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March

The day Audrey took a loaf of homemade rosemary-potato bread to Cora Jean Hall was the day the fog broke and made way for spring. Audrey threw open the curtains closest to the dying woman's bedside, glad for the sunshine after months of gray light.

Audrey moved quietly down the hall into the one-man kitchen, where she sliced the bread into toast, brewed tea, then leaned out of the cramped space to offer some to Cora Jean's husband, Harlan. He refused her without thanks and without looking up from his forceful tinkering with an old two-way radio. Over the past month, his collection of CBs and receivers had overtaken the small living room. His grieving had started long ago and was presently in the angry stage. Clearly, he loved his wife. The retired pharmacist dispensed her medications with faithful precision but didn't seem to know what else to do. If not for the radios, Audrey believed, he might have wandered the house helplessly and transformed from smoldering to explosive.

As Audrey arranged the snack on a tray, one of her earrings slipped out of her lobe and clattered onto a saucer, just missing the hot tea. She rarely wore this pair because one or the other was always falling out, but Cora Jean liked the dangling hearts with a rose in the middle of each. The inexpensive jewelry had been a gift to the women of the church on Mother's Day last year.

She put the earring back in her ear, then carried the tray to Cora Jean's room, settled onto an old dining room chair by the bed, and steered their conversation toward happy topics.

Cora Jean was dying of pancreatic cancer, the cancer best known for being unsurvivable. Audrey sat with the woman in the late stages of her illness for many reasons: because she believed that people who suffered shouldn't be left alone; because she was a pastor's wife and embraced this privilege that came with the role; because Cora Jean reminded Audrey of her own beloved mother.

She also went to the woman's home because she couldn't *not* go. In the most physical, literal sense, Audrey was regularly guided there, directed by an unseen arm, weighty and warm, that encircled her shoulders and turned her body toward the Halls' house every week or so. A voice audible only to her own ears would whisper *Please don't leave me alone today*. It was no pitiful sound, and Audrey never resented it, though from time to time it surprised her. In these moments she thought, though she had never dared to try it, that if she applied her foot to the gas pedal and took her hands off the wheel, her car would take her wherever God wanted her to be.

This five-years familiar experience had not always involved Cora Jean, but others like her, so Audrey had long since stopped questioning how it happened. The why of it was clear enough: Audrey was called by God to be a comforter, and she was glad for the job.

Audrey had a knack for helping people in any circumstance to look toward the brightness of life—not the silver lining of their own dark cloud, which often didn't exist—but to the Light of the World, which could be seen by anyone willing to look for it. In Cora Jean's case this meant not dwelling too long on the details of her prognosis, but in reading aloud beautiful, hopeful, complex poetry, especially the Psalms and the Brownings and Franz Wright. It meant watering the plants (which Harlan ignored) and offering to warm a meal for him before she left. It meant giving candid answers to Cora Jean's many-layered questions about Audrey's personal faith—in particular, about sin and forgiveness and justice.

And about the problem of so much suffering in a world governed by a “good” God. Cora Jean seemed preoccupied with this particular question, and her focus seemed to be connected to the yellowed family portrait hanging on the wall opposite the bed.

There were two brunette girls in the thirty-year-old picture. Audrey judged the age by Cora Jean's bug-eyed plastic-framed glasses, Harlan's rust-colored corduroy blazer, and the children's Dorothy Hamill hairstyles. Audrey had a similarly aged childhood portrait of herself with her parents. She guessed the daughters to be

nine, maybe ten, and they appeared to be twins, though one of them was considerably chubbier than the other.

A pendant on a large-link silver chain hung from the upper left corner of the cheap wood frame. The pendant was also silver, crudely hammered into a flat circle, like a washer, that framed a small translucent rock. Audrey suspected it to be an uncut diamond.

It would be rude to ask whether she was right about the stone, but on the day the fog broke and the sun brought a wispy smile to Cora Jean's pale face, Audrey decided to ask about the portrait she often stared at.

Audrey lifted her teacup to her lips and blew off the steam. "Tell me about your family," she said gently, indicating the picture with her eyes.

Cora Jean's smile crumpled, and the soft wrinkles of her skin became a riverbed for tears.

Audrey wished she hadn't said anything. Meaning to apologize for having heaped some kind of emotional ache on top of the cancer's pain, she returned her sloshing teacup to the tray, then reached out and placed her hands on top of Cora Jean's, which were clutching the sheets.

That was the second unfortunate choice Audrey made that day, with a third yet to occur before the sun set. The woman's sorrow—if it could be thought of as something chemical—entered Audrey's fingertips, burning the pads of her fingers, the joints of her knuckles, her wrists. The flaming liquid pain seeped up her arms,

searing as it went: elbows, shoulders, collarbone. And then the poison found her spine, an aqueduct that delivered breathtaking hurt to every nerve in Audrey's body. She yelped involuntarily. Here was a sensation that she had never experienced.

She wished that she could save the dying woman from the terror. She also wished that she had never dipped her toe into these hellish waters.

The pain bowed her over Cora Jean's fragile body, a posture at once protective and impotent, and paralyzed Audrey. The women cried together until every last drop of the agony had let itself out of Audrey's eyes.

In time Cora Jean said, "Thank you for understanding" and fell asleep, exhausted.

Audrey, who understood not a bit of what had transpired, said nothing. She tuned the radio to Cora Jean's favorite classical station, then waited, agitated and restless, for the hospice nurse to arrive.

* * *

Audrey stumbled out of the house, forgetting to give Harlan a polite good-bye. She stood on the square front stoop, stunned and spent and a little bit frightened, and leaned against the closed screen door for a long minute. She fiddled absentmindedly with one of her rose-in-a-heart earrings.

She began to wonder if she wasn't as well-suited for her divine calling as she had once thought. Surely sitting with a person through suffering didn't mean sharing the pain like *that*, experiencing it firsthand. How had it happened? She wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything except that she would prefer to avoid that kind of intensity in the future. She would do what she was able to do, and there was no point in feeling guilty about her shortcomings, if guilt was the right name for this emotion.

Audrey sighed and finally walked off the Halls' stoop and across the lawn. Cora Jean's windows weren't the only ones opened that day. Because the fog was gone, others in the working-class neighborhood had raised sashes to lure cleansing breezes into their homes. This is what Audrey would later blame for her third poor choice of the day.

