends smoking on their hill. They would never know that Rowan stood lookout at the top, making sure they never got busted. This secret was theirs and the hill was theirs too. Kings of the world.

Now, in the middle of the night, with the stars creeping past overhead, Rowan lay down on the side of it, her hands behind her head. And it just felt like a hill. Like every other hill. Except that they had ruined it and covered it in trash. The cigarette butts poked up like little white and gray wildflowers and the Monster cans glowed almost neon against the grass.

There was probably cow shit on it somewhere.

Rowan found a cleaner spot, though she still had to pick up a cigarette butt and flick it to the side. Cigarettes really were nasty, weren't they? She hadn't really wanted one earlier, just to calm down. She promised herself she wouldn't ever touch one. Then she lied down onto the space she'd made for herself, pressing her back into the earth and her hands into the grass.

Rowan rolled onto her side, pulling her knees back up into her sweatshirt and her face down into it. She hadn't slept without a blanket in a long time. And it was windy.

When was the last time she slept like this? Curled up in her dad's sweatshirt? The sweatshirt had been banned since the funeral. Or right after it? Since they moved to Nana's house, anyway. Nana hated it more than anyone else. When it had ended up in the garbage can, repeatedly, Rowan had always fished it out and hidden it back in her own laundry. She couldn't sleep without it anymore.

Rowan rubbed her thumb over the lining of the sweatshirt and remembered putting it on for the first time. She'd been surprised it was so soft. Her dad had just thrown it on the floor and left it, before he was arrested.

"Where did Momma and Daddy go, Finn? Why did the police come and get him?" she asked.

"I don't know, Rowan. But I know he'll be back soon. They're just gonna ask him some questions and then they'll let him go. That's what the police do. Dad'll be home soon."

Rowan hesitated. "What about Momma? Is she coming back soon?"

"She's just there to bring him home," Finn said.

She hadn't slept in the sweatshirt, at first. She'd just worn it around the house until her parents came back. She was just keeping it warm for him. But after the funeral, it was hers. And Rowan slept in it every night, hands balled up inside the sleeves just like they were right now.

She kept her hands in fists, tucked right against her body, legs curled to her chest, all in an effort to keep her hands warm. Those first few weeks, every time they got chilly, she had been hit with the worst nauseous feeling. She could feel her daddy's hands against hers when she had grabbed them on the porch. But even worse, she could feel them like they were at the funeral. Open casket.

Skin doesn't feel like skin once it's dead.

No one had told Rowan that before she grabbed her dad's hands. No one warned her, "Sweetie, don't touch the corpse." Why hadn't they warned her?

Rowan brought her hands to her chest now, but stretched out her fingers, rubbing each one to pop her knuckles. It was cold out in this field, but it was a completely different kind of cold. Not death cold. She wasn't dead cold yet.

What had they said at the funeral? Almost everyone was so angry at him. Every coworker, every old friend, every wife, every son, and maybe every daughter was angry. He had died and he had left them all, and not only that, but he had screwed them over right beforehand.

"All he had to do was forward the reports," a woman in a pencil skirt muttered under her breath in the lobby. She had a bun pulled up so tight you could see the veins in her forehead. "He didn't even have to make them."

"You think you can trust a guy, and then he gets even the tiniest bit of power..." the man next to her had whispered back. His tie was bright red, even though his suit was black. "But I guess it takes a lot of money to maintain a wife like that." He nodded at Rowan's momma, hair

still perfectly blonde and straightened, wearing a black dress with her perfectly composed makeup.

Another man walked up, wearing an appropriately black jacket and tie. He was the first one to notice Rowan standing there, close to the wall. Listening. He spoke like he was in charge of them, their supervisor, maybe. “Hey, let’s keep it together for the family.”

“We all have families,” the woman said. “Our families are the ones that have to deal with the consequences. It’s gonna take months to get all the reports he screwed with sorted out.”

“Janet,” Black Tie said. His voice became stern. “Remember what we’re here for.”

When they walked into the main sanctuary, there were flowers on the casket. And the muttering continued. Who had bought the flowers? Didn’t the guy screw over his whole family? Didn’t he get arrested two weeks ago? Didn’t the guy basically kill himself from stress?

