

THE TOWN IS WHISPERING: A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

by

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## ABSTRACT

CATHERINE DENISE SAWYERS. *The Town is Whispering: A Short Story Collection*.  
(Under the direction of PROFESSOR BRYN CHANCELLOR)

In the small town of Arlo, Virginia, everyone is lying. To their family. To their friends. But, more importantly, to themselves.

Willadeene convinces her friends and church that her family is coping after the death of her husband, but her son overworks himself and her daughter rarely returns to her hometown. Her granddaughter, Delilah, attempts to outrun her haunting nightmares behind the wheel of her daddy's Cadillac following the death of her beloved papa. Delilah's best friend, Presley, is unexpectedly "expecting" by the boy from the wrong side of Crooked Creek and must conceal the father's identity or risk her family's unblemished reputation. Ezra wears the guilt of his bad decisions like he does his brother's old sweatshirts as he attempts to escape his family's troubled history.

During a turbulent September, the Webster, the Evers, and the Montgomery families wrestle with loss, self-identity, and forgiveness within *The Town is Whispering*. The narratives of these respective families weave an intricate tapestry of hurt and healing that spans the entirety of Arlo, and one-by-one unravels the secrets that each member tries to hide.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I couldn't have written *The Town is Whispering* without the support of those close to me.

Thank you to my parents, Calvin and Denise, who always prayed for me and inspired me to explore my passions, especially writing. Thank you for the notebooks I poured my creativity into, the pens that scratched the surface of my imagination, and the love to never give up on my interests.

Thank you to my sister, Jessica. You are the Delilah to my Presley, my best friend, and my world would not be as bright without you.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my thesis committee with a special thank you to my thesis chair, Bryn Chancellor. Your feedback and support during this long year helped me find motivation to continue my thesis, even when I was exhausted and overwhelmed. I am extremely excited with the final project, which would not be the case without you.

You all have been my support system throughout the drafting and revising process, and I couldn't have completed this stage in my academic career without your support.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my family, whose unwavering support made these stories possible.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Long before I began my thesis, I knew I wanted to tell the story of Arlo, a fictionalized setting in rural Virginia based on my and my father's hometowns. Many short stories and novel drafts stashed in tattered notebooks all begin in this town. But it didn't mesh with the narratives I attempted to build around it or reflect the images of Arlo I had in my mind. I almost tucked this place away to rot with other ideas that hadn't worked out until I wrote "Ain't Got Much Choice in the Matter." This short story, the genesis of my thesis, needed a setting with wicker rocking chairs along a wrap-around front porch and lush lawns spotted with white dandelions that scatter with the breeze. I knew there would be no better place for my thesis than Arlo.

My thesis, *The Town is Whispering*, is a collection of linked short stories, focusing on three Black families: the Websters, the Evers, and the Montgomerys. Narrated in third person limited, each story reveals the perspective of a member of these families, exposing their secrets and memories. Among the many characters is Willadeene Webster, a seventy-five-year-old mother, who struggles to understand that the failing relationships with her children are her fault; Presley Evers, a seventeen-year-old high school senior, who hides her pregnancy from her domineering parents; Delilah Webster, a fifteen-year-old pastor's kid, who outruns her grief by stealing her father's car every night; and Ezra Montgomery, a sixteen-year-old thief, who wears his guilt for past wrongdoings like he does his brother's old sweatshirts. Each of these characters are protagonists in their own stories and recur as secondary characters within the others.

### **Approaches to Narrative Form**

For *The Town is Whispering*, I wanted to explore short stories, a genre I wasn't comfortable with before my thesis. I have always declared myself a novelist (or a novelist-in-progress), preferring the longer form of fiction to short stories. The length and pace of novels

mimicked the television series and movies I consumed, and with more pages to expand character arcs, I thought readers could connect with my concepts, themes, and characters on a deeper level. Short stories had the added difficulty of developing narratives in a fraction of the time of a novel, and I worried I couldn't leave as lasting an impression as I could with the longer form. But I couldn't deny there was something fascinating about short stories — a succinct glance into a character's life, balancing their prior experiences with the current conflict on the page. In the end, I wanted to push my writing abilities and prove I could exceed my hopes, learn this genre through trial and error, and produce a collection I could be proud of.

Connecting the short stories throughout my thesis was my next obstacle. I still desired to establish character arcs in the way I experienced in novels and knew I wanted each narrative to connect with the previous in some way. However, I wasn't sure how to achieve this. Through the collections of Elizabeth Strout and Randall Kenan, I discovered linked short story collections, in which each story intertwines with the others in some way. I chose to weave my plots and characters in *The Town is Whispering* so the stories could expand on and influence the interpretation of the others. To further achieve this close linking, my thesis is written in chronological order and contained within the first full week of September in 2022.

Aside from the short form, I found an additional challenge in how to coherently weave the stories together as a linked collection. I designed the tightly knit narratives to demonstrate how the characters impact each other but struggled with displaying that connection to the reader without confusion. One of the biggest problems I had was writing the narratives in a way where they could “stand alone” as individual short stories, while still flowing together like a collection or novel chapters would. Through several drafts and feedback from multiple sources, I found



what worked for *The Town is Whispering* and am eager to continue learning how to strengthen this connection.

### **Relationship with Past Writers**

In preparation for *The Town is Whispering*, I returned to my favorite authors, including Clyde Edgerton, Flannery O'Connor, Toni Morrison, and Kim Coleman Foote. I first read Edgerton's *Walking Across Egypt* when I began experimenting with Southern literature. This novel contained the charming euphemisms and humor I love about Southern literature and was told from the perspective of an older woman, Mattie Rigsbee. She takes in an orphaned young man, Wesley Benfield, from a youth correctional facility and adopts a maternal role with him. Their relationship sparked the inspiration for Willadeene and Ezra's connection, but I wanted to further complicate their intertwining stories with deeper interiorities of both characters.

O'Connor was another writer I examined when reconnecting with my favorite Southern narratives, and one of my favorites is "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Within this short story, a grandmother vacations with her son's family, and when their car crashes, the family encounters an escaped criminal, the Misfit. One of my favorite elements is O'Connor's blunt characterizations, especially of the critical grandmother, who considers herself morally superior to those around her and is oblivious of her flaws. After reading "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" for the first time, I knew I wanted to write a character equally unaware of her failings towards others, which was the original intention of Willadeene's character in "Ain't Got Much Choice in the Matter." Willadeene has evolved since her conception, but there are still lingering impressions of the judgmental woman she started as.

Morrison has an exceptional way of capturing the vibrant qualities of her characters, and among her many works, I found her short story, "Recitatif," invaluable to my drafting of *The*

*Town is Whispering*. Morrison's only short story follows the lives of two girls as they reconnect through life, first meeting at eight-years-olds during their stay at a children's shelter. The early pages of the story detail their time as girls, and I used their attachment as a model for Delilah and Presley's friendship. Although my characters didn't meet under similar circumstances, Delilah and Presley are bonded through their life experiences in Arlo, as young Black women trying to find their place in their families and in society.

Additionally, I first read Foote as a part of a short story course, in which the class delved into the 2022 volume of the *Best American Short Stories*. Her "Man of the House" was among the narratives that enamored me through her use of Southern dialogue. Crafting conversations has always been my favorite part of writing and identifying a character, and Foote expertly navigates the balance of Southern, Black dialects. The dialogue within her story reads fluently on the page, and I consulted Foote regularly when drafting dialogue-heavy scenes to further improve my own skills.

### **Major Themes**

One of the most valuable experiences in writing this thesis was uncovering the themes within and seeing unexpected patterns emerge. Black community and support and socioeconomic privilege were two major topics I found recurring in many of the stories. Community was a theme I hoped to integrate into every story, where those in the Black community in Arlo either step up or abandon its members, from Willadeene's maternal protection of Ezra to Delilah's alienation as she processes her bereavement. Community was an intentional theme within my collection, and a topic that can be understood universally. My hope is anyone who reads these stories can attach themselves to the characters within and feel seen and supported by the narratives portrayed.

Socioeconomic privilege was one of the themes I found within my writing after rounds of revision, particularly in “It’s Blowin’ Up a Storm” and “The Other Side of Crooked Creek.” The former shows how characters abuse their financial advantage for personal gain and the latter how socioeconomically unbalanced Arlo is. In “The Other Side of Crooked Creek,” for example, Ezra and his older brother, Jadon, leave their home in a trailer park to buy snacks from a gas station. During that night, the brothers don’t have enough money to buy their usual snacks and remain hungry. Socioeconomic privilege is a topic that has been on my mind frequently over the last few months, and I’m not surprised it snuck into *The Town is Whispering*. I wanted to weave the nuances of financial privilege into multiple elements of this collection as it is embedded in our society. I hope readers, who were once unaware of this privilege, can understand and acknowledge this disparity as the characters in my collection do (or will do).

### **Writing Craft**

As I drafted and revised *The Town is Whispering*, I focused on two main areas of storytelling: dialogue and vivid imagery. Dialogue is one of my favorite elements of writing, and I wanted to convey the natural speech of a Southern Black dialect — similar to the language I use with my family. In addition to consulting my favorite stories, I practiced the written dialogue aloud to hear awkwardness in the phrasing. When I had difficulty with a particular scene, I called my father or grandparents to use as models for the speech. On more than one occasion, I would also be inspired by moments of conversation with my family and incorporate those speech patterns into my character’s dialogue. In “It’s Blowin’ Up a Storm,” Delilah drives to her grandmother, Willadeene’s, house in the middle of the night. She knocks on Willadeene’s front door, and the two have an exchange that mirrors the snappy conversational style between myself and my grandmother:

Grandma Willadeene narrows her eyes at her granddaughter. “How on God’s green earth did you even get here? You don’t have a license.”

“I... borrowed Daddy’s car.”

“You and I both know he’d never let you do that.” Grandma Willadeene sucks her teeth before opening the door wider. “Well, come on in. I don’t want you catching a cold in this storm.”

Delilah steps into her grandma’s living room and breathes in the smell of pound cake. “You’re baking at two in the morning?”

“And you were driving. *Illegally.*”

With a few tweaks, their banter added depth to Delilah and Willadeene’s relationship and gave me another way to infuse myself and my family into my writing.

In addition to dialogue, I focused on vivid imagery, one of my writing weaknesses. I find it easier to capture visual images in my work, but I wanted to expand past these descriptions and integrate other senses. Using only visual elements narrows the reader’s perceptions of what’s being described, and I wanted to fully immerse readers in the memories and setting. In the later pages of “Ain’t Got Much Choice in the Matter,” Willadeene stands outside during a rainstorm, and I describe the scene as:

As soon as she steps onto the concrete sidewalk, the rain douses her. Globbs of water bleed into her sweater, soaking Willadeene instantly. She looks up into the downpour.

A wall of dark clouds blankets the sky, crying down on Willadeene and Rosemary and Arlo. Her garden, Willadeene thinks. And, for a second, she’s sitting with her

tomatoes. Her fingers worming into the earth. The dirt is wet, sticky, against her fingertips.

She breathes in the smell of the rain. It sticks in her nose.

Thunder cracks above her, but Willadeene can't hear it. Not over the sound of her own name.

In this moment, I wanted readers to be in the rain with Willadeene, and the way I chose to achieve this sensation was through auditory, textural, and fragrant images.

## **Conclusion**

*The Town is Whispering* is a collection of stories close to my heart. Over the course of two years, I have refined the town of Arlo, developed dynamic characters with authentic motivations, and conveyed themes I wish I had the opportunity to read more of. Throughout my writing journey, I have struggled to read literary fiction because I felt it didn't capture elements of my identity, but as Toni Morrison stated during her 1981 speech to the Ohio Arts Council, "If you find a book you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." I carry this quote with me every time I sit down at my computer to write and consider a new story I want to tell, especially as I wrote the stories for my thesis.

For most of my writing career, the literary short stories and novels I grew up with were written by white authors I couldn't relate to. My high school and early undergraduate English courses were filled with the works that couldn't detail the lived experiences I, as a Black woman, lived every day. I wasn't exposed to non-white authors until halfway through my undergraduate career, and it was even longer before I attempted literary fiction. At times, I felt my Black experiences didn't match this genre largely composed of white writers, and I hesitated to delve into these kinds of stories in fear I could never do them as well as other established writers.

Through writers like Morrison, Kenan, and Foote, I felt empowered to write the stories that hadn't been written yet from the perspective only I can tell.

There were moments in the writing process of my thesis where I struggled with motivation to continue this project. I found myself exhausted with these stories when other elements of my personal and academic life became overwhelming, and I worried that these feelings would impede my collection. But I knew my stories were narratives I had to convey from my experiences, and I used that thought as motivation to finish my thesis. Finding the belief in myself that I could write *The Town is Whispering* in a way that I was proud of was the most rewarding moment of this process and has stretched my perception to things I didn't know were possible.

In the future, I hope to expand my current collection to contain more stories and characters from Arlo, including Willadeene's children, Clara and Emmett Webster; Presley's older sister, Jezmyn; and Ezra's older brother, Jadon, and mother, Annie. Like those narrating *The Town is Whispering*, these characters have stories that have yet to be told but hold valuable lessons, memories, and experiences I am compelled to share. I intend to one day compose these stories in the ways I have for my thesis to continue learning about myself as a reader and exploring this setting in inventive ways.

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## AIN'T GOT MUCH CHOICE IN THE MATTER

Willadeene Webster still hasn't come up with a good enough excuse for why her car is missing out of her driveway when her daughter, Clara, pulls up.

"Ma?" It takes Clara a few moments to find Willadeene, sitting in the same spot she does at this time of day: her garden, a small plot of land with vegetables sprouting out of the dark dirt — green beans, cabbages, cucumbers — in the middle of Willadeene's backyard.

Clara rounds the side of the brick ranch house. Willadeene sits among her row of tomatoes, tying stems to wooden stakes with old strips of cloth. Clara calls her name again, but Willadeene doesn't turn around.