Wide oaks offered shade on both sides of the street. The separation from the sun would be a gift from God come summertime, when the air was too tired to stir even a single leaf in any of the towering eucalyptus trees.

The fleeting question of whether Cora Jean would be alive then passed through Audrey's mind. She kicked it out of her consciousness, still feeling raw and drained. She moved toward her car, wanting to go home and find answers in her sleep.

When she stepped off the curb to round her parked car and climb into the driver's seat, she felt the atmosphere move. Invisible but solid, thick air stepped in front of her like a large man who intended to hijack her car or snatch her purse. Her

keys, hanging from her fingertips, jangled as if she'd struck something. She steadied herself with one hand on the hood of the car, bracing her surprise. She had never experienced this "leading," as she called it, so close to another event. The effects would either pass shortly or lead her onward.

Heat like a strong arm snaked across the back of her shoulders. Audrey stepped forward to get out from under the weight. The move was reflexive, a whole-body flinch that sent her right into the invisible obstacle again. This time she was met with pressure, square and flaming over her sternum, and a crushing pain went straight to her heart. The grip on her shoulders squeezed, keeping her upright where she couldn't escape the wounding.

The hurt was blunt and weighty, a pestle grinding in a mortar. Audrey's lips parted and flattened, stretching out like a cry, but no sound came out of her mouth. The skin around her nose and eyes bunched up until she couldn't see, but there were no tears. She folded at the waist, her body bending over the car just as she had drooped over Cora Jean. This connection was unwelcome, and Audrey resisted it.

The arm let her sag, all but dropped her, and she lowered her forehead onto the hood. The drill into her heart kept turning, creating a whining noise that grew louder in her own ears until it drowned out everything else on the street. No birds, no cars, no children playing on lawns or in driveways.

And then the violence stopped. The body of heat released her, and Audrey found herself breathing heavily and wondering if anyone had witnessed her bizarre

behavior. Her head pounded, every blood vessel in it taxed as if she'd been wailing for hours. Audrey rested her cheek on the smooth shell of the hood and waited for her heart and lungs to find their rhythms again.

The sound of real sobbing reached her then.

Cora Jean? Audrey jerked off the car, looking, her breathing still deep and quick. The earth tipped, then leveled out again. The muscles at the base of her neck were painful knots.

After three or four seconds she stepped back onto the curb and crossed the grassy easement to the sidewalk. The noise wasn't coming from the Halls' house, but from somewhere down the street. She started walking, hesitant to follow the heartache, unable to do anything else.

The terrible sound pulled her toward one of the neighborhood's nicer homes, a single-story brick house with an attached garage. The cries came from an open window at the front of the house. Audrey stepped off the sidewalk and cut directly across the lawn, getting as close to the window as the bordering juniper hedge allowed. The dirt underfoot was still soft from the rain that had escorted in winter's final batch of fog. A sheer curtain in the window blocked her view of anyone on the other side.

"Hello?" She raised her voice. "Hello? Are you okay?"

Abrupt silence answered her.

"I'm sorry to intrude, but do you need help?"

The house in front of her was as still as her own when her husband and son were out. Audrey waited.

“Are you injured?”

She understood that she might be facing a delicate situation in which her confident desire to help someone could cause more problems than allowing that someone some privacy. But in her view, it was worse to be lonely than to be embarrassed by a good Samaritan—and even worse for her to disobey God’s clear direction—so she decided to persist at least until the person told her to stop.

“Maybe there’s someone I can call for you?” she offered.

“I know how to use a phone.” It was likely that the female speaker was the same one who had been crying. Her *N* sounds were nasal and stuffy. But the tone was far more irritated than grieved. As a pastor’s wife, Audrey understood the fine line between the two emotions.

“Of course you do,” Audrey said gently. “But sometimes it helps to assign tasks to other people. Take a load off your own shoulders.”

At the edge of the elevated windowpane, the curtain flickered.

“You’re trespassing.”

Audrey’s defenses went up. Her compassion had been rejected on many occasions, but never beaten back with accusations.

“That’s true, I am. I’m sorry, but I . . .” She had yet to land on an easy explanation for the experiences that led her to other people. Geoff’s position as a

church leader required that Audrey's choice of words—and confidants—be discreet. Anyone who thought she was outside of God's will, or heretical or occult or misguided or just plain loony, would frown on her husband too. Even so, Audrey believed people deserved simple, no-frills truth. The world was so full of deceptive spin that most days she worried it might gyrate right out of orbit.

“I just sensed you could use a friend right now. My name's Audrey and I go to Grace Springs Church. My husband's the pastor there. Maybe you've heard of it? Doesn't matter, I'm not trying to recruit anyone. Anyway, do you like fresh bread? Geoff and I bake bread as a hobby, to give it away. I'd like to give you a loaf. I have some with me in my car because I was visiting one of your neighbors before I heard you crying. I'm parked right down—”

A door slammed inside the house and the curtain rose, then sank.

Audrey waited for a minute while the juniper leaves tickled the legs of her jeans. Sometimes people came back. Sometimes they wanted relief so badly that they didn't care if it was offered by a total stranger.

But not this time.

Audrey left the yard, returned to the sidewalk, and started walking back toward her car, thinking about the woman inside the house. She passed the mailbox on her left, and her thoughts were interrupted. Her feet took her backward two steps, and she took another look at the side of the black metal receptacle. The name

MANSFIELD was applied to the box with rectangular stickers, black block letters on a gold background.

Mansfield. *As in Jack Mansfield, the church elder?* She glanced at the house number. She'd have to check the church directory. Mrs. Mansfield, Jack's wife, was a math teacher at her son's high school. Ed had her for geometry his sophomore year.

Audrey resumed walking, trying to bring up the woman's face. They'd met once, at a school event. Mrs. Mansfield refused to attend church with Jack, and Audrey had understood this reality to be a tender bruise on the elder's heart, maybe even on his ego.

Julie. Her name was Julie. And their daughter's name was Miralee, which was easier for Audrey to remember because until last week, the start of spring break, her son had dated the girl for a brief time.

If that had been Miralee crying, her refusal to come out was completely understandable. And Audrey was a fool not to have realized where she was. She still wasn't sure if the kids' breakup had been Ed's call or Miralee's. Audrey's nineteen-year-old had been so strangely tight-lipped that she assumed Miralee had broken things off. Secretly, Audrey wasn't sad to see that relationship end, though she hated that Ed was in pain. Now, after being subjected to the sounds of the broken heart in that house, she wondered if her assumptions had been wrong.