The whispers had made Rowan’s mother lock and unlock her jaw, trying not to flinch as the parade marched past the corpse without stopping. She wouldn’t let them see her squirm. Rowan watched her, standing there, with her shoulders back and her eyes dry. She was Andrew Harding’s wife, and they would look her in the eyes. They would show respect to Andrew. They could lie for an hour, and pay their respects. Not for his sake, but for her family.

As she lay in this field, head tucked in her sweatshirt, Rowan started thinking about what she should have said, a year ago. At the time, the only thing she knew to do was cry and put her hand in her father’s limp, cold fingers, and then yank them back the instant she felt his rubbery flesh.

But if she hadn’t been so busy crying, she could have stopped them. She could have told a lie, and said that none of it was true. That her father had been a good and honest man, and that



they shouldn't hate him. And she could have also told the truth, that they should stop disrespecting her mother. If she had just said the right thing.

And she didn't know if it was a lie, but she would have told them that there was no way he'd died from stress. Even if he was guilty, he would have gone to jail instead of dying. He would have done that for them.

He was her dad. He'd danced with her in the kitchen and made her pancakes on Sunday mornings. He'd taken work calls, even on the weekends, in order to take care of his kids. He'd picked her up on his shoulders and carried her around the house, ducking and dodging the ceiling fans. He'd stayed up late every night and stood on the porch outside of Rowan's bedroom window, keeping watch over their neighborhood. He'd lay on his back in the front yard, Rowan on his left and Finn on his right, and he'd shown them all the constellations he'd learned as an Eagle scout.

Rowan pulled her head out of the sweatshirt to look up at them. The night sky above her was clear, clearer than it had ever been in Jackson. She could see thousands of stars dotting the sky above her. There was the hydra, the lion, and Orion's belt. There was Virgo, who had once been a goddess, now trapped in the stars. Where was Taurus? That was her dad's star sign.

"And that, kids, is why your mother and I get along so well. At least, that's what she said when we started dating."

"Taurus," Rowan said aloud, turning her head to look for it. She didn't know which dots in the sky made the cow, but she knew it was up there. She sat up to look around better. And then, still not able to find it, she stood up on top of the hill and spun slowly around to try to find the dots she wanted to connect.

And then, she realized it had been another lie.

The stars hadn't decided anything. Not about how her momma and daddy would get along. Because in the end, they hadn't. They had ended in screaming.

Rowan was so tired. She would be more surprised, at this point, if anyone told her the truth. But it felt kinder that they hadn't. A ten-year-old needs something to believe in. She knew that now, with her chest feeling hollow and scooped out. Her emptiness felt exposed on the top of the hill. Like a shell without the turtle.

The wind rushed around her, carrying the lowing of the cows towards her, and she felt so stupidly small spinning on that hilltop. She stopped, looking out at the fields, and the wind almost immediately lifted her curls and tossed them into her face. Her hollowness filled up with frustration quickly. Rowan growled and pushed it back for the hundredth time today, pissed that her mother would never let her cut it.

"It looks just like mine did when I was a kid. Don't cut it, Sweetie," Rowan's mother would say, hands running through her curls. "In high school, I cut mine and bleached it because your dad liked blondes. I've always regretted it."

Momma's roots had grown out since they moved to Winona, and Rowan had liked to see their little bits of matching brown hair. She wondered if her mother's hair would curl once all the blonde was gone out of it. But Rowan knew very little about what had happened on her mother's Jackson salon trips. All she knew was that now when she was exhausted at the end of the week and collapsed on the couch at night, the last thing her momma was worried about was her hair.

She deserved to take care of her hair. Rowan wondered if the bags under her own eyes would match her mom's after being out so late tonight. Would both of their faces be gray when she got back home?

She didn't even know if her mom could stay up this late to wait for her. She could imagine her doing it while they were living in Jackson. But it was hard to imagine her withered and exhausted body staying awake and her eyes that were always drooping staying open. Something about that felt unfair.

A mom should have enough energy to look for her child. A mom shouldn't have to waitress and go to night school and come back to Nana screaming at her. Or to her kids getting expelled from school. Her momma was too tired for this. And yet, Rowan felt it in her chest. She believed her momma was awake right now. And she had to be worried, too.