Dry grass crunches beneath Clara's feet as she approaches, and Willadeene feels her daughter's hard stare on the back of her neck. If not for the September sun warming her back, she reckons that Clara causes the sweat to roll down her neck and soak into the collar of her sweater.

"What?" Willadeene still doesn't turn. Knows her daughter will see a planned lie on her face as soon as she does. Clara would make a good mama in that regard, Willadeene thinks, but doesn't say that out loud. Clara gets fussy at the mention of children.

"You heard me." Clara's voice shatters her thoughts. "Where's your car at?"

Willadeene doesn't like lying to her daughter but figures the Good Lord could tell the difference between a necessary lie and a wasteful one. "It's in the shop," Willadeene says. "Emmett said it ain't running right, so he took it up to Eddie Mack. Guess we'll just have to go up to the Sterling's place another time."

She turns to look at her daughter. Ever since Clara got that fancy degree up at Virginia Tech and started teaching high school in Richmond, she's been different. Wears these fancy



slacks. Her beautiful, coiled afro knotted back in ugly locs. Plastic glasses on the bridge of her nose even though God gave her perfect vision.

Willadeene's husband, Billy, had always said that Clara was coming into herself. Finding herself.

And Willadeene would always snap back that after thirty-six years, her baby girl oughta know herself by now.

Every time Willadeene looks at her daughter — which isn't very often, nowadays — she feels like she's looking at a stranger. Trying to wash off the roots Willadeene spent so long planting in Arlo, Virginia.

Clara raises an eyebrow. "It's no problem, Ma. We'll just take my car to Mr. Sterling's."

Willadeene sucks her teeth, the wet air slipping past her lips. The Sterlings' own the only funeral home in Arlo and have for as long as Willadeene can remember. Her Billy was buried with the Sterlings earlier that year, a couple of weeks into June. They did good work. Made him look just like he was when he was alive. But that didn't mean Willadeene wanted to make a trip up there.

Not today. It was still too soon.

Clara doesn't take no for an answer. She struts inside Willadeene's house and returns a minute later with Willadeene's pocketbook and house keys before locking up the door. "Let's go. We got an appointment."

And just like that, the matter is decided.

"Now, wait a minute." Willadeene ties the last tomato stem to the wooden stake extra slow, fiddling with the cloth until it's just right. Only when she's satisfied with her work does she slowly stand, shake the numbness out of her folded legs, and follow Clara to her car. They

walk — Willadeene a few lumbering steps behind her daughter — around the side of her house to the driveway.

“When’d you get this?” Willadeene eyes Clara’s new car. It’s black and sleek and too low to the ground.

“A while ago,” is all Clara says, and Willadeene decides not to press the matter. Instead, she slides into the seat, muttering how darn low the car is to the ground and how she couldn’t imagine getting in and out of the thing without her knees giving out.

Despite Clara’s car being much too low, it drives smooth. Willadeene nods approvingly as Clara backs out of the driveway without spitting too much of her gravel. Even on the road, the car cruises nicely, and they pull onto Main Street before she knows it.

They sit together in near silence, far too long for Willadeene’s taste. She hates the quiet. Always has.

When Willadeene was a child, her mama used to say, “you talking way too much,” before cracking a switch against Willadeene’s naked backside. But that made the words bubble up faster in her throat until they spilled out. Even now, as a seventy-five-year-old woman (seventy-six in November), Willadeene can’t stop them.

So, she says that Clara’s older brother, Emmett, and his daughter, Delilah, visited for dinner the other day. “And can you believe how smart Delilah’s getting?” Willadeene asks. “She’s been top of her class for the last year. And looking pretty as a peach. If you came on up to Arlo more often, you’d see it for yourself.”

Clara pinches her lips together. Doesn’t say anything.

Willadeene huffs. “Well, I know you probably haven’t heard about the Montgomery boy, have you?” She waits for Clara to say something — *anything* — but continues when she meets

silence. “The oldest one, I mean. Don’t remember his name, but I heard from Rosemary that he’s gotten hisself arrested. Ain’t heard what for yet, but it’s got to be something awful because his mama ain’t talking to nobody about nothing. Always avoids the subject when we talk after church.”

Clara mutters something under her breath but doesn’t repeat it when Willadeene tells her to speak up.

Willadeene launches into another story about the rain. How the last shower had been several weeks ago. How her poor cabbages were looking wilted without the rain. “Do you garden in Richmond? I’m sure you have plenty of time. I mean, all you’re doing up there is teaching. Can’t take up too much of your time. Guess just enough that you ain’t seen your own ma in a month of Sundays.”

“Ma?” Clara shifts to look at Willadeene in the passenger seat. “Can we just drive in silence for a bit?”

Her words stun Willadeene enough that she doesn’t know how to answer and forces her gaze to the window. They pass the doctor’s offices towards the beginning of Main Street and enter the stretch of town Willadeene likes the most: the shops. Wood-paneled stores line the narrow street, separated from the road by the sidewalk, but her eyes fasten to Paula’s Diner, up ahead on the left. Where Willadeene and Billy had their first date, all those many years ago.

Willadeene cracks her window in time for warm air to float inside, bringing with it the greasy perfume of frying burgers and oily fries. She closes her eyes, and for a moment, Willadeene is sitting on the inside of the diner with Billy across the table from her. She’s looking out the window while talking to him. She’s wearing her favorite dress — the denim one with

sunflowers sewn into the skirt — and a pair of yellow crocs. The same crocs Billy had gotten her a year or so back. He always liked to surprise her with yellow things. Her favorite color.

He's balding, except for the strip of hair along the backside of his head, and his graying mustache connects to a thick beard. In his last days, his beard — one of the few things, like gardening, that were Billy's pride and joy — started to thin, revealing patches of sepia-brown skin through his black and gray hair.

Willadeene opens her eyes. Billy isn't there anymore. Neither is Paula's Diner. A new boutique, that Willadeene hasn't ever been inside, catches her eye. One with white mannequins in skimpy outfits on display.

Willadeene's nose wrinkles at the sight, as a woman with her daughter, walking arm-in-arm, stops in front of that store. The daughter, young but thinks she's grown by the way her shirt tucks into her bra and shows too much of her belly button, points to the glass window of the boutique. Her mama, thirty-some years older, nods with a big smile on her face. The mama says something. Must've been funny the way the daughter throws her head back and laughs.

Willadeene can't tear her eyes from the mama and daughter, who disappear into the store. Both still smiling. Arms still linked.

It's been a long time since she and Clara looked like that.

Clara rolls past them. Doesn't notice them.

Willadeene sighs. How did their relationship get so... so funny? How long had it been that way? For years, she dreamed that she and Clara would have a normal relationship, like that mama and daughter walking down the street. Willadeene wants to run errands with Clara. Sip sweet tea and eat pound cake with Clara. Talk to one another without Clara getting into a hissy fit and doing something awful like putting knots in her hair. But every day, it seems that

Willadeene and Clara ain't ever going to get there. And she just ain't got much choice in the matter.

Through the front windshield, she sees their approaching stop. On the corner of Main and Lynch, two stoplights up, is the Sterling's funeral home. The building is stacks and stacks of gray stone, like it was carved out of a mountain. By the front door and stained-glass windows sits a shiny, white car that Willadeene knows belongs to Frank Sterling.

Clara eases to a stop at a light and taps her fingers against the steering wheel.

Willadeene toys with the black strap of her purse, her mind wandering back to the funeral home. She hasn't stepped foot in that building since the Sterlings dressed her Billy up in his black suit and painted his face with the same flush as when he was alive. And even though they had done a pretty decent job, she doesn't want to go back now. Doesn't want to remember the last time she had to walk past those stained-glass windows and through the front door.

Just as the stoplight changes to green, Willadeene says too quickly, but not at all too suspiciously, "I need to go to the store..." The words come out without her thinking, but it's too late to take them back.

A hundred feet or so, just before the stoplight by the funeral home is Webster's Produce Store, the one Willadeene used to operate with Billy, but Emmett now runs. The store matches the others on the street with its wood exterior, no bigger than a postage stamp in the corner of an envelope. A few cars dot the parking lot off to the side, and Willadeene says a thankful prayer that Emmett isn't working today.

Clara is the first to tear her eyes away from the store. "Why?"

“I’ve left Lucinda there all alone today. I’d ought to just check up on her. Make sure she’s all right.” This lie slips past Willadeene’s lips too easily, and she promises God that she’ll add a little extra to Sunday’s offering as repentance.

Clara thinks for a moment but says, “Fine.” She curves the car left, away from the Sterling’s parking lot and in front of the produce store. “I’ve got to drop some stuff off at the post office. I’ll be back here in fifteen minutes.”

The car jostles into park, and Willadeene hefts herself out of her daughter’s low car. “Mm-hmm.”

“And I mean fifteen minutes, Ma. Don’t go in there talking, or we will be late for our appointment.”

“*Yes. Ma’am.*” Willadeene shuts the door harder than intended but is pleased with the satisfying slam. She marches through the front doors of the store with her purse swinging over her shoulder but shoots a look back to the car. Clara whips out of the parking lot and pulls out onto the road. Willadeene forces herself not to look back any longer and strides inside.

Webster’s Produce is a tad longer than it is wide with the main set of glass doors beneath overhanging, green eaves. Willadeene pulls at the door’s metal handle and steps inside. The smell of fresh-turned dirt blooms beneath her nose. The scent of sweet fruit. Recently harvested vegetables. Billy used to smell the same way after a long day at the store.

Crates of produce sit on square tables, their aroma greeting Webster’s customers. Apples from the Ayers’ Orchard. Corn from the Frances’ farm. Sweet potatoes, peaches, and grapes from other places. Behind the tables are four rows of short, metal shelves, chest high, with random things: paper towels, bags of potato chips, canned goods. Freezers of milk, eggs, and beer line the right and back walls. Along the left stands the cash register and shelves of tobacco

behind that. Lucinda, a young girl just out of high school, leans against the counter by the register, her cellphone in hand.

Willadeene makes a note to tell Emmett about her phone.

She skirts her feet over the welcome mat, rough under the soles of her crocs. To keep the linoleum floors from slicking on rainy days. Willadeene suspects the brown doormat will come in handy today.

The produce store isn't lively, but that's to be expected this late in the morning. A couple of customers linger around the room with Webster's Produce shopping bags slung over their shoulders: Elaine Evers, Willadeene's next-door neighbor and the Sunday school teacher for her age group, strides up to the register; a young man, with his black sweatshirt hood hiked over his head and sagging sweatpants, that Willadeene can't quite name lingers around the produce; and Rosemary Hatcher, a Mother in Willadeene's church and her oldest friend, checks for cracked eggs in the back.

Willadeene says hello to Elaine as she passes Willadeene for the door. "How are your daughters, Elaine?"

"Highly favored and blessed, Mrs. Willadeene," Elaine says. She smooths her dark, freshly pressed hair before hugging Willadeene. "You know Jezmyn surprised me with a visit last Sunday. Came all the way from Charlottesville just to see me."

Willadeene hums and swallows the sour remark she wants to make. "Aww. Sounds like you had a happy Sunday."

"I did. When's the last time *you* had a visit from your daughter?"

Willadeene's fingers tighten around the strap of her pocketbook. "She decided to spend today with me. I didn't think she'd actually make it with her so dedicated to her students in Richmond and everything. They're just so needy up there, y'know."

Elaine smiles like she can see the discomfort on Willadeene's face. Can hear the lie in her words. But she doesn't say it. "Well, I'll let you get to your mother-daughter day." She makes a point to glance around, as if looking for Clara, before adding, "You have a blessed day now." Elaine is out the door before Willadeene can repeat the farewell.

Willadeene beelines for Rosemary, who inspects candy bars by the register. "Did you hear what she said to me?"

"How could I not? The woman has the biggest mouth in all of Arlo. Hell, all of Virginia." Rosemary is a short woman, only slightly taller than the front counter. Even though she's a few years younger than Willadeene, her hair is already tinted more gray than black, and she keeps her long strands in a single plait down her back. On one arm, she holds the Webster's cloth shopping bag, and on the other, an expensive red pocketbook swings from her arm.

Willadeene remembers when Rosemary's boyfriend, Fredrick Briggs, bought her that bag. Rosemary couldn't shut up about it. Still couldn't, as far as Willadeene was concerned. If her eyes even dropped down to the atrocious handbag, Rosemary would push it out and say, "Did I tell you that Freddy bought this for me last Christmas? He's a sweet man, ain't he?"

Rosemary unwraps a chocolate bar and tucks a piece into her mouth. She hums, dropping the wrapper onto the front counter, and unloads her shopping bag. "Add this one to my bill, honey," she tells Lucinda. She empties her shopping bag — adding to it another candy bar — before whispering to Willadeene, "I got something that will take your mind off her. You hear any more about the Montgomery boy?"



“I was just telling Clara about him earlier.”

“Now, I ain’t telling nothing the Good Lord don’t already know.” Rosemary likes to say that when she has something to tell. “But Annie’s son got hisself sentenced yesterday.”

Willadeene leans forward, her voice dropping to a whisper. “What?”

Rosemary leans in too, drinking up the attention like she is a thirsty hound on a hot, summer day. Willadeene can smell the rose fragrance that Fredrick bought her for Valentine’s Day. Too floral. The scent burns Willadeene’s nose.

“Mm-hmm. Heard about it at church yesterday. The trial lasted all of two days. And the jury was only out for an hour.”

“Aww that poor boy,” Willadeene says.

Rosemary waves off her words. “That boy’s guilty of something bad. Bad enough to get fifteen years.”

“How’s Annie taking it?” Willadeene asks.

Rosemary scoffs. “Acting like her world’s ending.”