The thought passed through her mind that she should go back, knock on the front door like a respectable friend, apologize, and get to the bottom of things. Fix

what Ed had broken, if necessary, though Ed wasn't prone to breaking very many things in life. He was a good boy. A careful boy. Man now.

Audrey looked back at the red brick house.

A flash of light, a phantom sensation of liquid fire tearing through her body, prevented her from returning to the Mansfields' property. She had no desire to press Miralee for details of the heartbreak. Especially not after the girl had refused.

She had done what God asked of her. This excuse propelled her back toward her car, the sunny air rich with the scent of rosemary-potato bread pushing against her face.

Audrey didn't second-guess this decision for three months. In June the Grace Springs Church board, spurred to fury by none other than Jack Mansfield, fired her husband and barred him from seeking another post as pastor.



November

For some sins, there was no atonement. Diane Hall had believed this all of her adult life, and twenty-five years of prison chapel services hadn't altered her perspective. Penance, however, was a different matter. For all sins, punishment was required even when pardon was out of the question. By her own logic, if not by God himself.

This was the truth that had hounded Diane through her years at the women's penitentiary in Central California, where she'd lived as though half dead since she was seventeen, tried and convicted as an adult. It was the truth that prevented her from sleeping through the nights at the halfway house after her release, where she lay awake at age forty-two while her housemates snored and dreamed.

It was the truth that finally kicked her out of bed after midnight one November morning, two months after her prison sentence was completed. She loaded a backpack in the dark and then slinked out the doors onto the streets of freedom, where she would have been lost if not for the guiding compass of penance.

Diane headed home.

On the southbound side of the highway, she stuck out her thumb wondering how hard it would be for an overweight middle-aged woman to get a ride on a road that passed through jail country. Her answer arrived within ten minutes in the shape

of a hairy bass player whose various guitars were stacked high in cases on the backseat.

“How far south you going?” she asked through the open passenger window of his sedan. She estimated him to be half her age.

“All the way to Sin City.”

“I’m not going that far this time,” she said, and when he didn’t ask her for specifics, she didn’t offer.

She threw her few belongings onto the floor under the dash, and driver and passenger didn’t say anything more for quite some time. Apparently he didn’t care that she was from the penitentiary any more than she cared that he might have a harmful bent. Perhaps her past wasn’t outwardly obvious. She didn’t have enough experience yet to know how to assess outsiders’ judgments of her, “outsiders” being anyone who’d never served a sentence. Diane had survived the pitfalls of prison life by learning how to be invisible, a strategy that involved (among other things) feeding her already ample body into largeness. She was smart, wily if necessary. She could outwit a kid musician if she could outwit anybody.

The fog rolled in, a familiar visitor that would stay for most of the cold season. Diane left the window cracked open at the top and closed her eyes, let the fog blow in and caress her cheeks. The sensation reminded her of her mother’s touch, a gesture so long forgotten that tears pooled like memories behind her lids.

Eventually her driver tried to make small talk, and she tried to be polite.

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"Home."

"And that'd be?"

"About an hour more."

"Cornucopia, is it? That's a nice town."

"A small town."

"Not the smallest in these parts."

"Too small for me."

He glanced at her pack, which contained a clean pair of jeans, a flannel shirt, underwear, socks, a new bar of soap, toothpaste, Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, and four hundred dollars cash, her meager savings from two months' work plus what was left over from her release fund. "You travel light," he observed.

"It was a short trip." Metaphorically speaking. She had been willing to stay behind bars for another twenty-five years. For life. But she had not been so lucky.

"You play guitar?"

"Since before I could walk. My older brother taught me."

"The two of you are close?"

He shrugged. "I got better at it than him. You know how that goes."

Diane guessed she did, but not in the way he meant. "I never had a brother," she said. They traveled another mile before she added, "It's probably a good idea to steer clear of jealous siblings."

The kid—Diane could hardly think of him as a man in spite of all the hair on his arms and face—laughed as if they shared some inside joke. “You sound like my mom. But my brother’s got his own thing going, you know? He’ll find what makes him happy, and then we’ll be okay.”

Diane stared at him, disbelieving that *her* mother’s very words from decades ago were pouring almost verbatim from this boy’s mouth. Her mother had been so terribly wrong.

But he rambled on, and Diane didn’t have to say anything else. Eventually she collected the backpack.

“Just drop me at the next off-ramp,” she said.

“Take you into town?”

“No need. No one’s up waiting for me. I mean at this hour.”

It was a little before three when she thanked him and wished him good luck with the guitar gig and slammed the car door, then set out eastward for the city limits. She walked just off the road’s shoulder through darkness, remembering the terrain by scent rather than sight. She passed harvested fields that smelled like dry grass. The inseam of her jeans made a sound like a zipper as she walked, her heavy thighs brushing together.

Diane lifted her chin and imagined she could see the distant ridges of the Sierra Nevada, which rose gently from the horizon like the rim of a shallow bowl. The Great Central Valley was a bowl, in fact, and the fog its favorite winter stew. She

wished for sunrise to come early over the mountaintops. She wanted to see them, needed proof that they were unchanging and reliable. Because everything else, including what was planted in these fields and who lived in her childhood home today, was probably different now.

The nighttime chill passed through her cotton sweater and the thin T-shirt underneath it. It was time to purchase a real jacket. On the other hand, she thought, people like her didn't deserve warmth. And she was fat enough now that she practically carried her own insulation. She shouldn't need more.

Six miles passed under her feet like a dream. Fog followed her, a ghost of the past, nudging her onward and gathering density.

By the time she arrived in town, the damp had penetrated her hair and her clothing. A streetlight allowed her to catch her reflection in the plate glass window of the old battery shop. Her appearance was limp and discouraged. Just what had she expected to do when she got here?

You're crazy, and you look like it too.

Diane turned away from her reflection and stepped out of the spotlight.

Crazy's nothing. Crazy is all that's keeping me going right now.

You can always go back. The other women won't even know you were gone.

The six-mile walk back to the highway was too great a distance to face. She hesitated. The sound of a pattering engine caught her attention, and she turned her

head as a slow-moving motor scooter passed her, cautiously heading east like Diane, its light-colored frame a skeleton animating the fog.

The bike passed through the intersection, and the shallow runoff drain that carried water from the blacktop into the street sewers under the sidewalk caused the scooter to bounce once. An object flew into the air like a flea off a dog, then hit the street inaudibly under the noise of the engine and separated into two pieces.