The tension in Rowan's chest started to release. She had almost been asleep on her feet a few hours ago, and now, even the cold couldn't keep her eyes open. They were closing, slowly. She sat facing away from the wind, and tucked her hands into her armpits. They were cold, again. They felt more and more dead by the minute.

Rowan worked her hands, rubbing them on each other and on her sweatshirt to warm them up. She rubbed her arms, her legs. She rubbed her feet and between her toes. She was still alive. She just had to believe it. She had to do something about it. She filled her lungs with air and then ran, practically tumbling, down the hill. When she reached the bottom, she decided to do a lap around the bottom, just to keep her blood hot.

But as she worked to warm up, she saw something on the back side of the hill. A large black shadowy blob. After squinting at it for a second, and slowing to a jog, she made out the shape of Finn's backpack sitting at the bottom of the hill, tucked into the grass.

Rowan rushed to it and dropped to her knees, tearing open the zippers in a flash. She turned the backpack upside down, shaking its contents into the grass: a coat, three Honey Buns,

her favorite flashlight, and a note from Finn. Rowan gathered it all up and then turned on the flashlight, a small turquoise thing with stars all over the handle. She pointed it at the note.

Hey Ro Ro,

I don't know if you're going to find this or not, but I really hope you come here. It's been about an hour since you ran off, and I know you're scared to come home, but I promise it won't be that bad. We can tell Mom whatever you want to. Just come home. Nana is calling everyone in the whole town to try to find you. Everyone's out looking for you, but she wants me to stay at home in case you come back. The principal told her what happened and she said she's going to get Bradley strung up by his toes. Just come home, kiddo.

-Finn

Rowan laughed. Of course, Finn knew she would come here. She clicked the flashlight off, and then as quickly as she could, tried to shove herself into the coat. It was her big puffy white one that she wore in the winter and it would be so warm. But the arms of the sweatshirt caught and tangled inside of the arms of the coat. The extra feet of fabric wouldn't sit properly inside. She untangled herself from the coat and then hesitated.

"Bye, sweatshirt," she said as she pulled it off. She pulled on the coat, finally a properly-fitting jacket. It was thermally insulated, too.

The XXL Vanderbilt sweatshirt looked up at her from the grass. It was absolutely filthy, covered in dirt and blood. It probably belonged in the garbage, now. But Rowan carefully folded it up anyway, blood-side in, and tucked it into the backpack.

She unwrapped one of the Honey Buns, and had just shoved half of it into her cheeks when she heard a car on a gravel driveway. It grumbled in the distance, and Rowan swallowed

the sticky snack cake quickly. The Merriwethers were home. She heard their car doors slam and knew they would be back in the house.

She needed to make a decision. The field wasn't so scary anymore, with her flashlight. There was no reason she couldn't stay out here just a little longer. Maybe tomorrow she could wake up, make her way out of town, and never have to talk to anyone about Bradley White ever again.

But... Finn had told her to come home. Nana, Momma, and everyone else in town were all looking for her. And she didn't feel like not talking about it anymore. She wanted to go home and see her momma. She didn't want to run anymore.

She didn't want to get the Merriwethers involved, either, though. They didn't deserve to drive her home in the middle of the night. They were just a nice, normal family.

As she considered how to get home without the Merriwether's help, Rowan read Finn's note a few more times. Then, she saw something else on the back of Finn's note. She flipped the page over and she gasped. How did he *always* know?

Finn had drawn her a map home.

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Lily Merriwether's bike was shorter than Rowan would like it to be and pinker too. But it leaned upright against the side of their shed, ready to be ridden. Rowan perched on the seat, putting her feet up on the spiky plastic pedals. The blisters on her toes made her wince.

Rowan scanned the surrounding area, and then the back porch of the house. Sitting next to the back door was a pair of pink light-up tennis shoes that didn't light up anymore. Rowan grabbed Lily's shoes from the porch and crammed her bare feet into them, biting her own tongue as her skin dragged on their fabric. Then she waddled back to the bike, pushing it through the

yard and to the Merriwethers' driveway. At the end of the drive, she bounced the tires up onto the asphalt road and hopped up onto the seat, only taking a second to look back at the house. She hoped the Merriwethers slept well tonight. And then, she turned back to the road.