Willadeene hears the boy in the black sweatshirt fidget behind her, moving from the peaches to an aisle at the edge of her vision. She tries not to pay him too much mind, but his shoes squeal against the floor. There aren’t many noises that grate on her nerves. She birthed and raised two loud kids and survived, but in her old age, more things just seem to bother her. Like that boy’s darn shoes.

“Well, she’s to blame,” Rosemary continues over the squeaks. “Children don’t up and act a fool out of the blue. That boy’s been something bad, and his mama didn’t do nothing about it. Far as I’m concerned, she’s the reason that boy up and did what he did.”

Willadeene nods but can't help feeling bad for poor Annie Montgomery. It's bad enough that her boy's gone and done some awful stuff, but even worse that he is going to jail for fifteen years. That is any mama's worst nightmare. And Willadeene thinks Clara putting those horrible locs in her hair is the end of the world.

Clara had always been a handful as a child. Still is a handful, as far as Willadeene is concerned, but she hadn't made Clara like that. Even when Clara drove her up a wall, Willadeene never thought that she was to blame for Clara's bad attitude. That's just how Clara was. That couldn't be Willadeene's fault, could it? Wonder if other mamas worry about that. Or does it only come to mind when another's world is falling apart?

"Y'know," Rosemary says. "My mama used to say that the Good Lord works in mysterious ways. I don't believe in that karma mess, but maybe this is it for always serving up those nasty green beans."

Willadeene opens her mouth to say something. Maybe to agree with Rosemary about Annie's awful green beans that even ham hock couldn't fix. Or even to tell Rosemary to stop talking so much, especially in front of little Lucinda, who pretends not to be listening but keeps glancing up from her cellphone.

Willadeene sees the boy out of the corner of her eye again. He isn't looking at her and Rosemary. His eyes are trained on a brightly colored bag of potato chips in his hand. He stares at them for a second more and stuffs them in the center pocket of his sweatshirt. The chips crinkle as it disappears.

He looks around, and Willadeene's eyes cut back up to Rosemary.

She's talking about Fredrick now. Something about how he better be planning something for their anniversary. "Just 'cause I'm seventy don't mean I don't like to be taken out like I'm young."

"Did you see that?" Willadeene's voice is barely a whisper.

"Did I see what?" Rosemary's voice shoots up an octave.

"Hush! That boy over there. *Don't look at him!*"

But it's too late. Rosemary cranes her neck towards the boy. "What about him?"

"He stole a bag of chips."

Rosemary's eyes cut to Willadeene. "He did *what?*"

Willadeene says a quick prayer to God that Rosemary's voice dials down to a whisper too. "Uh-huh. Just picked them up right off the shelf and stuck them in his pocket."

"Well, I'll be damned." Rosemary's voice turns shrill at a sudden realization.

"Willadeene! We're in the room with a criminal. A *cold-blooded* criminal."

Willadeene rolls her eyes. "I'm just gonna have a quick chat with him. Let him know that it's not okay to be robbing good people blind."

Rosemary's dark face ashens like she's going to faint. "Ohmylord! We're gonna be in a shootout. Just like on *Gunsmoke*."

"Hush." Willadeene makes her way to the boy, who has moved to the freezers in the back of the store. He opens one of the doors and picks up a can of soda. Slips the cold aluminum can into his pocket just as Willadeene approaches.

"What are you doing, boy?"

The boy spins around, hand still in his pocket with the stolen soda. He's taller than she is, by at least half a foot, and Willadeene has to crane her neck to look at the boy's face.

Her eyes trace his dark skin, blending in with his dark sweatshirt. A silver skull is stitched across the front. What an awful thing to print, Willadeene thinks but doesn't say.

His eyes fall to the floor, and he opens his mouth to say something but doesn't speak.

"What's your name?"

Again, he doesn't answer. Instead, he squeaks his shoes against the linoleum, as if the noise will help him remember his name.

"Y'know, it ain't good manners to not look at someone when they're speaking to you."

"*Willadeene*," Rosemary hisses from behind Willadeene. She ignores Rosemary.

The boy doesn't answer, but she is sure he hears her. His eyes flicker to Willadeene, but he looks away when they meet.

"Least the boy could do is tell me his name. *And look at me when he's saying it.*"

The boy stays silent.

"I'm Mrs. Willadeene," she says. "I wanna hear your name, y'hear?"

"Ezra," he finally says. "Ezra Montgomery."

"You Annie's other boy?" The younger brother of the criminal. Must run in the family. Her heart falls for the boy and his ma. Now she's got two criminals. What in the world is poor Annie going to do?

"Ezra." Willadeene tastes his name in her mouth. "Y'know, that's Bible. Your ma ever tell you what it means?"

Ezra nods. "Yes, ma'am. Means 'help.' Mama says I's meant to help people. Always wondered what kinda help."

"Why you taking stuff out of my store?"

"I'm not, ma'am."

Willadeene's eyes drop to the boy's pocket, heavy with soda. "And what's that?"

"Nothing."

Willadeene huffs and presses her hands to her hips. "You wanna go to jail, Ezra?"

Ezra's eyes shoot up at her before falling back to his feet. "Ain't nothing left for me here."

"Why..." Willadeene chews on the inside of her lip, unsure if she wants to hear the answer. "...on God's green Earth would you ever want to go to jail? On purpose?"

"Better off there," he mumbles to his shoes. "I ain't no good for folks 'round here."

She stares at him for a second. The poor boy manages to stop smearing his shoes against the floor — to Willadeene's relief — but now he trembles like a leaf. Maybe the store is cold with the freezer door wide open, but Willadeene figures he's just a scared boy. She reckons that boy's a lot of lonely now that his big brother's in prison, and her heart aches. He probably feels just as bad about what he did.

Clara had been like that when she was little, Willadeene remembers. She'd rush into something and not think it through all the way and then look all sorry when everything caught up to her.

Willadeene hadn't always been the best mama in those moments neither. When Clara messed up, Willadeene found yelling to be the best punishment. Yelling and a good switch. But the thought never occurred to Willadeene then, maybe Clara needed something a little different.

Maybe this boy is like Clara.

"I bet you're a good boy. Deep down," Willadeene says.

The boy looks up at her. Shock pools in his eyes like tears. "Nah. I ain't no good."

"I can tell. You're born good. Just... misunderstood, that's all."

“I ain’t born good. My deddy said I’s born bad, and I’ll die bad too.”

Willadeene puts her hands on her hips. “Sounds like your daddy knows everything ‘bout nothing. Good ain’t something you’re born with. Unless you’re Jesus. You Jesus?” She doesn’t give Ezra time to answer. “Didn’t think so. Good’s something you gotta choose. Like everything else. Every day you can choose to be good. Be better than the day before.”

“I ain’t got much choice in the matter.”

“And why not?”

The boy thinks for a while. Squeaks his shoe against the floor. “Sometimes I hear Mama saying that Deddy ruined us. Ruined me. I didn’t choose that.”

“Ain’t there somebody you can go to for help?”

“Nobody can help me.”

Willadeene takes a step towards the boy. He flinches but doesn’t back up too far like she expects. A good sign.

“Then I’ll just have to help you myself.”

Ezra shakes his head instead.

“Sure I can,” Willadeene says. “Maybe your mama don’t give you that name to help people. Maybe she wanted people to know that you needed help.”

The shriek of sirens loom in the distance.

Willadeene turns around. Spots Rosemary tucked behind the front counter with Lucinda, the girl’s phone in her hands. “I called the police,” Rosemary hiss-whispers. “He’s kin to that older Montgomery boy. They’re something dangerous.”

Ezra’s eyes track the flashing red and blue lights out the front windows. “You can’t help me. Not from them.”

Outside, a police car parks in front of the store, and a pair of officers emerge. They stand around outside for a moment, scoping out Webster's before their entry.

"I's born bad, Mrs. Willadeene. I ain't got much choice in it."

Willadeene takes another step towards the boy. They are so close she can touch him. Hug him. Tell him everything is gonna be alright. Like she should have done for Clara more often. She doesn't, instead saying, "Don't you worry about that, Ezra. We're gonna make this right."

"You sure?"

"God willing and the creek don't rise."

Ezra smiles. "My mama says that too."

"That makes your mama a real smart woman," Willadeene says.

At that moment, Sheriff Evers and his deputy storm into the store. The sheriff is a big man with a balding head and black beard covering the front of his blue uniform. He eyes the room before settling onto Ezra. "Montgomery. I shoulda known. Put your hands up real slow, y'hear?"

Ezra's eyes dart to Willadeene like a paralyzed doe on the side of the road. He looks ready to bolt, but she shakes her head at him. "Do what they say, Ezra. It'll be all right."

Ezra obeys. His hands raise to his face, but his eyes watch the ground.

The deputy reaches Ezra, bending the boy's arms around his back and locking cuffs onto him.

The sheriff moves towards Rosemary and Lucinda, making sure they're okay. Tells them to wait outside so he and the deputy can do "official police business."

Rosemary tries to get the sheriff's attention with an "ohmylord," but Willadeene drags her out of the store.

Willadeene looks back at Ezra. Watches the deputy kick Ezra's feet out from under him to make him kneel. She wants to go back in there and give that deputy a piece of her mind, but now Rosemary's pulling Willadeene out of the store.

As soon as she steps onto the concrete sidewalk, the rain douses her. Globbs of water bleed into her sweater, soaking Willadeene instantly. She looks up into the downpour.

A wall of dark clouds blankets the sky, crying down on Willadeene and Rosemary and Arlo. Her garden, Willadeene thinks. And, for a second, she's sitting with her tomatoes. Her fingers worming into the earth. The dirt is wet, sticky, against her fingertips.

She breathes in the smell of the rain. It sticks in her nose.

Thunder cracks above her, but Willadeene can't hear it. Not over the sound of her own name.

*"Ma!"*

Willadeene's eyes find Clara, running toward her from a few parking spots down. Willadeene doesn't know how long she's been standing there, but long enough for Rosemary to find Clara.

Clara runs from her car to the side of the store, leaving Rosemary by her open driver-side door. "Ma, are you alright? Rosemary said you were attacked by a criminal?"

Willadeene looks back up at the sky. Thick drops slide into her eyes and down her cheeks and into her sweater. "You remember what your daddy used to say about a big rain?"

Clara stares at Willadeene for a moment, sighs, then looks up at the sky. "What?"

"That it's a good thing. Means a change is a-coming. I thought he was talking about a harvest."

"What kind of change, Ma?"



The front doors of the store open, and the sheriff and deputy step out with Ezra in between them. The boy's hands are shackled behind his back, and his head hangs so low to the ground that he looks like he's praying. Tears slither down his cheeks and seep into the sidewalk with the pattering rain.

He looks much younger with his hood down, Willadeene reckons. Looks too much like a boy.

"Sheriff Evers." Willadeene flags down the officers before she can stop herself.

The officers pull Ezra by his elbows to stop by their cruiser, the backseat door wide open.

"What's wrong, ma'am?" the sheriff asks.

"I don't want you to take this boy to jail."

Ezra's eyes cut to Willadeene, filled with shock and distrust. The sight sears Willadeene's heart.

"Ma?" Clara says. "He stole from the store. He deserves to be punished."

"Sure, he stole from the store, but this boy's done paid too much already."

The deputy eyes the sheriff. "We letting him go, Evers?"

Sheriff Evers nods to Ezra. "You ain't gone press no charges on Montgomery?"

Willadeene shakes her head, flinging droplets from her graying afro. "Naw sir."

The sheriff huffs but releases his hold on the boy. "Then I guess he's free to go."

Willadeene waits for the deputy to unlock the cuffs. The lock clicks, and they fall into his hands.

Ezra rubs his wrists, bringing his eyes to meet Willadeene's. "I don't know how I can thank you, Mrs. Willadeene."

“Ain’t no need, Ezra.” Willadeene pats the boy’s shoulders. The rain has drenched them both, and his sweatshirt clings to his bony body.

The cold rain must ice him, Willadeene reckons, and she can feel the poor boy shivering. But, as her hand rests on his shoulder, he stills for the first time.

## GUMPTION

“Lord have mercy.”

Presley mouths the words, crouching over the porcelain toilet in the women’s bathroom of her church. She rocks herself, forehead nearly bumping the olive-painted, stall door in front of her. Hands hug her midsection, and her angry stomach churns the bubbling acid deep within. She feels the signs of sickness and recites them from memory like a prayer. Abdominal cramps, the searing stab between her last rib and pelvis. Mouthwatering, the saliva slicking her throat in salty spit.

“Presley?”

She perks at the sound of her own name. “In here.”

The hinges of the bathroom door groan and shut. Footsteps patter against the tile floor.

“Do you have it?” Presley pushes the stall door open to see her best friend, Delilah Webster.

Delilah’s jade-green choir robe drags along the floor with each step. She pulls a sepia-brown hand from her deep pockets, revealing a small paper box.

Presley reaches for it, but her stomach turns. Her hand shrivels back to her stomach, as if the tight grip is enough to keep her breakfast where it is. It isn’t.

She slides off the toilet with a graceless thump and buries her head inside the basin before she purges her body.

Delilah rushes to her, grabbing at her thin, box braids and pulling them into the best ponytail she can with a scrunchie.

Presley hurls what’s left of her breakfast into the toilet until she only hacks, orange spit connecting her mouth to the toilet bowl in thin strings.

When she can breathe again between coughs, Delilah hands her a paper cup filled with water from the cooler in the foyer. “Are you okay?”

Presley nods, sipping the water. Her stomach gurgles, but she doesn’t have the urge to regurgitate the water too.

“Do you want to take the test?” Delilah retrieves the box from her pocket.

Presley rips the opening flap and tears out a thin, white, plastic stick. Delilah steps out of the stall, holding the door shut behind her. “Tell me when you’re done.”

Presley shakes out the test strips and several scatter on the bathroom floor. She picks one up and inserts it into the end of the plastic wand. The pregnancy test looks like it does on the box.