“Hey,” Diane said, barely able to hear herself. Then, embarrassed by her own reticence, she said more loudly, “Hey!”

The driver kept going, oblivious or uncaring.

Diane went into the street to see what the object was. She saw it glinting in the gutter inches from a storm drain. A cell phone.

Several of the women in the halfway house had these phones, had spent a fair chunk of their release funds on the technology, which Diane thought was an impressive but unnecessary invention. Why would anyone want to be at the constant beck and call of the telephone? Of course, that was a dumb question for someone like her to ask, someone who had no one to call.

Diane picked up the two pieces and turned the parts around in her hands, guessing how they might fit together. They snapped into place.

She would have to figure out how to use the thing, with its shiny black face and minimalist buttons and icons that everyone else seemed to understand. No—she was smart. She could figure this out if the owner didn't come back looking for it. If

he did, she'd give it up. The thing looked expensive, and there was no point in going back to jail over something as silly as a ball and chain.

That accidental joke cheered her up a little. She decided not to hike back to the highway. She let her backpack fall forward across her stocky body and put the phone into the small zippered pocket on the front.

She kept walking in the same direction, retracing the steps she had taken nearly every day of her life as a child, with Donna by her side. Donna, skipping instead of walking home from school or from church or the grocery store. Home was a straight shot down Main Street from nearly anywhere in town. In her mind Diane heard the *skiff scuff, skiff scuff, skiff scuff* of Donna's feet next to her gliding over the sidewalk. Her momentary cheer vanished. She covered her cold ears with her hands.

Almost two hours after leaving the bass player's car, she found herself on the corner of Main and Sunflower, standing in front of the old drugstore her parents once owned, stunned. She'd expected anything but lights on within. The exterior had been painted red, and the tiny scalloped awning looked blue in this light, with a white stripe on the curving edges. Simple curtains had been drawn back to the edges of the French-paned bay windows, one on each side of the inset door. Like a child, Diane placed both hands on the glass and gawked.

It was a bakery now, with sloping racks half filled with fresh bread where the shelved cigarette boxes used to be, and glass display cases and café tables rather than

rows of shampoo and aspirin and prepackaged snack foods. Blackboards with colorful chalk lists of breads instead of advertisements for cosmetics covered the walls. Only the wood floors were the same.

A man about Diane's age emerged from the storeroom—probably a kitchen now. He carried a large baking sheet loaded with oversized muffins and slid this into one of the glass cases next to a tray of bagels. His lips were pursed to whistle a tune she couldn't hear.

He straightened and wiped his hands on the white cloth tucked into his jeans. He lifted his head, noticed her.

Diane jerked back. She'd left handprints on the window. The man glanced at the large digital clock hanging over the kitchen doorway—4:59—and came around the display cases toward the door. She turned away and walked as fast as she could, squaring her load on her back. Behind her she heard the tumbling sound of a lock being turned, and then the jingle of a tiny bell on an opening door.

“You want to come in?”

The invitation startled her so much that she stopped and turned around. She wanted nothing more than to go in, except perhaps *never* to go in. Why would he allow it? He leaned out over the sidewalk, bracing the door.

“Y-You're open?” she asked.

“Open due to fog,” the man said, eyeing her lightweight clothing. “Weather’s nicer inside.” He had the gentle look of a harmless man who smiled a lot and liked to eat a little more than he ought to. “Hungry? The muffins are still hot.”

Do I look hungry? Are you one of those people who thinks fat girls are always hungry?

She was ravenous. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast the day before.

Diane shifted her weight to one foot and glanced back into the bright room that was golden and warm.

“I can bring one out to you if you’d rather,” he offered.

It could be no more dangerous inside than it was out here. And going in would put her that much closer to where she wanted to be anyway. She nodded her thanks without looking at him and walked back to the bakery, then entered, slipping her backpack off her shoulder.

The sweet scent of expanding yeast and crisping crusts caused her to sigh. Goose bumps rippled down her arms and legs, receiving the dry warmth of the room. He let the door fall closed without locking it again and pulled out a chair for her.

No one had ever pulled out a chair for Diane Hall.

She sat slowly, wondering, keeping her eyes averted so he wouldn’t see her blush.

“Coffee’s not on yet,” he said, going back around the case. “But my wife should be here any minute. She’ll have my hide if I try to work that thing.” He

nodded to an espresso machine at the other end of the counter while placing one of the muffins in a wicker basket lined with waxed paper. He brought it back to Diane's table and set it in front of her. "You want an orange juice or something?"

His kindness made Diane wary.

"Would water be okay?" she said.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Can't think of why not."

Which made her feel a little stupid, though she doubted he meant to. While he went to get a glass, she leaned over the smell of pumpkin pie spices and candied pecans that floated up from her unexpected breakfast. The soft cake warmed her fingers when she picked it up. She bit into the muffin's crisp-soft mushroom top. There was no food like this in prison. Maybe not in the entire world.

He set the glass of water next to her basket and extended his hand. "Geoff Bofinger."

His fingers were dusty with flour. She let it transfer to her palms.

"Diane," she said around the wolfish bite she'd just taken. There were crumbs gathering in one corner of her lips. She hated her own idea of herself.

"Stay as long as you like then, Diane. I've got loaves to get out of the oven."

After he walked back into the rear of the shop she thought to say, "What do I owe you?"

"Nothing," he said as he vanished into the kitchen. "First-timers are on the house."

She'd never heard of such a thing, but times had changed while she was inside.

At the end of the L-shaped counter and cases, in the rear right corner of the dining area, a universal sign on a push-through door indicated there were bathrooms on the other side. She'd have known this without the sign. Unless there had been remodeling since she'd last used those toilets, yet another door beyond the ones marked for men and women would lead to a rear stairway and a small apartment above the bakery.

That door would probably be locked. Her parents had always locked it.

She wondered.

Diane stood and peered through the round glass window in the top half of the swinging door. The hallway beyond was dim. She shouldered her backpack and picked her muffin out of the basket. She took another bite and crossed the room, pushed through that door, and walked right past the bathrooms to the end of the hall, which still smelled like the bakery but wasn't as warm.

The red stenciled letters that spelled out the word *private* were scratched up but legible. Diane reached for the round stainless-steel knob with the keyhole in the middle.