If Finn could make this ride with her on the pegs, Rowan could pedal herself home tonight. She pulled out the map, clicked on her flashlight, and made sure her bike was pointed in the right direction. She would be going the opposite direction of the highway this time, down some quieter roads to get home.

Rowan clicked off her flashlight, zipped it back into the backpack, and put her foot up to pedal the bike. She whispered a promise to return Lily's bike and then pedaled down the road.

It was even colder on the bike than it had been on the hill. Rowan's hands were frigid as she gripped Lily's plastic covers on her handlebars. Glittery pink tassels blew from the end of each one. But the wide seat on the bike was nicer than Finn's. More comfortable. She practically cruised down the street to the stop sign, where she stopped, pulled out the map, and then kept going.

The night air was still and the sky was clear. For a long time, Rowan rode under starlight, only passing beneath a street light every few minutes. But the dark wasn't as scary anymore. The freedom of the bicycle outweighed the deadness of the street. Rowan twirled her hand through the glittery streamers on the bicycle handles and they crinkled slightly.

"Maybe I'll wait to return you until the afternoon," Rowan said.

Wobbling, she realized how out of practice she had gotten, just riding on Finn's pegs all the time. Momma said she couldn't replace Rowan's old one until she was done with night school. Rowan hoped that would happen before she forgot how to ride. Or maybe she'd just have

to ride Finn's, eventually. She pushed each pedal hard, up and down, and felt her knees going higher than they should have on Lily's bike.

The cracked and bumpy streets gradually became smoother. Another turn, and then one more, and the road became better lit, too. Soon, with a little more practice and better asphalt, she was sailing down the road, practically flying.

Rowan stood up the pedals, hands still on the handlebars, trying to remember how to balance. Finn had taught her how to ride with no hands. She wanted to stretch her legs, balance on the pedals, and fling out her arms the way she used to. She had learned to do it when she was six and could always impress her classmates. Even Finn had been impressed.

Or had it been Finn who'd taught her?

She couldn't remember. Who taught her to ride a bike with no handlebars? She knew she had learned from someone. It must have been Finn. But she also couldn't remember learning to ride the bike in the first place.

Who taught her to do that?

At some point, she had her own bike. Smaller than this. And purple. There were training wheels on it and there was a bell she could ring. Who had taught her how to ride that one? She knew someone must have, and someone must have taken the training wheels off.

She could imagine that it was Finn. Pulling off the training wheels, telling her she had to learn to keep up. She could almost feel the shimmer of asphalt from a hot summer day and could remember the million times she'd chased him. He always rode like a bat out of hell. Maybe it had been on one of those afternoons out in front of their house, huffing and puffing behind Finn and the neighborhood boys. Maybe he'd finally decided to teach her, just so she could keep up better. She could picture his face in front of the bike, cheering her on. She could imagine his

hands behind her, holding the seat to steady her. She watched him run next to her as the bike glided forward for the first time. It must have been him, at some point.

But no, if he had taught her, he would have brought it up. Rubbed it in a little more. Especially once she got cool enough to ride without handlebars.

It was her daddy. It had to be. Maybe he had come home from work early that day on a hot afternoon. She could imagine him sweating into his collared work shirt, tie loosened, but standing out in the heat anyway. He was telling her to be brave and that he wouldn't let go of her. She could imagine him strapping on her helmet, shoving it down over her sweaty curls. The buckle always pinched a little when he put it on her. And then, with her daddy right there next to her, the bike would start to cruise forward and she would feel safe, right up until she turned around to look at him. She could see his face far behind her after he let go and let her roll down the street on her own. She could almost hear the pride in his voice saying, "Good job, kiddo!" He waved at her as she went.

Rowan shook her head. She was pushing one foot in front of the other, and soon she would be getting back home. Maybe Finn could tell her once she got there. He would remember.

More and more streetlights passed above Rowan and her pink bike. The stars overhead seemed to dim as she sped beneath them. But the light on the road allowed her to see the neighborhood around her more. And it did seem more like a neighborhood, now. Instead of one or two houses on a street, there were soon three, four, five, with smaller and smaller yards. They seemed friendlier with each other, in some ways. More like Jackson. And the lights between them helped everything to feel friendlier too. Rowan stopped just one more time to look at her map under a street light. She was about a quarter of the way there. And almost to the school. She would have to pedal harder to get home anytime soon.