Standing, she re-hikes her lavender dress. Yanks down her panties. Hovers over the toilet. Presley holds the stick over the water and aims a stream of pee at the tester.

When Presley is empty, she lays it on the shredded remains of the pregnancy test box and fixes her skirt. “I’m done.”

Delilah releases the door, and Presley steps out with the test.

“Are you...?” Delilah looks down at the test in her hand.

“I have to wait until the lines appear.” Presley swings onto the sink’s counter and sits with her legs crossed. Delilah does the same, sitting on the opposite side of the sink.

Presley glances down at the pregnancy test between them and says a quick thank you prayer for Delilah. She didn’t deserve a best friend like her but couldn’t imagine a moment when they weren’t friends.

Delilah's grandmother, Mrs. Willadeene, was Presley's next-door neighbor, so the two spent many summer days and weekends playing in their connecting backyards. That's probably how they met, but it had been so long ago, Presley couldn't be sure.

Delilah looks down at the pregnancy test. "Something changed."

Presley peers over from the sink. "Two lines." Her stomach drops, and she inhales a shallow breath. Leans herself against the sink's mirror and stares up at the ceiling. The world dips, and Presley grips the sink's edge, her walnut-brown knuckles paling. Stop spinning, she orders the bathroom and pushes air in and out of her lungs.

This panic pounds harder in her chest than it usually does, Presley thinks. Worse than when she wakes every morning, searching for a red stain in her bed sheets. She has felt like this for three months. Should be used to it by now.

"And?" Delilah squints at the test. "What does it mean?"

Presley's voice comes out in pants. "It means... I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Delilah breaths the words like she can't believe it either. "Who's the father?"

Presley can't bring herself to say his name. "I don't know," she says instead.

Delilah's eyes rake Presley's face, but she doesn't say anything. Instead, she helps hide the evidence. She rips the pregnancy test into small, unrecognizable pieces and covers them in the trash can with wads of paper towels.

Presley flushes the pregnancy test, watching the plastic wand swirl around the basin until it's gone. But the results are still burned in her brain.

"Church service is about to start," Delilah says.

Presley can't bring herself to nod. Her head feels heavy. If she tilted it, her head might tumble off her shoulders.

“Everything’s going to be okay. I promise.”

Presley tries to feel reassured.

Delilah links her arm with Presley and walks the two out of the bathroom. The foyer, outside of the bathroom, is a small wood-paneled room with two doors facing opposite each other — one leading outside of their church and the other opening into the sanctuary. Delilah heads toward the second, and a pair of ushers pry open the door with white-gloved hands.

The sanctuary of the Brothers in Christ Primitive Baptist Church unfolds in front of Presley and Delilah. The large room is split in half by a center aisle, with a dozen pews on each side. The pews, thin crescents of wood with cushions padding the seats, face the pastor’s pulpit at the front of the room. Two choir stands rest one on each side of the pulpit. Windows line the walls, letting in a trickle of sunlight past stain-glass panes.

Delilah drops Presley off at her usual seat, beside Presley’s mother, Elaine Evers.

Elaine doesn’t acknowledge Presley, continuing her whispers to her friend, Sister Gloria Hatcher, on the other side of Elaine. Gloria’s wide, turquoise hat bobs as she nods to whatever Elaine says, threatening to fumble onto the floor.

Presley sits beside her mama. Forces her breath to even and avoid her mama’s cold stare.

Elaine eventually turns, and her eyes skirt over Presley. “What took you so long?”

Presley forces herself to shrug. To pretend her world isn’t crashing around her. “Delilah and I were talking.”

Elaine’s mouth ticks downward. “You should be in here.” Her words dip into a whisper. “What will people think of you spending all your time in the bathroom instead of in the Lord’s house?”

“Sorry, Mama.” Presley can barely hear herself over the hammering heart, vibrating in time with her spinning world.

A few months ago, at the start of the summer, Presley was lying on the floor of Delilah’s living room. They had pushed the furniture to the edges of the room to spread out along the floor — Presley with her paper applications for different universities and Delilah with a book on her latest obsession: paleontology. This book had a large, green fern on the cover with bolded, black words beneath: Prehistoric Plants.

Delilah stretched out beside her, the TV remote in her hand. She flipped channels while Presley typed away at her laptop.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve got applications coming up.”

Delilah rolled her eyes. “Yeah, in November. Why are you working on them now? We’re not even in school?”

“Some people want to get into a decent school, Lilah. Not everyone can coast on their daddy’s money.”

Delilah snorted and punched Presley in her shoulder. “Shut up.” She switched to a news station. Presley didn’t know which one.

“Where are you applying to?”

“Everywhere with a decent pre-med school to get me into a good neurosurgery program.”

“You’re already thinking about med school? That’s giving me a headache.”

“I have to if I want to be the youngest Black neurosurgeon. I’ve only got a few more years before I’m too old.”

“Who cares? Isn’t being a Black neurosurgeon good enough?”

Presley shook her head. There was never “good enough” in her family. Presley’s daddy was the youngest sheriff in Arlo and the reason crime in their small Virginia town was declining. Her mama was always hosting events for their church, and everyone who was anyone wanted an invite to these occasions. And her older sister, Jezmyn, was finishing her computer science degree a year and a half early, with honors and a perfect GPA.

Presley was just Presley. She had to be the best and youngest at something to stand out in her world. Or even be noticed by her parents.

“Thinking about your future is important,” Presley said.

“Not when it keeps you from thinking about the now.” Delilah increased the volume on the TV, and Presley glanced up. She almost looked away, but the words “ROE V. WADE OVERTURNED BY SCOTUS” caught her attention.

“What’s SCOTUS?”

“Shhh,” Delilah said.

“... in the chaos of the Supreme Court’s decision. Abortion, once a constitutionally protected right, is now a decision in the hands of individual states,” an unseen, female reporter said. The TV panned to the pearl steps of a courthouse.

Delilah craned her neck to Presley. “I can’t believe you don’t know what the Supreme Court is.”

Presley’s eyebrows sagged into a glare. “I never heard it called SCOTUS before.”

Delilah scoffed with a smirk. “Some neurosurgeon you’ll make.”



Presley's stare hardened at Delilah, but her frown dissolved when their eyes met. She faced the TV again. The reporter, a blonde woman in navy, stood with her back to the courthouse. She gestured to the people around her — some protesting, others defending, the decision.

"I feel bad for those women, y'know," Presley finally said. "I couldn't imagine having to get an abortion with the whole world sitting on your shoulders like that."

"Virginia still hasn't banned abortions," Delilah said. "They've still got time."

Presley feels an elbow in her arm and jolts.

"Could you at least pretend to be listening to the sermon?" Elaine whispers.

How long has she been daydreaming? Presley scans the sanctuary, trying to focus on where they are in the service. Elder Emmett, cloaked in a black robe reminiscent of the choir's green but with two, golden crosses stitched on each side of his chest, dabs his slick forehead with a handkerchief. His voice, usually deep and energized, is punctuated with breathy pants — a sign he's nearly finished preaching. "The hour has arrived for us to open up the altar for prayer. Everyone who is able, please join me."

Elaine rises, hooking her arms around Presley's, and all but drags her to the front of the sanctuary. "I want you to pray for some focus. And maybe a little discipline while you're at it."

The members follow, circling the open area before the altar. Elder Emmett descends from the pulpit to the center of the mass, instructing them to hold their neighbors' hands and bow their heads.

A few people bump into Presley, trying their best to shimmy as far left as possible.

Presley's eyes trace the members to her right. The congregation parts as what remains of the Montgomery family — Annie, her husband, Jack, and their youngest son, Ezra — join the circle.

Presley's eyes catch Ezra's, but he breaks their contact, eyes sweeping the floor. He had once told Presley that she had the prettiest copper eyes that he never wanted to look away from. That night, where no one but the stars had shared that tender moment between them, seems like a million years ago. Tears sting the corners of her eyes.

Elaine grips her daughter's hand again. A warning to keep her wandering eyes to herself and not draw attention. Presley's head falls.

"Is that...?" Presley hears someone whisper.

"It is," another says.

"Did you hear?"

"I did. The older Montgomery boy got sentenced."

"If I were Sister Annie," Elaine's own voice adds. "I wouldn't show my face for weeks."

Elder Emmett clears his throat, and the congregation settles. "Let us pray. Heavenly Father." As the pastor's voice pours over everyone, Presley lowers her chin to her chest and closes her eyes, forcing herself to focus on his words. But her thoughts drown out the prayer.

What was she going to do? She can't be pregnant. Not this close to graduation. She'd be popping out the baby as she walked across the stage. She would spend the rest of her senior year pregnant. Missing classes. Missing prom. Missing her friends.

Elaine would hide Presley away — in her room, in oversized clothes — away from the stares of their church. The whole town would whisper about Presley for months. For years after the baby was born. They would probably never stop.

Presley hisses a breath out of her nose to keep herself from spiraling out of control. She needs to think. There's a way out of this. You're a smart girl, Presley reminds herself. You can handle this. Just don't tell anyone.

But what about Ezra? Her eyes pop open. *Ezra....* She closes her eyes before anyone can see her panic.

She couldn't *not* tell the baby's father, right? He deserved to know. Deserved at least that much.

Did he want a baby? They'd never had a conversation about children, but then again, Presley and Ezra had been dating in secret for only a few months. The thought had never crossed Presley's mind.

Did she even want children? Maybe after med school and residency. Maybe after she's worked for a bit. Then, she figures, she'll be ready for a baby.

Not now. But later, maybe.

The room warms. Sweat puddles under her arms and across her forehead. Heat steams in her lungs until she's close to suffocating. Presley needs to be outside. Fresh air. If only for a few moments before her mama finds her and drags her back inside the sanctuary.

"In your name, Lord, we pray. Amen," Elder Emmett ends.

"Amen," the church echoes.

"Hug someone as you head back to your seats. Tell them you love them."

Presley's eyes flutter open, and her lips curl into a smile for her mama.

“God bless. I love you,” she whispers into Elaine’s ear as she seals her mama into a hug.

Elaine repeats the words back before letting go.

Finally free, Presley bolts, skipping past her pew and heading out the sanctuary doors. She forces her steps to even, not the sprinting pace she wishes to run. Pushes through the back doors before the ushers can open them.

The wooden door leading outside is on the opposite wall of the foyer, and Presley pulls the bronze doorknob. The door yields with a groan, and Presley steps over the threshold, into the warm September air.

She doesn’t take a breath until the door clicks shut. Then she can’t stop inhaling and exhaling. Pushing air through her lungs like it’s a drug. Anything to stop the panic frosting over her stomach.

Presley shivers beneath the sun. *What am I going to do?*

Presley can hear Elder Emmett giving the benediction to end the morning service, his voice humming through the walls.

Soon, everyone will spill out the front doors and glaze the front lawn. Elaine is surely looking for her, Presley thinks, but won’t immediately search. She must keep her routine of speaking to the other ladies after church. Elaine will wait for Presley to find her. For the conversations with the other ladies to wither. For her husband, Aaron, to find them outside and lead them to the car. Elaine will wait for the church to be a mile or so behind them before interrogating Presley.

Presley makes her way to the side of the church. To her hiding spot away from the congregation. The cemetery, behind the building, is where Presley goes. The grass is thicker here, ready for the grounds keeper to carve a path through the wild daffodils and weeds.

The tall grass itches Presley's bare legs, and she makes her way through the slate headstones, jutting above the grass, to the farthest side of the cemetery. She stops at a small, square marker, barely cresting over the weeds. Chiseled into the stone is a boy's name, Noah Montgomery, and a plot the size of an infant. Ezra's younger brother.

Ezra told Presley once that his family never comes out here. His mama is too sad. His daddy too angry. His older brother too indifferent. Only Ezra ever visits his baby brother. Sits at the side of the grave. Whispers to the little boy who never had the chance to live.

Before Presley and Ezra slept together, they would meet at Noah's headstone to get away. It was their spot away from the world, where they could just be the two of them: Presley from the too-perfect family and Ezra from the too-broken one.

Presley sits in the grass and traces a finger over the headstone's words. Her mind drifts back to Ezra.

What will she tell him when he meets her here?

Presley's head jerks up when she hears a pair of feet crunch through the grass, getting closer to her.

She hasn't had time to plan anything. To practice what she wants to say.

It's fine, she thinks. He'll understand. It's *fine*.

Ezra emerges into Presley's view. "Hey." He sits on the other side of her, so that they're both looking at Noah's headstone. "You left early."

"Wouldn't you?"

Ezra laughs, but the sound is heavy, like his thoughts weigh his laughter down. "Yeah, I would."

Silence swallows the space between them. Presley used to like their quiet. When their breaths sync in time with each other, like that night in Presley's backyard behind her daddy's shed.

Presley inhales. "Ezra, I want to tell you —."

"Don't you just hate this place?"

"What do you mean?"

"This church. Arlo. Everyone in it. Don't you hate them all?"

Presley doesn't say anything. Sometimes she does. But, right now, she doesn't hate anyone more than herself. *Tell him.* "Yeah, it sucks. But I really want to —."

"I mean the stares," he says. "The whispers. It's like the whole town's talking about Jadon. I wish everyone would just leave us alone. Everyone does stupid stuff but because he's Jadon..." Ezra takes a deep breath, softening his rising voice. "Sometimes I wish I could just leave this place. Don't you?"

Does she really want to leave? To college, sure, but Presley knows he isn't talking about that. Ezra doesn't care which university has the best pre-med program.

He isn't really interested in anything, save tinkering on his mama's old car. No, Ezra wants to get out of Arlo. Slink into some city where he can get some part time job as a mechanic and she as a receptionist. He had mentioned this once, and then, Presley didn't have the heart to say that his dream wasn't hers.

She wants a different future for herself, one her parents could be proud of. "Umm..."

The corners of his mouth drop. "You wouldn't go with me?"