She gripped it, and it turned. The fact required her to reevaluate: how far was she willing to go with this? She had come to this long-anticipated moment so swiftly, so unexpectedly, that she hadn't properly prepared.

But that was only an excuse, wasn't it? What kind of preparations could a person really make when the time came to stare a demon in the face?

Diane went through. She entered the landing at the bottom of a dark stairwell lit only by emergency lighting on every other step. Her sweaty fingers let go of the knob before she meant to, and the heavy door slammed, bouncing the cannon boom around the small space like her heart within her ribs. She took a calming breath and waited for her pulse to fall.

When it did—or at least when it wasn't so high up in her throat—Diane wiped her free hand on her jeans and gripped the skinny wood handrail. The stair treads were lined with warped non-skid mats that gave in to her weight as she ascended. *Pop-pop, pop-pop.*

At the seventh popping the door below her opened, startling her into dropping the remainder of her muffin. The ball of bread took the descent two steps at a time, raining crumbs, and came to rest at Geoff Bofinger's feet.

"Help you find something?" he asked kindly, as if she were truly lost and not invading his privacy.

She hesitated. Such a man deserved no lies, but the truth might be unnecessarily cruel. "The sign out there, uh, said there were bathrooms?"

He looked back down the hall as he stooped to pick up her food. "Right there. I sometimes walk right by them myself this early in the morning."

Diane doubted it. "Duh on me," she said, faking a laugh.

“No worries. I heard the door slam and remembered I didn’t lock up after I restocked the paper goods this morning.”

He must think she was a sinister person. She descended, afraid now because she needed to get in touch with her distant past, but it seemed her recent past was going to be forever in the way.

“I’m an ex-con,” she blurted. She would either affirm his worst fears or allay them—a truthful ex-con was better than a dishonest one, right? “I just got out two months ago.”

He nodded as if she had said this was a great town to live in. “Well, I’m an ex-pastor,” he said. “And I just got out four months ago. Maybe we’ve got some things in common.” He laughed at that, but she didn’t. Geoff cleared his throat. “Besides my knack for flat jokes. I never did master that part.” He pointed with the broken muffin to the ladies’ room. “Here you go. If you want, come into the kitchen when you’re done. I’ll get you something else to eat.”

Diane watched him push his way back into the dining room, disbelieving his unaffected reaction. In two months, the number of outsiders who continued speaking to her after they learned she had a criminal record was one. This one, this former pastor. She wondered if he regretted having pulled out that chair for her. Maybe she should have just said *I’m a killer, you shouldn’t invite me in like this! What if I kill you too?* Maybe that would shake him up.

She opened her mouth, daring herself.

There was no time for words. From the street that passed the bakery outside, the ear-drilling sound of colliding metal and breaking glass came straight through the thin walls, as if it were coming for her.

In the Great Central Valley of California, fog settled like dead bread dough in a bowl: dense, heavy, unwilling to rise. Audrey sat erect in the driver's seat and hugged the steering wheel, fingers gripping twelve o'clock and elbows squeezing the sides, as if pulling her body forward would help her to see the road better. Her car schlepped along at fifteen miles an hour, which was too fast for these conditions but a risk she was willing to take. It was five in the morning and she was late to the bakery, and traffic was light. She'd seen only one vehicle on this rural road in the last ten minutes—a pickup transporting field workers toward the pecan and orange groves for harvesting.

In the passenger seat, her son yawned, his maw wide enough to drink the scented air that poured through his open window. Plowed earth. Barley seeds. Winter on its way after the most brutal summer their family had ever endured.

Ed rested his head on the doorframe. When he regained control of his mouth he said, "You and Dad've gotta hire another person."

"We hired you," Audrey murmured, straining her eyes to keep track of the street's white fog line on the right and dashed yellow lane divider on the left. Her own headlights worked against her efforts, bouncing off the waterlogged air and glaring into her windshield. But it was that or drive in blackness.

“I mean someone who *likes* getting up when the rest of the world is going to sleep.”

She chuckled. “Again, that’d be you.”

“If you were running a nightclub maybe.” He crushed his eyes with the heels of his hands and rubbed.

“It’s good of you to help like this. Your dad and I appreciate it. We really do.”

Ed sniffed and said something under his breath. Audrey shot a glance at him, then tried to refocus on the barely visible road. *Hypocrites*, she believed she’d heard.

“I didn’t mean you,” he said, more alert.

“I know. I understand.”

The road’s white fog line broke on the right for a wide dirt driveway that belonged to an orchard. It was Audrey’s “fogmark,” as she called it, the indication that she could expect a street signal a hundred yards ahead, though she wouldn’t see it until she was right on top of it. She slowed the car to ten and craned her neck toward the dashboard, looking.

Her son said, “As if none of them ever made a mistake in their pathetic lives.”

“Ed.” Her warning was gentle. It was a tender scab he kept picking at, the family’s mutual wound, and she had no more emotional salve to apply to it.

She almost changed the subject by asking if his friends had decided about going to Mammoth to ski for Thanksgiving, or whether he would fill out the application to the community college, or how he was thinking about spending the next six months of his “time off” besides earning a few bucks at the bakery she and Geoff had opened after being thrown out of the church. It was important that she learn the answers to all of these questions, but the moment she opened her mouth she understood that she'd fail to change the subject at all. In Ed's mind, the various threads of his destiny were hopelessly tangled. This young man had watched his carefully knit plans for life unravel into a heap at his feet, and he'd been staring at the knots, disbelieving, for months.

She released the steering wheel with one hand and squeezed his knee.

The green light appeared, ghostly and floating over the road, where Audrey would have to enter the intersection and take the left turn. It was impossible to detect oncoming traffic, but nearly as dangerous was any vehicle that might be following her. Its driver might see the green overhead before registering her turn signal.

She turned the wheel and stepped on the gas.

When she had moved to California's inland valley and was told to expect foggy winters, she had hoped for something poetically beautiful. Shimmering water droplets. Wispy ballerinas, slender and light-footed, dancing among trees and grasses. The occasional moody mystery. She had not expected this: a gray tomb that not even

sunlight could fully penetrate, weather that muffled sounds and swallowed cars and killed by the dozens every year.

Tule fog, it was called, after the thick tule grasses that grew throughout the valley.

A blaring horn startled her. She punched the gas pedal, and her little sedan was catapulted to safety. In her rearview mirror she saw the smudge of yellow and red that were the lights of another car passing through the intersection she'd just cleared.