There may have been a faster way, but if there was, Finn hadn't drawn it. Maybe he didn't know it. The only way he knew to get to the Merriwether's house was from the school, the biggest landmark this whole town had. Rowan recognized the street when she turned onto it and knew that she was close. Soon she was riding past the chain-link fence, the playground, the line of buses.

The massive concrete building loomed out of the darkness. It was bigger than nearly any other building in town. There were multiple wings, all built out of the same gray stone. She had ridden up to the back side of the school, where she could see the door she had run out of earlier today, when she ran from the principal's office. Then the dumpster where Finn had fought Bradley's friends.

Rowan stopped her bike in the middle of the road and looked at the Winona Public School building. The more she looked at it, the more it shrank. It seemed small with all of the lights off and the parking lot empty. It really was just a school building in a tiny town.

Rowan could see her mother's face, just a foot away from her own, listening with her eyebrows furrowed. The bags under her eyes, the wrinkles on her forehead. She could see her mother running her hands through her hair. And asking her if she was okay. Holding her.

Rowan's throat felt tight. She pushed herself forward a step or two, and then pedaled down the street, down the length of the school. Rather than coasting, she started pushing hard, using the muscles in her calves to propel herself forward. She rounded the corner to the front of the school, where she saw the grand entrance with its long overhanging awning. In front, a flag pole, with an American flag blowing backwards in the breeze. The rope it hung from whipped back and forth in the wind, making a clanking sound as it repeatedly hit the pole. Rowan took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

She remembered blonde hair. It had to have been there when the training wheels got taken off. Because there was no way her mother would allow her to ride off into the streets of Jackson without at least watching. Without keeping an eye on her.

The image of her mother with a screwdriver in hand, taking out the fasteners for the training wheels appeared. Behind Rowan's eyes, she could see the blonde hair, the black tire lines on her mother's hands. She was sitting on their driveway, with her hair and makeup done, but with the tool kit out and dirt on her green pants.

Had she done that?

She must have. Because Rowan could hear her, out of sight, but still close by. She was saying, "Go, baby! Be safe! Keep your hands on the handlebars! Don't stop pedaling! Watch out, Finn! There's a car coming!"

Finn's hands were on the bike's seat, and she felt them slowly let go. And then she was sailing, sailing, sailing down the road. He was cheering for her, whooping and hollering and making enough noise to fill the whole neighborhood. Because she was so grown up and riding all on her own.

Her dad wasn't there. Where was he?

Rowan hadn't noticed that he wasn't there, before. But now, slowing for just enough time to make a left-hand turn away from the school, she realized that he must have been at work. Or on a work call. He always had a lot of those. And even when he wasn't on a call or at work, he always seemed so busy during the day. The only time he was still was at night, standing on the front porch, watching the neighborhood while Rowan slept.

Until the night he was arrested.

It had been windy that night, too. And Rowan had been standing at her dad's usual post on their front porch. Every night, long past her bedtime, he stood outside. Emailing from his phone, smoking in the one spot the living room windows couldn't see, looking out at the front lawn of the house that Rowan thought they owned. But that day, his face was more worried than it should have been. His eyes were dark and darted around the room every time Rowan had looked at him. All through dinner, he had been getting quieter and quieter, receding into himself, as his phone continuously buzzed. And then he'd excused himself out to the front porch, where he paced until the police sirens arrived.

On a normal day, it was so comforting that he stood out there, protecting Rowan's window. He seemed like a watchman, always looking out for her. It was like a nightlight. God, she was such a baby back then. But she always knew she was safe if her dad was awake. Until that night, when his pacing had kept Rowan awake all night to see him in handcuffs.

While their momma went to the police station to bring him home, Rowan had gone into her parents' bedroom and found the sweatshirt crumpled on the floor. Cigarettes. Cologne. She had put it on and stood on the front porch, watching for them until she fell asleep still sitting outside. Finn had brought her inside a little later.

Rowan had her eyes open, but didn't see the road. She pedaled harder.

Her dad was back within a day, and once he was back, he was never still day or night. He and Rowan's mom were arguing in the living room in minutes. He and his lawyer were arguing in the living room within twenty-four hours. Some of his coworkers soon followed. It seemed like there was no end to the people who were coming over to shout at Rowan's dad.