"It's not that, Ezra. It's just —."

His voice raises. "What is it, then?"

“If you stop interrupting me for two minutes, I could tell you,” Presley snaps.

Ezra quiets, grinding his teeth to keep himself silent.

“I don’t want to run away like that.”

“But you’re going away to college in a few months.”

“That’s different. That’s for my future. I’m going to be the youngest —.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Ezra waves his hand, dismissing her thoughts. “‘The youngest Black neurosurgeon ever.’ When are you going to stop living for your parents and start living for yourself?”

Presley grimaces. This is a choice for herself. Being a neurosurgeon is all she wants to be.

Sure, Elaine had been thrilled when Presley told her a few months back and proceeded to tell all of Arlo that her daughter was going to be a doctor.

Sure, Presley had reveled in the attention, until Jezmyn came home one college break and announced that she was graduating the following semester, over a year earlier than planned.

Then Presley had to be something better than just a neurosurgeon. She had to be the youngest neurosurgeon in the world.

But it had all been her idea. That had to count for something.

“And running away...” Presley says, her voice growing. “...because you can’t take a few people talking behind your back is ‘living for yourself?’”

Ezra’s eyes narrow. “Forget I said anything. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Like you understand *anything* that’s going on in my life.”

Ezra stands, refusing to look at her.

Presley tries to grab at him and sputters an apology — anything to make him listen to her — but Ezra shakes free of her grip. He's gone before Presley can follow him.

She calls his name, but he doesn't answer. He doesn't even turn around to look at her.

Presley sinks back into the grass, dropping her head into her palms. She screwed that up. And she didn't even tell Ezra that she was pregnant.

Would it have mattered?

No, she thinks. Her pregnancy would just be one more thing for their town to talk about. He wouldn't want any more attention.

Presley knuckles her eyes, forcing her tears back into her skull. But they seep past her fingertips and drain down her cheeks.

What is she going to do?

"Presley?"

Presley spins around, but it's only Delilah, still in her choir robe. She sits beside Presley, blending in with the grass. "Did you tell him?"

Presley wants to say that she doesn't know what Delilah's talking about. But she can't bring herself to lie to her best friend. Not again. "He wouldn't have listened anyway."

Delilah wraps her arms around Presley and squeezes. "What are you going to do?"

Presley leans into the hug, burying her face into Delilah's collar. "I don't know." Her tears spill quicker, splotching the jade robe black.

Delilah holds Presley tighter. "We'll figure something out. I promise."



Early morning — when the sky is a blend of black and purple and white stars blink out of sight — is Presley’s favorite time of day. She sits in a rocker on her wrap-around porch while the whole world sits still, slowly waking. It’s too early for the birds to squawk awake, and even the crickets silence their chirping from the grass. For a single moment, every morning, time stops.

Presley likes the stillness of the breaking day. This morning, a soft, September breeze whispers through the fluffy dandelions spotting the yard. Wisps of white scatter, drifting in the air.

When they were little, Presley and Delilah would pick dandelions and blow the seeds, making wishes as they exhaled. Their worlds seemed so simple.

Presley chases one with her eyes. It bobs and sinks, drifting from its original spot in the grass, lifting above the paved driveway, and disappearing towards the road. The dandelion seed flashes in the headlights of a car and disappears — too far to see.

The headlights belong to a car older than Presley is. It’s small and silver with a wide nose. The lights flicker out, and the car slips into Presley’s driveway.

From the front windshield, Delilah yawns.

Presley sits on the porch a moment longer, as if the stillness will return, and she can sit and rock forever. But the crickets start back up and a few more stars blend into the inky black of the sky. Presley stands and heads for the car.

“How’d you get this?”

Delilah sits behind the steering wheel, barely tall enough to look over it. “Got it from Grandma.” She nods her head to the house on the right. Mrs. Willadeene’s brick ranch house. “She said she’s trying to get out of something with my aunt later today and told me not to bring it back until this afternoon. She thinks we’re taking it to school since Daddy’s at work.”

Presley raises an eyebrow. “You don’t even have a license yet.”

“Technically, I told her you were driving.” Delilah shrugs. “Would *you* prefer to drive?”

Delilah knows she doesn’t, Presley thinks. She hates driving on a good day, but today...

Presley shakes her head.

“That’s what I thought.” Delilah backs out of the driveway and doesn’t turn the headlights back on until Presley’s house is in their rearview mirror.

They drive in silence to Rowan, a city twice the size of Arlo and over an hour from Presley’s home. Occasionally, Delilah sings with the humming radio, songs that Presley doesn’t recognize, but she leaves Presley to her thoughts.

She thinks about how this is the first time she’s ever ditched school. How her homeroom teacher is calling her name for attendance. How the school’s receptionist will phone home around lunchtime to alert Elaine that Presley has missed class. How Presley will have to appease her mama with a lie at the dinner table.

What would Elaine say if she knew where Presley was on her way to? First, she would scream, Presley reckons. How dare her daughter get pregnant by that Montgomery boy? From the wrong side of town. From the wrong family. Just the wrong choice period. How stupid could her daughter be?

Then her mama would say how Jezmyn would never. Would never do something so unthinkable. Would never shame their family in that way. Jezmyn was too perfect to make a mistake like that, and Presley should be more like her big sis.

Presley sighs, leaning her head against the window. Sometimes she wishes she could think without her mama’s voice in the back of her head. Could be someone she was proud of, regardless of what her mama says.

Delilah pulls her grandmother's car into the small parking lot of an even smaller building. The building is slated with a brick exterior and a flat roof spanning the top. The few windows lining the front are covered with multicolored posters, all with the building's motto in bold letters: "Care, no matter what."

At the back of the parking lot are a group of people — women, mostly. Their stringy hair is pulled back into messy buns and their torsos are clad in the same, red shirts reading "PRAY to end ABORTION." They shout this mantra, waving handmade, poster board signs with different sayings.

Delilah fits the car away from them, into a narrow parking spot by a building. "Are you okay?"

Presley glances at the protestors in the side mirror.

"We can go home any time you want."

Presley inhales. "No." She pushes open her door.

The protestors, invigorated by their newest prey, shout "Choose life! Your mama did," but Delilah pushes Presley into the Planned Parenthood clinic before Presley focuses too much on what they're saying.

The lobby is small and square, much like the outside of the clinic. A dozen or so chairs dot the waiting room, with a coffee table here and there, piled with magazines. Most of the chairs are occupied by solo women or couples looking everywhere but the parking lot protestors.

A receptionist sits behind a desk and a glass pane against the farthest wall. Delilah links her arms with Presley, and they cross the room.

“Hi ladies,” the woman says through an opening in the glass. She stares at Presley and Delilah through thin, cat-eyeglasses slipping down the bridge of her nose. “How can I help y’all?”

“I’m here for my appointment.” Presley’s words come out in a rushed breath, and she repeats herself again, much slower.

“And what’s your name, darling?”

Presley gives it and her date of birth and her address and every other question the receptionist asks.

“Alrighty then,” the receptionist finally says. “You filled out all that paperwork online?”

Presley nods. She had done everything last night, when her head had been too heavy with thoughts to sleep.

“Why don’t y’all find a place to sit. A nurse will bring you back shortly.”

Presley can only force herself to nod with a small, thankful smile.

“And we’re only allowing patients back in the procedure rooms,” the woman says. “For your safety and privacy.”

Presley thinks she sees the receptionist frown at the protestors past the glass windows, but her smile returns when she glances back at Presley and Delilah. “Y’all go and have a seat.”

Delilah manages to find a bench open in the back corner of the lobby. They sink into the cushions and wait together. Nurses call the women back into the clinic one at a time. The lobby starts to empty, but more women trickle in and take their seats. Finally, a nurse, a short woman in bright, pink scrubs, enters the waiting room and announces, “Presley Evers” to the waiting patients.

Presley forces her legs and arms to heave her out of the chair and heads into the back with the woman. As the door shuts behind her, she looks to Delilah, who offers a comforting grin. It draws a small smile from Presley, and she follows the nurse deeper into the clinic.

The nurse gives her name, “Birdie,” and Presley forces herself to remember it. She repeats “Birdie, Birdie, Birdie” in her mind to block out her pounding heartbeat.

Birdie leads Presley into an exam room and asks Presley to undress and lie on a bed draped in crumpled paper before leaving.

Presley sheds her clothes and pulls on the ugly gown that the nurse leaves. When the nurse returns, Presley lies on the bed, grimacing every time the paper crinkles beneath her. A team of women enter behind Birdie, wheeling in a cart of metal contraptions. They each introduce themselves, but Presley can’t remember their names. Birdie strings an IV through Presley’s arm — “For sedation,” she explains when Presley asks — while another rotates the cart closer to the bed.

Presley tries to watch the women work, but they move too fast, and her brain feels heavy. Almost drowsy, like when she pulled an all-nighter to study for the SAT, and now she’s struggling to keep her eyes open.

Birdie stops next to Presley and places a hand on her shoulder to get her attention. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” Presley murmurs.

“You’re going to sleep for a minute, and when you wake up, you’ll be ready to go.”

Presley tries to thank Birdie. But her words slur in sleepiness, mashing together like she’s speaking too slowly and too quickly all at the same time. Presley tries again, but she can’t move

her lips. They're too heavy. Just like her eyelids. Too heavy to stay open. She lets them close, and sleep overtakes her.

Waking happens slowly, and when Presley's conscious, Birdie is already in the room. She helps Presley sit up before looking over a clipboard of papers.

"Your procedure went well," Birdie says. "As expected, there is a bit of blood. And you'll bleed for a while, but don't you worry. There's a recovery room where you can get a snack. After that, you're free to go."

Presley listens but doesn't hear her. Her brain is still picking up the pieces. After this, she has to go home and lie to her mama. To Ezra. To everyone. She wraps her arms around herself and feels a stab of pain in her pelvis. Presley's eyes well. Should she be relieved or disappointed that she isn't pregnant anymore? She can't decide.

Birdie sits on the edge of the bed. "Would you like me to bring some snacks so you can stay a few extra minutes? It's usually against the rules, but I can make an exception just this once."

Presley opens her mouth to answer, but tears dribble down her cheeks instead. A sob rises in her throat, and all she can do is bury her head in her hands.

Birdie wraps her arms around Presley. "Oh, sweetie. It's going to be okay. Everything's going to be okay."

Presley tries to nod, but the sobs wrack her body.

"I know it doesn't feel all right. But trust me, it gets easier."

Presley knuckles her eyes. "Have you ever had an —." Presley is cut off by sobbing hiccups.

Birdie nods. "I was a bit older than you were now, but yeah. I was twenty-three, and, well..." Birdie shakes her head. "No one talks about this side of abortion. How lonely it is on the *other* side. Pretending nothing happened when it obviously did. No one really looks at you the same."

Presley sniffs. "How did you get through it?"

"Wasn't easy. Takes a lot of strength. A lot of gumption, as my ma liked to say, to be strong for yourself when no one else is around." Birdie smiles at the thought, releasing Presley from her hug. "And I had a really nice nurse. She even called to check in on me a few weeks later. I found my way because of her." Birdie stands. "I'm going to go get you a couple of things. Be right back."

Presley nods, unable to form the words "thank you." Those words just aren't enough. She leans into the pillows. Stares at the ceiling. Replays her plans for the day in her head like a broken record.

When she left the clinic, Presley was going home. Hopefully, Elaine would be out, and Presley could sneak into her room and remain there for the rest of the day. Or at least until she could think of a good enough lie for why she ditched school.

After that... what was she going to do?

Pretend her life was normal?

Go each day pretending that she was the same person as yesterday?

Presley shakes her head. She can never be the same person. Can never go back to being that Presley.

So, what will New Presley do? The thought pops into her head. She doesn't know how to answer it.

She has options, Presley thinks. She could... tell her mama where she was really at. The thought brings a whisper of smile to her lips, and Presley shakes her head. She would never.

She could be a gynecologist and help other women preparing for abortions.

This thought sobers Presley. Give up neurosurgery for gynecology.

What would her mama say, Presley wonders.

Does it matter, is the next thought — a whisper in the back of her mind.



## IT'S BLOWIN' UP A STORM

Delilah takes a deep breath and slides beneath the wheel of her daddy's Cadillac. It's an action she's done more times than she would ever admit. She shifts the driver's seat up to match her short frame. Tilts the rearview mirror until she's staring into her russet-brown eyes. Wraps raw knuckles around the leather steering wheel.

Delilah drops the keys into the cupholder, presses the push button start, and rolls the windows down. On nights like this, she feels like she's going to suffocate.

Midnight air seeps in with a few, splattering droplets of rain. She inhales again, warm washing into her nose. It heats her like hot chocolate and smells musty like grass shavings — the smell of a storm. This storm has been brewing for days, breaking a few days earlier, and hasn't stopped since. The rain pelts on, bringing a wet, petrichor fragrance. Her grandma liked to say that she could smell when a storm was blowing up. "Smells like the earth," she once told Delilah.

And that's what Delilah smells. A light shower sprinkles against the exterior of the car, and she breathes in a whiff of earth. Relaxes against the driver's seat.

Beyond the rumbling engine, she hears the crickets, blending their throbbing songs into a single harmony. Delilah used to find their sound consuming, breaking through her thoughts with their screeching, sliding limbs. But, tonight, she welcomes being consumed by anything other than her own thoughts.

Delilah sighs. She needs to leave now or, by the time she gets back, her ma will be returning from work at the hospital. Delilah didn't want to think about what her ma would say when she saw her fifteen-year-old pulling out of the driveway.

She presses the gear shift into drive and rolls the car out of the gravel driveway. Nice and slow, she tells herself. Just get out of the driveway.

The tires slip out of the muddy gravel and touch the asphalt road. Delilah presses the gas pedal down. The engine growls loud enough to wake her daddy and the neighbors, but Delilah can't bring herself to care. The car lurches forward, and the smallest smile spreads across her face. Time to go anywhere but here.