"There's got to be a better way to do this," she said and blew her spiky blond bangs off her forehead.

"Ditch this commute, move into town." Ed put his sneakered foot on the dash. "You should give up that sorry excuse for a rental house and move into the rooms over the bakery."

"Living there would be quaint."

"European."

"Old subject, Ed. You'd go stir crazy. It's microscopic, hardly a home. You need your space. We don't want you to feel . . . tied to us, to this venture. Besides, I was talking about driving, not housing."

The first dim streetlights of town came into view.

“If I moved out, would you do it? I’m not supposed to be here anyway. I’m supposed to be pulling all-nighters, playing college basketball, struggling to make the transition to independent living, that kind of thing.”

“Don’t start with that. You’re here, and we’re glad to have you.”

“You won’t be saying that when I’m thirty.”

“You won’t be so morose when you’re thirty, I promise. Stay, go, duck when life throws stuff at you, and come home to see us now and then. Your dad and I won’t live anywhere that doesn’t have a decent place for you to crash. Deal with it.”

“Aw, Mom, where’s your tough love?”

“You don’t need tough love. You need to give yourself a little grace is all. For that matter, just accept the grace everyone wants to give you.”

“This little town is just full of grace, isn’t it?”

Audrey pursed her lips and had no comeback. She understood in a new way that her only child probably wouldn’t stick around for many more months, even if it meant leaving before their hearts had healed. *Stay, go*. Her maternal heart was already torn.

They crawled past a mechanic’s graveyard and several east-facing, weather-bleached storefronts, then turned right into a clear pocket of air. The tule fog, in its predictably unpredictable manner, had receded here and formed walls like a stadium’s, turning Main Street into a socked-in arena. Whereas a second ago Audrey couldn’t see ten feet in front of her, now she could see all the way to the Honey Bee

restaurant three blocks away. The yellow awnings the owners had installed last spring had already paled a little in the blistering summer sun. Even so, under the streetlamps they seemed to give off their own light. The bakery was a block beyond on the northwest corner, still shrouded in fog.

Audrey accelerated to a much more productive pace. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty. Storefronts clicked by her window under the light-shadow-light-shadow rhythm of the streetlights.

It might have been that the shifting patterns deceived her, but as she approached the end of the good visibility, a movement on the left side of the street drew her eyes. A gliding form passed through a cone of light quickly, a leaf bag caught by the wind. There was no wind, though, and Audrey supposed on second thought that the shadow had been larger than a bag. Larger than a bag and more weighty than breeze-tossed plastic, moving like a living creature: a leaping dog, a stooped person dashing through a rainstorm, a cloaked villain.

Ed said, "I still think we could have taken over a failing bakery in some town where the Mansfields don't live."

Audrey's head swiveled away from the street and toward her son-of-the-stubborn-perspective. She was going to say *We don't run from problems* or *We made this decision as a family* or something similar to remind him that several good people had chosen to stand by him in the universe of his particular heartache, at no small cost to themselves, but she ran out of time.

In the space of a second her car plunged back into fog like a bullet passing through flesh. Her foot found the brake in half a second more, but she entered the intersection of Main and Sunflower blind. The tires squealed, but her good reflexes were not enough to overcome the laws of physics. The sedan bulldozed something solid and heavy where nothing solid and heavy should have been.

Audrey gasped and threw her arm across Ed. He reached out for the dash, body folding over his elevated leg, but his seatbelt held him back. The object they struck stayed in front of the car, metals cracking and screeching. Ed shouted and Audrey felt the front end of the car rise and then fall again as it was lifted by whatever part of the obstacle had slid under the wheels. The thing came apart and clattered, separated, scattered beneath the blanket of fog. The street stilled.

Mother and son glanced at each other in shadows, stunned. Ed's steady but heavy breathing was the only human sound to reach Audrey's ears, and that's what frightened her the most.

She began to fumble with her seatbelt, praying aloud—"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus"—and mixing this with jumbled instructions: "Where's your phone? Call 9-1-1. Did we hit someone? Stay in the car. Please, Jesus. Sweet Jesus." It took longer than it should have to find the seatbelt button and release the latch. She clawed at the handle and pushed the door open. Ed had his phone to his ear.

The fog hid what she needed to see, what she hoped not to see. She swung her feet out of the car and gripped the top of the doorframe with her right hand,

then hauled herself up—an old habit that, this time, probably saved her from breaking her neck. Her legs went out from under her before she was upright, her shoes sliding across the paved road as if it were covered in ice. She lost her grip on the door as she went down and felt the strain in her shoulder as the jolt tipped her sideways. She landed on the heel of her left hand, tiny shards of deteriorating asphalt puncturing the skin at her wrist, then cracked her elbow on the threshold of the car's frame.

“Mom!” Ed was not about to stay put in the passenger seat, and Audrey heard him talking to an emergency operator while he climbed out of the car on his side and ran around the back.

Shooting pain from her wrist doubled up at her elbow and immobilized her entire arm for a few seconds. Something damp seeped in through the denim of her jeans as she sat there on the ground, and when she could move her fingers again she noticed they were covered in a dense, sticky goo.

Ed's tall form bent over her. “She's conscious,” he said into the phone. And then to her: “Did you hit your head?”

“No. Watch where you step.”

He took first note of the spill.

“It must have busted an oil line or a gas line or something,” she said, wondering at the same time if that was even possible. She knew nothing of auto mechanics. Audrey rolled cautiously to her knees, holding her injured wrist to her

stomach. There at eye level, she saw where some of the fluid had splashed onto the body of the champagne-colored car. It dripped slowly down the sides, dropping truth into Audrey's mind with a revolting splash.

"That's a lot of oil," Ed said. He moved toward the front of the car, eyes on the slippery hazard, phone still to one ear.

"Ed, no. Go get your dad." The bakery was right there on the corner, mere feet away from the intersection, a saving distance from the possibility of a broken human body. Her son did not need images of the dead dancing on the graves already dug in his mind. Audrey lifted her throbbing hand to her nose. She sniffed and then recoiled, having no idea what to do with the coating on her skin and clothes. This was no oil.

"Help's coming, okay?" Ed said. "But they wanna know if anyone's hurt."

"Yes, but I'll go see."

He stepped in the wrong direction around the periphery of the disaster, then disappeared.

"Ed!"