He shouted right back at them. Her dad had been a quiet man, until he was arrested. And then, once he got back, he was practically thundering through the house. He paced when he

wasn't smoking and smoked when he wasn't pacing, and he didn't hide it from their mother. He even smoked in the house. It seemed like he didn't have any secrets left, anymore.

And then, someone came over who didn't shout. It was a woman from his firm. Janet from the funeral. Wearing a black pencil skirt and a white blouse. She stood on the porch with him, and hissed at him, instead. She spun around and left as quickly as she'd arrived, but by the time she was gone, Rowan's father had changed. His hands were steadier. He went quiet again.

"They have evidence," he said to Rowan's momma. "They compared the reports I sent to the Department of Labor to the actual expense reports. They know I altered them."

"Andrew..."

"I'm going to jail, Emily."

The next night, he had stood still again at his normal place on the front porch.

Rowan was drifting on the bike now, getting nearer to the edge of the road than the center of it. She pulled herself back towards the middle and put all of the muscles in her leg into it, her back bending forward over the handlebars. The road was getting rougher now, turning from asphalt into gravel. She would have to get off the bike and push it, soon.

It was getting darker now, the farther she got away from the school. Fewer lights, except for the moon. She would have to use her flashlight to see the map again soon. There were hardly any lights near Nana's house. But it wasn't just the street that was darker, the sky was darker, too. The space between the stars was pitch black.

Had he looked at them? When he fell on the porch that night, his knees buckling out from under him, had he seen them? Or had he just seen the roof above him or the wood paneling beneath his face?

Had he felt her shaking his shoulders, crying?

She'd been wearing his sweatshirt then, too.

Later, other people would try to explain to her that he'd died in the ambulance. Not on the porch, we promise. No, it was the ambulance, we swear. Even a massive heart attack couldn't make him drop dead that quickly. He'd almost made it to the hospital and just hadn't.

"It's not your fault, Rowan," her mother said, pulling her daughter tighter into her arms. "Your father did this to himself."

They were going to blame him? For killing himself?

No, his heart hadn't killed him. And her mother hadn't killed him. And the police hadn't killed him. And the stress hadn't killed him. Even the porch hadn't killed him.

He'd died alone on that porch, with his daughter standing right next to him.

Rowan felt the weight in her backpack slowing her down, even though it was just two Honey Buns and the sweatshirt, now. She made another turn and realized that she was on Nana's road. She would have to get off and push the bike now.

It was coming. The moment when she had to talk to her momma about Bradley. And she still didn't have any explanation for it. But no matter why it had happened, Rowan knew the stress wouldn't kill her. It wouldn't kill Emily Baker, and it wouldn't kill Rowan Baker, either. It would hurt. Just like it had all day. And maybe her skin would never stop crawling and her body would never stop aching. But Momma, tired as she was, would be able to help her. Even though she'd gotten expelled from school. And even though she wasn't ready to go back. They could survive this, together.

But how to say it? The school had already told her all they knew. But Momma would need to hear her side of things.

She pictured her mother's face, right in front of her. The bagged eyes, the wrinkles, but the slightly upturned mouth. She imagined it lighting up when she first saw Rowan coming down the driveway. She saw it, so relieved that she started crying because Rowan was home. And Rowan could picture her falling asleep on the couch, waking up the next morning, and staying home from work for just a day. She knew Momma would do it if she could. If she asked.

The gravel rumbled against Lily Merriwether's tires, and Rowan's arms were tired. She looked to the sides of the road to see if there was a better place to ride, but all of the ditches and dips in the grass made it impossible. She just had to keep pushing and she would be home. Over the black rock in the gravel, past the raccoon and the storm drain.

She was close. She saw the twenty-three Black-Eyed Susans shaking in the neighbor's yard, welcoming her home. When she saw their dancing, her mind stilled. Her feet paused. It felt like she and the Susans were looking at each other, making eye contact, as they rustled towards her, tossed by every passing breeze.

How to say it?

Rowan crept forward, bike in tow, and bent low to pick one, two, three of the Susans.

It wasn't much. Just a few flowers. The neighbors probably wouldn't even notice that they were missing. But Rowan knew her mother would love them.