The town fades into her rearview mirror as Delilah drives. She doesn't go anywhere in particular. Just drives on instinct. She takes a road that she knows links to another one and another one, without really watching where she's going. But she doesn't have to. Her daddy always says you can never get lost in Arlo. All roads connect to somewhere you've been.

It's usually about this time in Delilah's drive when the thrill of sneaking out in the middle of the night wanes. Whatever music purring from the speakers fades and melds with the deafening silence, and Delilah is reminded why she's driving around at — her eyes cut to the illuminated dashboard — one-thirty-seven in the morning. Insomnia isn't the right word, but that's what Delilah labels her symptoms: the dreaming, the waking, the stealing her daddy's car for a night drive.

The dreams are what's giving her the most trouble. Most start out ordinary enough. She's in Paula's Diner or she's sitting in the choir stand at Brother's in Christ church or she's beneath the maple tree at the edge of her Grandma Willadeene and Papa Billy's garden. Her papa is always there. In whatever place they're in, they sit next to each other, so close their knees bump together. He's telling her stories of his childhood, ones that Delilah has already committed to memory but wants to hear again. They're better from the source, she always thinks.

She breathes in his scent. He always smells like fresh-turned dirt. Like no matter how many times he washes his clothes, the smell sticks to him. Permeates his skin. He has become the soil. Delilah loves that smell.

Her papa decides he needs to stand up. Always for a different reason, depending on the dream. If they're in Paula's, it's to wash up before their food arrives. At church, he's about to preach. In his garden, he left some tools on the porch. He always stands, smiles down at Delilah while he does, and then he keels over. Delilah can never figure out why. Papa Billy just falls, all six-and-some feet of him. He's too tall to drop gracefully, but he does anyway. As if, for that one moment, he can defy gravity just before he hits the ground. She can't get the horrible crunch out of her head when he does.

And then Delilah's awake. She's always crying. Sweating. Then, she's sprinting. She moves around her room in the dark, shucking on a sweatshirt and shoes before racing out of her bedroom as quietly as she can. Passes her daddy's room, where he's still sleeping. His snores shake his bedroom door.

When Delilah's downstairs, she's less quiet. She rummages the table for his car keys, slips them into her sweatshirt pocket, and is out the door.

The escaping her room, the droning crickets, and the driving help her forget the dream. But, when the adrenaline fades, she's left with nothing but the cold reality that not even the September air can melt.

Her papa never toppled over like that in front of her, but he ain't ever getting back up. He died of some long medical term that her best friend, Presley, had explained to her, but Delilah's head felt too light and her heart too heavy to listen. Delilah thinks about his funeral, the second weekend in June, earlier that year. It rained all day, as if the sky mourned him. The rain soaked

his burial plot, out in the backyard of the church. When everyone marched outside, the wet earth smelled rotten, the musk searing her nose. Tainting what her papa smelled like. That was the first time she cried that day. Her tears mixed with the rain and washed her papa's scent away.

Something beyond the golden headlight beams catches in the light. Delilah jerks, stomping on the brake pedal and swerving the Cadillac to the edge of the road. She sees the chestnut fur of a deer's behind, and for a full minute, Delilah forgets how to breathe.

*If I wrecked the car after stealing it*, "Daddy would kill me," she says out loud, finishing the thought. She forces a few breaths — in through her nose, out through her mouth — until her hands don't shake when she holds the steering wheel.

She hasn't been this jittery since... earlier today.

Delilah eases against the accelerator, continuing the car against the wet road. Flicks the windshield wiper faster, sloshing away the falling rain.

She can barely see past the beam of her headlights as the memory of that morning consumes her.

Rain had puddled in Delilah's sneakers as she shouldered open the side door leading to the science hall, instead of the front entrance. She couldn't risk the receptionist spotting her as she snuck into class, and today was her third tardy in a row. The science door could be unlocked with one swipe of her school ID, and the camera taping this entrance never worked. If she was late one more time, Delilah would be looking at detention. Her daddy would kill her if he found out about her tardies or worse — her taking his car out for her nightly drives.

She had been driving last night until three in the morning. And the morning before that. When she finally snuck back into the house, curled under her comforter, and fell asleep, the sun peeked over the maples outside her window. Most nights, she only slept for a couple of hours

before she heard her ma back home from the hospital. Delilah's own personal alarm clock, reminding her to get ready for school.

But these last couple of nights, sleep only seemed to come when the sun had risen. Delilah would promise herself a few more minutes and, the next time she opened her eyes, her first period class was starting.

Delilah clicked on her phone to check the time. She had missed half of sophomore pre-calculus but could still slip in. Mrs. Albert wouldn't notice. *Probably.*

Sneaking into class seemed a better option than hiding out in the bathrooms until second period started. Delilah couldn't afford the school receptionist calling home about an absence.

She followed the checkered tile flooring to the central staircase, connecting this hall, library, and main entrance to the math, languages, and history halls of the second floor. Delilah climbed the stairs two at a time, trying to keep her feet from slapping as she jogged, until she reached the opening of the math hall. It matched the science hall in every way — checkered floors, gray-painted walls, and heavy wooden doors decorated with the teacher's personalities.

Delilah found her pre-calc easily. The only one without decor. Like Mrs. Albert, her door was as boring as the subject she taught. Delilah could never see herself using pre-calc in any situation outside of her first period.

Delilah pushed the metal handle down and pressed the door open as quietly as she could. Mrs. Albert — a skeleton of a woman with a thin frame and blond knot of hair on the back of her head — stood at the front of the square classroom, scraping a piece of white chalk against the dusty blackboard. She drew a lopsided circle and marked it with squiggles that Delilah should recognize but couldn't seem to place.

She spotted an empty desk on the other side of the room, towards the back of the class. Delilah was halfway to the seat when Mrs. Albert turned, her eyes narrowing. “Miss. Webster. Thank you for *finally* joining us.”

Delilah plastered a sheepish smile on her face. “Sorry, Mrs. Albert.”

Her teacher waited a full second before pointing at the blackboard with her chalk. “Who can tell me what this is?”

Delilah found the empty seat, dropping her book bag onto the floor.

Fiona Hatcher, sitting to her left, looked Delilah up and down, a scowl marring her face. Delilah tried to ignore her.

She had known Fiona for too long. Their families had always been close — her own grandma was friends with Fiona’s grandma, Rosemary. Their daddies, Emmett and Colton, played golf together too — and the girls had been in every possible church group together: Sunday School, youth ministry, and now, the choir. Fiona couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket, Delilah reckoned, but she never told Fiona that. Her daddy, Emmett, was always saying that Delilah was a Webster. She had to hold herself to a higher standard.

Fiona scoffed when Delilah sat, whispering to her nearby friends, “Told you she’d be late.”

Delilah craned her neck to Fiona. Screw whatever her daddy said. “You got something to say to me?” Delilah spat loud enough for Fiona to hear.

Fiona cast her eyes onto Delilah with a scowl, as if to say *how dare you interrupt my very important conversation about you*.

Delilah leaned toward Fiona, ready to give the girl a piece of her mind, when Mrs. Albert spun around.

“Miss. Webster. I know you’ve only been with us for a few minutes, but what did you get for number three?”

“Number three?” Whatever venom Delilah prepared to lash at Fiona dripped from her voice, and her eyes clambered to the dusty blackboard for any signs of an answer. The circle, now adorned with strange fractions around the perimeter, was all that Mrs. Albert had bothered to scratch onto the board. The drawing looked a bit like the unit circle Delilah had seen in her textbook the previous evening, before she had sworn off math for a new paleontology book from her papa’s library. He had been interested in dinosaurs, and when Delilah was little, they would dig in his garden looking for fossils.

Sometimes, her papa would hide chicken and pork bones in the dirt for him and Delilah to reassemble — like architects rebuilding the ancient world.

Papa Billy never had the opportunity to study paleontology in college. He had to give up that dream in the eighth grade, when his daddy needed help manning their tobacco farm, and had never gotten the chance to go back to school.

Delilah had promised her papa that she would go to college for him and bring back all the lessons he never had. Papa Billy had been thrilled when she told him and had lent her the first book he had ever bought: one on prehistoric plants.

Papa Billy died before he could give Delilah any of his others, but her grandma had found them in his study. The covers chipped from use. Old pages creased and colored with his notes. Ever since Grandma Willadeene gave Delilah his other books, she spent every day pouring over them and usually forgot about her homework.

Now, she wished she had looked a little harder at her math textbook.

“Number three!” Delilah tried to sound sure of herself and fumbled through her bookbag for a notebook. Any would do. She opened a blank page in her history one. Skimmed the page, pretending she had done whatever work Mrs. Albert insinuated. Pointed to an empty line. “I’ve got it here. For number three, I got... six.”

“Six?”

“Yes ma’am?”

“And how did you get that answer?”

“...with math?”

Mrs. Albert crossed the room in a few, long steps, stopping at Delilah’s desk. She didn’t have time to shield her notebook before Mrs. Albert snatched it from the desk. Delilah hoped she had ripped the page her teacher grabbed but wasn’t that lucky.

Mrs. Albert studied the empty page for too long then dropped the notebook onto Delilah’s desk. “Does anyone else have an answer?”

“The *correct* answer is two pi,” Fiona said, eyes skirting to Delilah and lips curling.

Delilah felt the blood in her head run hot, and it took everything in her not to take her notebook and whack Fiona upside the side of the head with it.

“And how did you get that, Miss. Hatcher?”

Fiona’s smirk stretched, and she launched into a description of the answer.

“Well done, Miss. Hatcher,” Mrs. Albert said. “That answer is correct.”

Delilah could feel the class’s eyes linger on her, even as Mrs. Albert strode to the front of the room.



She couldn't wait for the class to end, and when the first period bell rang, Delilah was the first to spring from her seat. She was nearly at the door when Mrs. Albert announced, "Miss. Webster. Could you stay for one moment?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Albert." Delilah took another step closer to the hallway. "I have Mr. Spencer for English, and we have a test today." He wasn't giving a test, but the bigger Delilah's excuse was, the sooner she'd be out the door.

"A moment, Miss. Webster."

Delilah groaned but met Mrs. Albert at her desk.

Her teacher waited until the class filtered out, even as Fiona took forever to pack her bookbag, eyes gliding over Delilah and Mrs. Albert every couple of seconds. Finally, when Fiona had left, Mrs. Albert said in a quiet voice, "This is the third time you've been late this week. Probably the tenth time this month, and we're barely halfway through September."

Delilah shrugged and stared at the navy nylon carpet beneath her feet.

Mrs. Albert's cold stare melted. "I'm sure you're still in shock after your grandfather.... The whole town's been feeling his loss, and I'm sure it's hit you and your family the hardest."

*I'm sure* I would prefer if you didn't put words in my mouth, Delilah wanted to say but crammed the thought down her throat. "I'm doing fine."

"Who have you talked to about his... passing?"

"Me and daddy talk about him all the time." That was another lie, Delilah thought as soon as the words came out of her mouth, but they earned a smiling nod from Mrs. Albert.

Delilah and her daddy hadn't talked about her papa since Sterling's Funeral Home lowered him into the ground. There were times she wanted to bring him up, especially with the dreams she'd been having, but Delilah couldn't do it.

She'd watched something die in her daddy that day. When the casket was first rolled in and parked before the altar of their church, her daddy, Emmett, had dropped to his knees at the start of the wake. Had to be carried to his seat by two of the church's deacons.

Delilah had never seen him that way. How could she bring up the worst day of his life? The worst day of hers.

Mrs. Albert seemed satisfied with the lie. "Okay, Miss. Webster. If you ever need someone else to talk to, my door is always open."

Delilah forced a polite smile. Everyone always said that, but the words never rang true. "Thank you."

Mrs. Albert returned the smile, a sign that Delilah had been dismissed, and she turned from her teacher's desk. Delilah crossed the room in a few, long steps, and left the suffocating classroom. As soon as she passed the threshold, Delilah took a deep breath. Felt like she hadn't breathed that entire conversation.

"Ooh! Is someone in trouble?"

Delilah dragged her eyes to Fiona, leaning against a locker a few feet away. Fiona had waited for Delilah to leave, she assumed, and was now here to make the rest of her day a living nightmare.

"What did she give you? In-school suspension? Detention?" Fiona cackled at the idea.

"No. *Not that it's any of your business.*" Delilah turned from Fiona and strode in the opposite direction of her stalker — and in the opposite direction of her next class. She would have to take the long way and make a giant circle to her English class, just to avoid Fiona.

But Fiona pursued her. "Just like a Webster. Always finding a way to get out of trouble."

Ignore her, Delilah coached herself, weaving through the thin crowd to the nearest staircase. Most students had already found their next class, but a few lingered. Their eyes clung to Delilah and Fiona, especially as Fiona raised her voice.

“Just because your family’s got more money than Carter’s got little pills doesn’t mean you’re special.”

*Breathe.* Delilah sucked in a deep breath but could feel her face heating. If Fiona didn’t back up...

“Y’know, you need to get over your dead grandpa. The whole world doesn’t revolve around you *just because you’re a Webster.*”

Delilah moved faster than she had in her entire life. So fast that her bookbag slid off her shoulders and crashed to the ground. She didn’t even feel the weight freeing her. Didn’t feel anything but hot rage coursing through her.

Delilah sits in her daddy’s Cadillac, replaying the events of the day in her head. She doesn’t remember shoving Fiona back. Only, for a split second, a weightless feeling.

Fiona stumbled back, her own book bag throwing her off balance. But she didn’t fall.

Delilah tries to focus on this memory a million times, but it never forms clearly. Fiona must have reached for Delilah first. Attempts to shove her back.

At some point, Delilah’s hand curled into a fist. And that fist collided with Fiona’s face.

Her nose crackled, and Fiona spat blood.