Audrey moved as quickly as the blood—*So much blood! Dear Jesus!*—would allow. "Ed!" She was on her feet, tiptoeing to dry ground as if she might have more balance that way. The reach of the streetlights, diminished by the moisture in the air, cut across the sedan. She saw the steaming radiator and the disfigured bumper and the crushed metal under the tire. "Ed, wait!"

He was only steps away, and she nearly collided with him where he stood still, staring down at the mangled form of a small motorcycle. It was a motor scooter, actually, light blue or yellow or white, with a platform for feet directly in front of the stumpy seat. The shredded cushion was also spattered with the terrible liquid. The front end of the scooter had been swallowed by her car. Something that looked like a storage compartment had separated from the bike and tumbled down the road.

Audrey looked around. "Where's the rider?"

"I don't know." Ed was staring at the wreckage. The hand holding his cell phone dropped to his side.

"He must have been thrown," Audrey said, thinking she would have to find and follow a trail of blood leading from this lake. She was shaking, nauseated by the shock of what she'd done.

"That's what the dispatcher said."

"What?"

"That the rider would have been thrown."

Audrey turned away. "We'll look until emergency workers get here. I've got a flashlight in the trunk."

Fog caressed Ed's shoulders. He was fixated on the bike.

"Go get your father. Ed, we need to find the rider." The clammy moisture on her forehead and upper lip wasn't from the weather. "*Ed*."

He gestured at the wreckage. "That's Julie Mansfield's scooter."

Sergeant Jack Mansfield was a city detective, not a patrol officer, and so under ordinary circumstances he wouldn't have been the one to respond to dispatch's announcement of an 11-83, even though both Cornucopia and its force were small. Vehicle accident, no details available, except that the caller described it as car versus motorcycle, which meant that injuries were likely. An ambulance had caught up with them half a mile back and now tailed the cruiser at a safe distance, only its flashing lights visible in the rearview mirror.

An 11-83 was as common as an orange tree in these parts, in this season, at these hours. For the next four or five months people would spend most of their time on the road driving blind. The locals were pretty good at that, having had their entire lives to practice, but enough people were idiots, especially the young ones, and ignorant of how their tragedies happened until some emergency responder explained it to them.

He didn't have a lot of sympathy for idiots.

Technically, Jack wasn't responding on this early Wednesday morning; he only happened to be in the car of the officers who were, because the last thirty-six hours had been anything but ordinary. He'd been on duty since five Monday afternoon, collecting and chasing evidence in a rare murder, only the third in the

county this year. Even more rare, however, was a break with an eyewitness who had the information Jack needed to connect crime and criminal faster than a TV drama.

It was the paperwork, not the sleuthing, that ate up the hours in this particular case. Both killer and evidence had to be properly processed, and for this reason the paperwork on both had to be pristine. If any case as straightforward as this fell apart, it wouldn't be because Jack had lost his grip on it. Details, details. Jack never overlooked details.

Not even strange details, like the ones Jack's wife and the victim held in common: both were five six, 135, early forties. Both had their nails done at Studio Six Salon and bought locally roasted coffee at The Midnight Oil. The victim was a first-grade teacher at Hartford Elementary School; his wife taught math at Mazy High.

The parallels brought to mind the unpleasant scenario of how his life might change if Julie were no longer a part of it, and this brought grim memories of how their daughter, Miralee, had exited their lives in a flurry of expletives.

These details were curious but not relevant, so he moved on to other thoughts.

Specifically, to procedures. There was a reason for the many regulations and guidelines that governed scenes and labs and interrogation rooms. Follow the rules and reap the reward: another lowlife behind bars. Do it once, do it right. Renegade bad-boy cops who followed their own rules were the stuff of Hollywood myth—and

perhaps New York City—and Jack would as soon shoot one on the street as allow him to walk through the doors of his precinct.

The principle worked in life as it did at the office. The theology of grace had been abused, in his opinion. Old Testament law made more sense to him than the ambiguous “everything is lawful” fluff. How could a man build logical systems of behavior out of that?

It was such a mindset that allowed him, in less than two days' time, to cuff the victim's husband, secure the chain of evidence, dot the I's and cross the T's of his report, and finally go home.

This goal was hampered only by his mechanic, who didn't follow procedures with Jack's level of integrity and didn't have the Jeep ready when promised Tuesday afternoon. So Jack decided to take his vehicle somewhere else next time, and at 5:07 Wednesday morning, while Julie slept soundly at home, he caught a ride from Officers Carlisle and Rutgers, who would pass through his neighborhood on their routine patrol.

When Carlisle arrived at the scene of the 11-83 and parked the car in the middle of Sunflower, Jack considered walking home, just two miles away, or rousing Julie by phone in spite of the hour. Carlisle left the blues and reds going as a hazard indicator for inbound traffic, then called dispatch to ask for blockades on the other streets until the wreck could be cleared.

From the backseat of the cruiser, Jack saw the cone-shaped beams of streetlights cutting through the gray air on his right. On his left, he saw the lights on inside a corner store and the silhouettes of three people standing outside in front of the bright window. Maybe eyewitnesses. Maybe passengers from the sedan in the middle of the intersection. One of the three approached the cruiser on Carlisle's side.

Through the distorting filter of fog, the no-details accident in the center of the intersection took on just enough clarity to capture Jack's eye: that was a hard-shell cargo compartment lying on the ground. It was light blue, like Julie's scooter, which had just such a chrome-plated top case mounted behind the matching blue seat. And that was a bumper sticker above the keyhole, and Jack thought he knew what it said even though he couldn't make out the words from his position.

I TEACH KIDS MATH. WHAT'S YOUR SUPERPOWER?

He was out of the cruiser before the officers had unbuckled their seatbelts. He measured his breathing and his steps and approached the wreckage as he would approach any crime scene. He noted the dismantled blue-and-white Vespa, the champagne-colored Corolla, maybe fifteen years old, the car fluids spilling out from under the car's carriage.

Where was his wife?

The ambulance had circled the block to approach from a different direction and came to a stop behind the wreck in the middle of Main, shining its low beams on the site. Those were not engine fluids on the ground.

Behind him, the voices of Carlisle and the bystander took calm turns. Rutgers approached with a flashlight. The officer whistled as the beam passed over the blood.

“That’s a couple quarts, you think?” Rutgers said. “Two? Three? Where’s the body?”

Jack motioned for Rutgers to hand over the flashlight. “Julie!” he called out.