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At the end of the road, with three flowers tucked into her waistband under her coat, Rowan leaned Lily Merriwether's bike on her Nana's mailbox. It looked excessively pink against the copper-rusted pole, even in the dark. Bright enough to make Rowan want to return it right away.

Rowan turned towards the gravel driveway and the white house squatting at the end of it. The porch in front of it seemed to yawn open, calling her to step up the stairs between the columns and the picket railings. It was solely lit by moonlight, making the white house ghostly. The windows were dead and empty. Every light in the house was off. Rowan's legs slowed as she got nearer to Nana's house, even though she wanted so badly to rest.

And then, halfway down the driveway, Rowan saw that something was off.

Nana's Buick wasn't in the driveway. Her mom's green minivan wasn't in the driveway.

"Momma?" She called, waiting for an answer. Hoping for a light to flick on. Maybe she had just gone to bed. Maybe she had just been too tired when she got home from work.

"MOMMA!"

Nothing.

For a second, Rowan considered the ridiculous possibility that they had all decided to run away, too. But no, they must have just not heard her. She would walk to the end of the driveway, and open the door to the house, and they would all be there asleep inside.

Rowan's feet, still crammed into Lily Merriwether's shoes, bumped against the bottom of the stairs to the front porch, and she looked up at the house in front of her. Her family was right there. Just three stairs and a few feet away. One porch away. Along with the closed front door.

No, the front door had a note attached to it. A single piece of lined notebook paper folded up and taped next to the handle.

Rowan took a deep breath, out of habit. But then, when she felt the pull on her lungs, she let it go. It was just a porch.

She climbed the steps, pulling herself up by the railing. One, two, three. At the top, she dropped Finn's backpack from her shoulders, where it landed with a loud *thunk* that crushed the

two Honey Buns she still had inside. But she didn't care anymore. Rowan just kept moving forward, her breath still pinching slightly, until she reached the note.

She unfolded the piece of paper on the door and read:

Hey Rowan,

Mom told me to stay here and wait for you to come home, but I can't just sit by and wait anymore. If she and Nana are going to stay out all night looking for you, so am I. If you're here before I get back, stay here! And call Mom!

-Finn

Rowan held the note in her hands like a crushed bird. Her hands cupped around the paper, barely grasping the corners with her fingertips. Gentle. The wind threatened to take it at any moment, but she read it another time, and then one more time, before finally settling into the fact that she was really here by herself.

Alone.

"Really?" she asked the note.

Rowan pulled on the front door knob and found that it opened. First the screen door and then she pushed the wooden one behind it. But when it opened, it only showed the rose-wallpapered and plastic-wrapped living room, huge, empty, and dark. She went inside, turning to take in the empty house. It was the first time she'd ever been inside without anyone else home, and it was eerie. The indentation where the grandfather clock had stood, the rows of pictures peeking from the hallway, even the wallpaper— it all seemed threatening. She didn't even want to go to the bedroom.



She slowly backed out of the living room and back onto the porch, where she pulled the front door shut again. Then she let the screen door slam behind her. She would wait out here until her momma got home. Until they talked.

Rowan turned back around to look at the driveway and keep watch until they came back. Rowan pushed off one shoe, then the other, lowering her bare feet onto the wood. The night air made her wince as she exposed the blisters on her toes. She had forgotten her socks by the Merriwethers' back door, and she wished for them now. It would hurt like hell to put them on, but it would be better than having frozen blisters. And they had really matched her outfit perfectly. Back when she had her T-shirt.

Her breath quickened, and she couldn't sit still. The day had been long, but now that it was coming to an end, she had a jolt of energy run through her, lighting up her brain, her fingers, and her legs. She started pacing up and down the wooden porch in her bare feet.

“Hey, Momma... sorry I was gone all day. But I need to tell you about what happened. From my side. Well, wait, hold on, I brought these for you, first.”

Rowan stopped at the corner, pulled the three Black-Eyed Susans out of her waistband, and looked at them between her palms. They were a bit more battered than they had been before. She pulled their petals gently, just enough to spread them out without breaking them. The leaves she carefully extended with just the tip of her index finger.

She started counting their petals, bent and otherwise. Her fingertip just barely touched each one.

“Hey, Momma. I brought these for you. I know I was gone all day, but... I thought you would like them... Yes, I missed you too, a lot. I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have run away.”