The searing pain in Delilah’s knuckles came later when she sat in the principal’s office. Delilah later recollected that a student had seen the punch and ran for the principal, Mr. Tucker. He had only taken one look at Fiona’s blood-splattered shirt and crooked nose and Delilah’s raw, left hand and determined that both girls needed to follow him.

Delilah's memory clears when she's sitting in Mr. Tucker's office. He had left her there to stew while dropping Fiona off at the nurse and returned with Emmett in tow. Delilah wasn't sure how long she had sat in his office before the heavy door swung on its hinges, Mr. Tucker entering. Emmett, in his work clothes — a white polo with "Webster's Produce" embroidered on his chest and khakis stained with what looked like tomato juice — trailed behind.

"...sorry to be calling you in from work," Mr. Tucker was saying. Delilah had missed the first part.

Emmett glowered at his daughter. "What happened with my daughter, Mark? The call I got said there'd been a fight."

Mr. Tucker nodded. "Yes, 'fraid so, Emmett. Another student — I'm sure you know Fiona Hatcher and her family — was following Delilah. Said some unkind things. Y'know how girls can be." Mr. Tucker tried to laugh off his joke, but her daddy didn't join him. "Anyways, according to some students, Fiona made a remark about... the late Elder Webster... and Delilah didn't take it too well. She pushed Fiona. Fiona pushed her back. And then Delilah punched her."

Emmett rubbed the bridge of his nose, sliding up his thin, wire glasses in the process. "What were you thinking?" he muttered to Delilah.

Delilah hung her head. Didn't know.

"I know this has been a hard time for your family, and y'know I hate adding to the pressure, but we need to talk about Delilah's future at Arlo High."

Emmett's head shot up. "What do you mean?"

"Well..." Mr. Tucker avoided Emmett's gaze. "We do have a zero-tolerance policy for fighting. And since Delilah threw the first punch, she's facing expulsion."

Delilah's eyes caught Mr. Tucker's for a second. He looked away first.

"Expelled." The words sounded hollow in Emmett's voice. Almost as hollow as his cry when Papa Billy died. Delilah tried to shut out the memory.

"Fraid so, Emmett. It's policy."

"There's got to be something you can do, Mark. Y'know Delilah's a good kid."

"I know she is, but..."

"Rules are rules," Emmett finished for him. He sighed but didn't sound resigned. It reminded Delilah of when she was little and caught doing something she wasn't supposed to, and her daddy was about to tell her to go get a switch. "I know, but there has to be something I can do. I'd hate for my annual donation to the school to... lose its way."

Mr. Tucker wheezed. "Yes, that'd be a shame."

Emmett nodded coldly. "Yes, and I planned on doubling it this year."

Delilah glanced in her daddy's direction. He was a Webster. *They* were Websters.

"We will always be something that everyone else in Arlo can't be," Emmett had told Delilah once. "And that means we have to hold ourselves to a higher standard. Be better than those around us."

She'd been too young to comprehend what he meant at the time but grew to understand. In their small town, a last name was always coupled with a reputation, and that recognition weighed as heavy as money. As embarrassed and hurt as Delilah felt when her friends and classmates commented about the money connected to her last name, she knew that "Webster" also carried respect. And she had always been proud of that reputation.

“Arlo High’s such a good school,” Emmett continued. “And you know what Romans says about good behavior. The Lord ‘will repay each person according to what they have done.’”

“Amen, Elder.”

Her pride dissipated.

Emmett found his checkbook in his back pocket and scribbled his signature onto the paper. “Please see that this does good work within the school. On behalf of the Websters and the church.”

Mr. Tucker took the check and coughed when his eyes traced over the dollar amount. “We’ll still need to talk about repercussions for Delilah.”

“Whatever you suggest, we will abide by.”

“Two-day suspension.”

Emmett swallowed his reply. “Fine.” He stood before Mr. Tucker could change his mind and glared down at Delilah. “Get up. We’re going.”

Delilah scrambled up and followed her daddy out of Mr. Tucker’s office.

Their drive home was quiet for all of ten seconds. By the time Emmett pulled out of the parking lot, he reprimanded Delilah for her stupidity. And grounded her. Her entire suspension would be spent at their house. No visiting her best friend, Presley. Only home until her suspension was up. Then, only home and school.

Delilah thinks about how angry he was as she eases his Cadillac onto a familiar street. Her grandma lives on this street, Delilah thinks, and before long, she’s turning into Grandma Willadeene’s driveway.

The brick ranch house was more of deep brown than rusty-red brick. White columns supported the low-pitched roof hanging over the porch. A few white wicker chairs sat by the door, alongside her grandma's various flowers in mismatched pots. The sight of the house reminded Delilah of home just as much as her own house did.

She checks her phone for the time. It's nearly two-thirty in the morning, but light glows beyond the pulled blinds. It's the kitchen, Delilah thinks, and turns the car off before running up the cement walkway to Grandma Willadeene's front door, dodging as much of the pelting rain as she can.

She knocks, beating on the door in a random rhythm like she always does until she hears Willadeene approach.

Her grandma takes a moment to unlatch the door.

"Hi, Grandma."

Willadeene blocks the doorway in nothing but a silk bonnet and a yellow nightgown.

"Delilah Jane Webster! What are you doing on my porch in the middle of the night?"

"Visiting."

Grandma Willadeene narrows her eyes at her granddaughter. "How on God's green earth did you even get here? You don't have a license."

"I... borrowed Daddy's car."

"You and I both know he'd never let you do that." Grandma Willadeene sucks her teeth before opening the door wider. "Well, come on in. I don't want you catching a cold in this storm."

Delilah steps into her grandma's living room and breathes in the smell of pound cake.

"You're baking at two in the morning?"

“And you were driving. *Illegally*.”

The living room is mostly open, with clashing furniture that Willadeene has collected throughout the years. A powder blue sofa on one wall. A floral recliner on the other. A rose loveseat between the two. Everything aims towards the mantle, holding the television and photos of Willadeene and her family.

Grandma Willadeene leads Delilah into the kitchen and connecting dining room. On one of the marble countertops rests a pound cake still in the Bundt pan. “Sit on in there, and I’ll cut you a slice.” She nods to the dining room.

“Thank you, Grandma.” Delilah sits at the closest chair, tucked beneath the rectangular table with the white, sunflower cloth draped over.

“You want ice cream with this?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You like butter pecan?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I also got some sweet tea. You want some of that, too?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’ll get you a glass.”

In a few minutes, Grandma Willadeene joins Delilah with two plates of thickly cut pound cake smothered in melting butter pecan ice cream and two mugs of sweet tea, the ice clinking against the ceramics. She sits from across from her granddaughter and passes Delilah a napkin.

Grandma Willadeene shovels her spoon into the cake and ice cream, speaking with her mouth full. “Now, why are you driving in the middle of the night?”

Delilah dips the cake onto the end of her spoon. “Couldn’t sleep.”



Willadeene points her cleaned spoon at her granddaughter. “Keep talking.” Goes back and refills it.

“It ain’t nothing, Grandma. I needed to clear my head.”

Her grandma stares at Delilah for a second, breaking her gaze to take a long sip of her tea. “Y’know, I met a boy the other day. At the store. Said the same thing to me. Had so much stuff going on in that head of his that he hadn’t shared with no one. Not even his own mama. Little sad, ain’t it?”

“Suppose so.”

“I don’t want you to end up like that boy I met.” Grandma Willadeene looks into the bottom of her mug, staring past the drink and ice. “It’s a lonely life not talking to people about what’s going on. Maybe they can help. Keep you from doing something stupid like driving without a license.”

Delilah nods, staring down the ice cream dripping from her spoon to her plate. “I’ve been having these dreams. About Papa. One minute we’re somewhere talking, and the next he’s...” Delilah washes down the rest of her thoughts with sweet tea.

Grandma Willadeene nods. Eats another bite of cake. “Have you told your daddy about these?”

“I don’t want to bother him with something like that.”

“And that’s why you can’t sleep? Because you keep dreaming about Billy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Grandma Willadeene hums around her spoon, licking the last of her pound cake and ice cream. “I know it can be hard to talk about your papa. When Billy first passed, I didn’t say nothing to nobody. Didn’t want to. Then, when your Aunt Clara came down, the first thing I did

was yell at her. I didn't really mean what I said, but that's what happens when you bottle things up. When you're wound too tight, you're bound to snap."

Tears sprout from the crevices of Delilah's eyes, and she dabs them away with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

Willadeene, eyes welling too, pats Delilah's hands from across the table. "I missed Billy for a long time. Still do. Felt like it was blowin' up a storm, and I was all in the middle of it. Takes a while for that storm to pass. But it does. Slowly but surely."

Delilah sniffs. "I miss him, Grandma. I miss Papa so much." Tears sweep down her cheeks, and Delilah buries her head in her arms, snorting all over a sunflower on the tablecloth.

Grandma Willadeene moves around the table, sitting adjacent to her granddaughter. She wraps her arms around Delilah into a hug and rocks her.

Delilah sobs, tears soaking into Willadeene's nightgown. She inhales, breathing in her grandma's smell. Like flour with a dib of lemon.

Delilah retracts her hands first, then Grandma Willadeene releases her. She dries her cheeks on the sleeves of her sweatshirt and takes a deep breath. "Sorry for crying all over you."

Her grandma grabs Delilah's sepia hands in her own. Grandma Willadeene's hands are several shades lighter than Delilah's medium brown and etched with wrinkles and callouses from years of working in her garden. She has strong hands like Papa.

"Don't be sorry, baby. Crying is good. But, y'know, ain't nothing that can't be fixed with a little pound cake and butter pecan ice cream," Grandma Willadeene says with a wink.

Delilah chokes, caught between crying and laughing. When her coughs calm, she picks up her spoon again and scoops up a bit of cake. The pound cake is soggy from the melted ice

cream. Delilah swallows and feels the cold cake warm her. It still has its slightly lemon twang mixed with the nutty ice cream.

“You can stay here for the night, if you want,” Grandma Willadeene offers. “I can tell your daddy that I called you in the middle of night for something or another.”

Delilah shakes her head, finishing off her cake in a few bites. “I can drive myself home. Plus I want to hurry up and be ungrounded.”

Grandma Willadeene takes her and Delilah’s empty plates and mugs into the kitchen and starts to fill the sink with water.

“What are you doing?”

“Can’t have my dishes sitting overnight. What will everybody think?”

No one’s coming into your kitchen in the middle of the night, Delilah thinks but shakes her head. “Grandma, you said you met a boy the other day at your store that didn’t have anyone to talk to.”

Her grandma nods, spraying dish soap into the left side as it fills.

“Is he doing okay?”

Grandma Willadeene sighs. “That boy... he needs a little guidance, is all. Didn’t have the best ma or daddy watching him grow up.”

“Who’s going to help him if his ma or daddy don’t?”

Willadeene drops a yellow rag into the soapy water but doesn’t pick up a dish. She holds herself up on the sink, like the question exhausts her. “I don’t know,” she finally says. “I wanna help him, but I just don’t think I got what it takes anymore.”

“Sometimes being there is enough. Like you are for me.” Delilah hugs her grandma goodbye. “Thank you, Grandma.”

Grandma Willadeene kisses Delilah's cheek. "Anytime, baby. But let's not make this a habit."

Delilah steps out onto the front porch and, as her leg swings mid-air for the step, she hears a soft patter. Fat drops of rain bleed into the grass, onto the concrete sidewalk, and all over. She climbs down the single stair of the porch and walks into the middle of her grandma's yard.

The rain is warm. Slides down her face. Bathes her sweatshirt.

Above her, swollen clouds obscure the sky. Delilah can barely make out their edges against the darkness, but a faint white glow past them.

She squints, trying to see if the sky is being lit by a purple-white streak of lightning. The clouds slowly part, taking the rain with them.

The sliver of the moon, a dangling crescent, emerges between the charcoal-gray clouds. Its milky light washes the night in a soft glow.

The last few drops of rain land on Delilah's forehead and slip down her cheeks like tears. She breathes in. The earlier, earthy odor of the rain lifts. The world smells like her papa again. Crisp and fresh.

The scent reminds Delilah of Papa Billy's hugs. How his arms, tall frame, and scent envelop her. Squeezes her.

The dark night before her replaces the memory. Above her, the clouds have parted, revealing more of the moon and winking stars.

Delilah smiles.

The storm is gone.

## THE OTHER SIDE OF CROOKED CREEK

Ezra Montgomery was fourteen years old when he and his older brother started sneaking out. He remembered the bite of the December air. The stillness of the world at one in the morning.

The night always began with his brother, Jadon, slapping Ezra across the face with a pillow. The force startled Ezra from sleep, and he nearly raised his voice to a shout. “Hit me again, and I’ll—.”

Jadon, with a finger pressed against chuckling lips, flashed their daddy’s wallet between spindly fingers.

Ezra squinted in the darkness of their bedroom. “We can’t.”

“I’m hungry.” Jadon raised a knowing eyebrow, pulling at the edges of a dark bruise around his right eye.

Ezra’s stomach rolled at the mention of food. “We’re going to get in trouble.” He didn’t want their daddy to give Ezra a matching shiner.

“Not if you don’t rat.”

That had been enough to get Ezra out of bed, not that he would have said no anyway.

The brothers moved around the room in silence, dressing in clothes warm enough to brace the bitter night. Ezra shrugged on his favorite sweatshirt — bright red. His favorite color. Jadon donned his favorite — an inky black with a silver skull stretched across the front.

Ezra hated Jadon waking him in the middle of the night, but they didn’t have much time to spend together with school during the day and Jadon’s basketball practices in the evenings. After practice, they ate supper with their mama and occasionally their daddy, if he wasn’t playing poker with his buddies. Ezra wished for the days his daddy was away. Their mama

would let Ezra and Jadon split his share of supper — but Jadon would sweep his half onto Ezra's plate. It seemed the only spare moments Ezra had with Jadon were these night trips, and, as much as he already missed his bed, he would miss Jadon even more.