The murmuring at the patrol car ceased. Rutgers glanced at Jack. “Your Julie?” he asked.

“That’s her bike,” Jack said, refocusing. Of course, Julie wouldn’t be here.

“Where’s the rider?” he called out in Carlisle’s direction.

“No rider,” Carlisle shouted back.

“What do you mean, no rider?”

“Can’t find anyone.”

“Well, who’s looked?” Jack muttered. He circled the sedan, scanning it with the beam, and Rutgers followed. The EMTs were already on the other side of the wreck with their lights, sweeping.

“Sarge, let me take the lead on this.”

“Let’s take it slow. Julie’s fine. My guess is someone stole her ride.”

There was no good reason why Julie would have been out at this time of the morning. She had classes in just a few hours. She hated rising early after staying up late grading papers and prepping lessons. She’d been sleeping more than usual of

late, recovering from a routine surgery. And if she *had* gone out in spite of all that, in these conditions she would have taken her car.

“Is the driver of the sedan on the scene?” Jack called out to Carlisle.

“Right here.”

“How fast was he going?” He homed in on the blood, looking for a source.

The answer came after a few seconds. “It’s *she*. And about thirty.”

“Fast enough to throw a rider,” Jack said to Rutgers. “Grab another light. Clock’s ticking if anyone’s hurt.” Then to the medical techs: “Spread out. Could be anywhere, but most likely that direction.” He pointed.

A thief would have fled the scene. A victim who had been thrown wouldn’t have left this much blood behind on impact. And a victim who had been thrown from a scooter shouldn’t be too far from the scooter itself. *And* a victim who had lost this much blood wouldn’t be going anywhere under her—his—own steam.

Jack turned these thoughts around in his mind but couldn’t get any new perspective on them.

The blood seemed to have risen from the ground like a natural spring under the Corolla. It puddled under the driver’s side door, which was still open, and a swirled mess like black finger paints smudged the ground beneath it. From there, sticky shoe prints led to the broken scooter and then away from the scene, back down Sunflower where Carlisle had parked. *Driver*, Jack registered.

Tracks behind the front tires were smeared as if the car had skidded through the stuff. There was blood on the scooter's carriage too, and on the seat, spilled in a pattern Jack had never seen in twenty years on the force.

He stared at the spatter, committing it to memory even though there would be photos taken. Holding the flashlight in his left hand, he pulled his cell phone out of the case on his belt and pressed the speed-dial button for home. It rang four times before the recording picked up. Julie was a heavy sleeper. He left a long, loud message instructing her to wake up. He called again, and a third time.

When she didn't answer, he called her cell phone, which might be on her nightstand or might be buried in the depths of her purse, depending on her frame of mind at the end of the previous day. She would make things easier for both of them if she would get in the habit of always placing it in the same spot.

No answer there either.

It was possible she was in the shower. Slim, but not out of the question.

The lights of Rutgers and the EMTs bobbed on the other side of the fog. Sun would be up in an hour or so. Jack would have dispatch send a team with a crime scene kit. He'd left his at the office. He'd also ask them to send a car to his house. Check on Julie. Take a report about the stolen scooter.

Jack turned around and followed the bloody shoe prints down Sunflower toward the cruiser. They led to the curb in front of the bright corner store, which actually was a bakery, which explained why it was lit up at this dim hour. It would

open soon if it hadn't already. He glanced at the gold foil lettering that arched across one of the windows.

RISE AND SHINE

The Bofingers' new place.

On Sunflower and Main. That was right. He'd heard something about this from . . . from . . . from Mrs. Olsen, who wasn't sure whether she could in good conscience patronize the place.

Jack weighed this revelation and balanced it on his mental scale with the likelihood that the Bofinger kid had something to do with his wife's mangled bike. Swipe the ride, park it, get someone to run over it. Teenagers. The Toyota—

Of course. The Corolla belonged to Pastor Geoff, who was just Plain Geoff now. Sunday after Sunday for five years, that nondescript car had parked in the same slot under the oak tree as far from the church's front doors as it could get. There was no shortage of these cookie-cutter economy cars, but was it such a leap to think—

Yes, it was a great leap, and a good detective would not have taken it. Jack huffed and returned to the moment. Carlisle had separated the three adults, probably to take their statements. From several yards away, Jack could hear the officer asking questions and another male voice responding. In the window of the shop, light shone around another figure, about six two, about 160, and by Jack's judgment also male.

And in front of Jack, sitting on the curb where the sticky footprints led away from the scene, was none other than Audrey Bofinger.

No leap at all, this: the other two men must be Geoff and Ed.

Audrey flinched when the glare of Jack's light hit her eyes. She raised her left arm as a shield, and Jack saw the cuts on her palm and the smears down the sleeve of her shirt. The left side of her pants was coated with the blood.

"You three know how to find trouble," he said.

"Jack," she said, not all that surprised. Maybe she'd recognized the bike. Maybe she'd premeditated the whole event.

"Best keep this formal. Call me Sergeant Mansfield."

"I don't see what difference that'll make."

"Were you driving the car that hit the scooter?"

"Jack—"

"Ma'am."

Audrey sighed. "Yes."

"What happened?"

"I already told the other officer."

"Tell me again."

"Please, I—"

"You really need to consider what it will look like if you're uncooperative with me."

The woman's eyes challenged his threat. Some people were so hard to keep in line. Their sense of entitlement was ruining the world.

"When are you going to let go of this thing?" she said in a voice that Carlisle wouldn't be able to hear. Jack matched her tone.

"Your own sins were your downfall. Nothing to do with me."

"It's time to put all of it behind you."

"Why don't we head on down to the station?" he said, and Audrey relented. She gave an unhelpful statement that failed to shed any more light on who was driving the scooter or where that person might have gone.

"Are you injured?" he asked when she was done. All the blood he could see on her was consistent with her story and the smeared blood at the site. He flicked his light in Ed's direction. The kid scowled at him, but he was clean. At least outwardly.

"Not really," Audrey said. "My wrist—"

"I'll get you a first-aid kit." He turned to the car.

"Has anyone found your wife?" Audrey asked. "We looked for—"

"Julie wasn't riding," Jack said.

"I'm glad to hear it." The relief in her voice might have been motivated by guilt.

"Don't get too happy. That blood belongs to someone, and you're covered in it."

Jack went to find the Band-Aids. He felt a prick of irritation that his wife was ignoring his calls.