The Susans nodded at her.

“Yes, I’m okay. I’m not hurt or anything. But I... well, I need to talk to you about something.”

A leaf fell off a stem.

Rowan took another breath, repositioned the flowers in her hands, and said to them, “Momma, I need to talk to you. See, a lot happened today. I got into a fight. You already probably know I got expelled. But it was for a reason. There’s this boy named Bradley, and he...” Rowan stopped again. Her body shivered.

“This doesn’t sound real, does it?” she asked the flowers.

She looked to her right, at the empty space on the porch next to her. Then towards the night sky up above her.

“What do you think, daddy?” she asked. “How do you think I should say it?”

The night stayed still and quiet. Rowan pinched the hem of her coat between her thumb and pointer finger, the black-eyeds tucked between her palm and the rest of her fingers.

“Nothing, huh?”

“You know... I’m never going to talk to you again,” Rowan said to the porch. She caught her breath at the last word, as a force of habit. But when nothing happened, she breathed out again. Her body relaxed a little more now, and her stomach felt normal for the first time since this afternoon.

“Daddy...” she said again, a little louder this time. Rowan waited again, listening. Her hair blew back from her face.

“Well, I’m going to do this. I’m going to tell Mom. I’m going to tell her about Bradley White!” Rowan’s voice rose and squeaked on his last name. She cleared her throat and started again, “I’m going to tell her about Bradley! And I’m going to tell her that we got expelled, too!”

Rowan's hands curled into fists. Her eyes were stinging now, and she squeezed her hands tight enough to pinch. "I punched a thirteen-year-old boy in the eye today, dad! Your little girl, your little kiddo! I punched him! What are you going to do about it? Come on, daddy! I heard you earlier! You should be here when I need you! Not just when you want to be!" Rowan shouted. "You should have been here! You should *be here!*"

And then she screamed again, one more time like she had at Bradley. But less of a screech and more like a howl. It came from her exhausted lungs and heart, her tired legs and feet, and the haunting pressure on her chest and back.

The neighbors must have heard her.

As the echo of the sound faded away, Rowan's legs wobbled beneath her, and then gave out. She was down on her knees, on the front porch, her head and throat both aching from her own voice. She pulled herself to the front steps of the house and leaned her head against the pole to the railing, staying there until the throbbing in her temples started to fade.

When her head started to clear, and her eyes were back open, Rowan felt how still the night was. It invited her to rest, for a minute. To just let herself drift off right here. But she still had more to say before she slept.

"Daddy... I'm not going to talk to you anymore. You're gone. And it's not fair. But I'm going to talk to momma. And I'm going to tell her, from my side, everything that happened today. I don't know how much she's going to believe. No one believes us anymore. But I'm going to tell her anyway. And I'm going to tell her that I was lost all day today and that I ran away because I was scared."

"You weren't here. I was all alone. And I know I cried a lot, but I punched Bradley White! I'm going to tell her that I was brave, no matter what you think!"

The hammering in Rowan's chest began to steady as she sat in silence. It was like she'd been carrying a weight on her shoulders ever since they moved to Winona. Like a backpack full of gravel. But it had all been emptied now, every last bit of it. And now, it was time to start being honest. Rowan wanted to be known for telling the truth. Not for being the daughter of Andrew Harding.

Her thoughts felt clear, now. She knew she should rest. She laid her head against the pole of the porch's railing one more time, her eyes feeling heavy again. Rowan stretched her legs down the steps, letting her feet rock back and forth before settling them. Her shoulders released their tension, and her knees relaxed for the first time in hours. Her eyelids drifted over her eyes as she waited, starting to stay closed more often than they were open.

There was a rumbling at the end of the driveway. Rowan's eyelids snapped open to see the headlights of her mom's sedan.

Shit, the flowers. Rowan uncurled her fist, looking at the now-slightly-battered stems in her hand. She straightened out the stems in her hand again, trying to flatten them out where she had squeezed them too tight. They didn't deserve to be hurt like that. But her momma was coming. And maybe, if Momma put them in some water, they would perk back up.

Rowan Mae Baker held the Black-Eyed Susans close against her chest, and as her mom's car came down the driveway, she hoped she would be brave enough for what came next.



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