Creeping out of their shared bedroom was the hardest part. If their daddy's snores rocked the walls of their double-wide, Jadon and Ezra were safe to sneak out the front. But tonight, an action movie and their daddy's drunk babbles whispered beyond their bedroom door.

Jadon pointed to their window, a small pane that could be pushed up to let the night air in.

Ezra suspected there had once been a sheer metal screen on the other side of the glass, but it was cut out long ago.

Jadon yanked up their window. "Go first."

Ezra was thinner than Jadon — almost six feet and skinnier than a pole. He slid his legs through the open window and wiggled his hips and chest until he could plant his feet in the grass, all in under a minute.

Jadon was not so quick. Shorter than Ezra by a few inches and with thicker arms, legs, and head, he squirmed his way through the window. Jadon's broad shoulders fit snugly between the frame, and he writhed until Ezra could pull him through. Jadon fell into the grass with a thump, but after a long second of waiting, no one came looking for them.

The brothers found their bikes dropped in the middle of their "front yard" — the stretch of grass separating their trailer from their neighbors. Ezra mounted his bike, while Jadon counted the bills in their daddy's wallet.

"What?" Ezra had said when he saw Jadon chew his lip.

"Nothing." He snapped the billfold shut. "Let's get out of here."

On these nights, Jadon and Ezra left the Trailers for Mike's gas station. Mike's was on the other side of Crooked Creek, a stretch of stream that sliced through Virginia and divided their small town of Arlo in half.

Ezra imagined that the Trailers might look like the white tops of a cresting wave. Not that Ezra had been to a beach, but sometimes there was a big enough surge in Crooked. For miles, the Trailers housed one of the largest trailer parks in the area — probably in Virginia, Ezra reckoned, but couldn't be sure. Each trailer was painted in different colors. His neighbors had a light teal one. Someone's down the road had burgundy siding. His own home was just white. Their deddy hadn't cared to paint the outsides, no matter how hard their mama begged. But, like all the others, every mobile home had a white roof. The waves never stopped. They went on as far as the eye could see. Ezra had once thought the Trailers were pretty, but truth be told, no one on that side of Crooked could buy a hill of beans.

Half a mile west of the creek was where living started to get good. Where anyone with a decent last name and reputation in Arlo lived. With their wide, green lawns and front porches and cul-de-sacs, that side of Crooked Creek didn't get a name like the Trailers. It was just called Arlo.

Mike's was a few miles northwest of the Trailers. In half an hour, Jadon and Ezra had crossed Crooked and skidded their bikes into the empty parking lot.

The gas station was a plain wooden building with two pumps out front. Beneath the only window facing the front of the store was a metal bench, tinged orange from years of rust. Old, yellow light bulbs were strung along the eaves, casting the entrance in a sunset glow.

Ezra imagined the glass bulbs were filled with lightning bugs, especially when some had flickered out.

Jadon stepped through the light and into the gas station, a small bell announcing their entrance. Ezra slipped in behind him.

Compared to the outside, the interior of Mike's was poorly lit. Shadows fell over the rows of aisles, piled high with already expired bags of corn chips and stale peanuts. Along the far wall were smudged, glass freezers with old beers and flat sodas.

Ezra's eyes traced the freezers, throat drying as he thought of the waters that were probably room temperature by now but still worth it. Instead, he followed Jadon to the back of the room where a slushie machine churned flavored syrups.

Jadon handed Ezra a large cup and took one for himself. "Which one?"

Ezra filled his cup with the cherry slushie until the top overflowed with sticky red. He licked his fingers as Jadon chose the same and moved past him to another station. Beside the slushie machine was a hot dog turner, slowly burning the rotating wieners. Ezra could smell the charred meat, heavy and smoky, and his stomach twisted hungrily. He stuck a straw into his drink and sipped while Jadon fished two hot dogs into paper bowls, slathered them in day-old chili, and topped the dogs in mustard. He handed one chili dog to Ezra, and the brothers walked to Mike at the front register.

Mike Jester was sixty-some years old and had owned his gas station for most of his life. The old man, with white skin and patches of graying hair around his head, grunted at the brother's approach, eyes never leaving a small, boxy television off to the side. An old Western blared so loud that Ezra couldn't hear his thoughts.

"Hey, Mike." Jadon dropped his chili dog and cherry slushie onto the front counter and slowly pulled a few dollars from their daddy's battered wallet.

Ezra counted the money in his head. It wasn't as much as it usually was.



Mike looked up from his television. "Ain't enough, boy."

"I know it ain't, Mike. But just tonight. We really hungry."

Mike shrugged. "If it ain't enough, it ain't enough."

The straw slipped from Ezra's mouth, and he looked at his brother. What were they going to do?

Jadon recounted the few dollars strewn across the front counter. "Just give us the slushies," he said coldly.

Mike either didn't seem to notice or didn't care. He swept the bills into his palm, added them up himself, and typed the amount into the cash register. "Leave them dogs here," he said, dismissing the brothers.

Ezra glanced at the chili dogs one last time, their salty taste lingering in his memory as Jadon pulled him into the cool night. They sat on the metal bench, the cold slushies stinging their hands.

"What does he need two chili dogs for?"

Ezra downed a mouthful of slushie. "It's okay," he said. "I'm not hungry." The cold settled into his stomach and frosted him from the inside out. But didn't fill the gnawing hole that wished for the greasy hot dog.

Jadon seethed. "No, it ain't. Mike coulda gave us those hot dogs. It ain't gonna hurt him none." He fixed his eyes on his untouched drink.

Ezra swallowed his in silence.

"I'm tired of being dirt poor in this town. People think they can walk all over you. But they can't."

“They can’t?” Ezra must have witnessed a different interaction in the gas station than Jadon. His brother, being two years older, always saw the world a little differently. A little darker.

“Y’know,” Jadon said, slowly speaking his stirring thoughts. “If you’re still hungry, we could always head over to the 7-Eleven.”

Ezra’s eyebrows screwed together. Hadn’t they just spent the last of their money on slushies? They didn’t have any left to go to the 7-Eleven.

The realization of Jadon’s words settled into Ezra’s head. He meant going into the 7-Eleven and taking things. “Like stealing?” The thought settled uncomfortably into Ezra’s stomach, like when his deddy caught Ezra staring at his beers in the fridge too long. “I don’t know.”

“We can be in and out in a few minutes. Ain’t nobody even gonna know it’s us. You don’t want to go back home hungry, do you?”

Ezra’s grumbling stomach decided for him.

Jadon sprang up and threw his cherry slushie to the ground. The red liquid spread into a puddle over the parking lot.

Ezra followed. His cup was nearly empty, and he dropped it into the trash can.

They mounted their bikes, and instead of heading back to their trailer, Jadon led the way deeper into Arlo.

Ezra had never ridden through Arlo at night. The town was eerie at one in the morning. But peaceful. The only lights speckling the roads were lampposts, casting oval beams that the brothers dipped in and out of. Like splashing through white-light puddles.

Jadon kept them off Main Street, choosing side roads and neighborhoods instead. “You never see cops patrolling these neighborhoods at night,” he said to Ezra. “Only in the Trailers. And Main Street. Just ‘cause they don’t want none of their nice stores broken into.”

Ezra wished they could bike down Main. He had seen the small shops from the backseat window of his daddy’s pick-up but never beneath the moon’s dim glow. How much different was this world at midnight than during the day? Ezra didn’t know, and he couldn’t explain why he wanted to see it so badly.

Jadon pointed out the 7-Eleven, just off the main road. The brothers broke onto Main Street for a second, turned right at the stoplight in front of the Sterling’s Funeral Home, and pedaled into the 7-Eleven parking lot. The lot was empty, save old wrappers littering the ground and a single car tucked in the back. No doubt belonging to whoever was stuck working the midnight shift.

Jadon hopped off his bike first and let the aluminum frame drop against the pavement. Ezra copied his brother, sliding off his bike with less grace. The metal clanged against the ground, ringing into the empty air.

“Now,” Jadon said before they entered the store. “Don’t do nothing stupid. Just grab a few things. Not too much to make your pockets bulge. Got it?”

Ezra nodded, echoing the instructions in his head.

“And don’t look guilty.” Jadon pulled his sweatshirt hood over his head. His cropped, dark hair blended in with his black sweatshirt.

Ezra yanked his hood over his head and tucked in his mess of black braids.

The inside of the 7-Eleven beamed where Mike’s gas station was a dull throb of light. The walls glowed white and red and green, the brightness spilling onto the checkered tile floor.

A thick, black rug covered the entrance behind the sliding glass doors. It muffled their footsteps as the brothers passed the cash register on their way in. A teenage boy, not much older than they were, barely glanced at them, in favor of a video playing on his cellphone.

Jadon beelined for the back fridges, seizing small bags of chips, peanuts, and anything else he could get his hands on as he lurked down the aisles. Ezra forced himself to keep his brother's pace but couldn't snatch things off the shelves like Jadon. These snacks didn't belong to Ezra, no matter how loud his stomach gurgled.

Once in the back, Jadon shoved two cans of beer into the pockets of his sweatshirt, the added weight giving him a pot belly. "What'd you grab?"

Ezra looked around him. The aisle to his right was lined with sour gummy candies, and he nabbed one. Held it up to Jadon.

His older brother rolled his eyes. "You can get a few more things." Jadon's own pockets crackled with each step, the stolen items crunching together.

They retraced their steps through the store, picking up smaller items — candy rings and packs of chewing gum — as they made their way to the exit.

Jadon stopped at the end of one aisle. "Once we leave here, we've got to make it all the way to the door without getting caught. Got it?"

Ezra looked past Jadon. There was nothing to hide the added weight of their pockets between their current position and the door. They'd be exposed — in full view of the teenage cashier.

"Whatever you do, don't look suspicious," Jadon warned. "Walk slowly to the door. Don't run." He made his way out of the aisle first, eyes trained on the register.

The cashier didn't notice him, his phone capturing his focus.

Ezra followed a few steps behind, careful not to draw the cashier's attention. The two had almost made it out the door without being spotted, but the thick black rug in front of the doors caught Ezra's foot. He stumbled, knocking into Jadon, and the two fumbled to the ground.

The cans of beer burst beneath Jadon's weight and crumbled chips poured out of his pockets. A few bags of candy from Ezra's sweatshirt spilled around them.

The cashier looked over the counter, and for a second, time stood still. The brothers looked up at the cashier. The cashier down at them.

Jadon seemed to be the first to break the petrified staring contest. "*Run.*" He scrambled to his feet first, leaving Ezra behind as he scurried out the door.

"Hey! Stop that!" The cashier fumbled with his phone, dialing three quick numbers into a keypad.

Ezra crawled to his feet and tripped one more time over the carpet before finding his footing. He chased Jadon out of the 7-Eleven, meeting his brother at their bikes.

Jadon straddled his bike and fixed his feet to the pedals. "Hurry up, Ez."

Ezra clambered with his own bike but finally mounted.

Jadon pushed off first, speeding towards the road.

Ezra followed and sped past his brother, his longer legs pumping his bike faster.

Jadon hissed instructions to Ezra, keeping them on Main Street, but Ezra almost didn't hear. Sirens wailing in the distance drowned out any thought, but he hoped they were his imagination.

Ezra wished he could slow to look at the shops he whizzed by. But his head pounded with a fear greater than when his daddy came home after losing too much during his poker games. His daddy was always predictable on these nights — yelling, throwing empty beer bottles, or

slapping the brothers around — but this panic iced his stomach. His feet slipped against the bike pedals. Ezra could outrun his daddy's anger, but this terror might not be easily escaped.

The shrill of a siren bloomed behind him, and flaring red and blue lights sliced through Ezra's thoughts. From behind Jadon, a police cruiser's headlights cut through the darkness, illuminating the brothers.

Jadon swore but yelled directions to his brother. "Left. Make the next left."

"What? Why?" A red stoplight glowered down on a speeding Ezra, at the junction right before Webster's Produce. Left would take him through one of Arlo's neighborhoods. He wasn't sure which one but knew that the detour would take him several miles out of the way of the Trailers.

"Do what I tell you. And don't turn around."

Ezra pumped his legs a final time, letting himself coast into the left-hand turn, driving him away from Arlo's downtown.

But he couldn't help himself. He looked over his shoulder.

Jadon's bike slowed to a stop, and the police car braked too, no longer pursuing Ezra.

"Jadon." Ezra's voice came out as a whimper, but Jadon seemed to have heard him. His older brother shook his head, a silent command not to turn back.

Ezra's legs froze beneath him. He could see himself returning to Jadon. The police officer dragging both brothers down to the station and leaving them in jail to rot. Ezra deserved to be right there with him.

*Would Jadon abandon him if the tables were turned?*

Ezra's eyes teared, but he forced his gaze forward. The side road, splitting from Main Street, unfurled in front of him, and Ezra pumped his legs harder, putting as much distance between him and the blaring siren as possible.

Ezra blinks, tears puddling in his eyes as he stares up at the sky. The inky darkness fades into his memory, and wispy clouds checkering a cyan sky replace the stars.

It's no longer chilly December but humid September. It's no longer a frigid night but a stuffy day. Ezra is no longer fourteen but sixteen. He still lives on the other side of Crooked Creek but in a bedroom all to himself. Without a brother to wake him in the middle of the night.

Beneath Ezra is his bike. His feet pedal in creeping circles, propelling the bike slowly down Main Street. His eyes trace the world in front of him, waking from the memory. It feels like thawing his limbs in front of the kerosene heater his mama brings out on snowy days. Warming his toes and hands until his entire body shivers off the cold.

He's still shivering off that night, two years later.

Ezra retraces the evening in his mind. After spilling out of the 7-Eleven with Jadon, they sped down this stretch of Main Street. Up until Webster's.

The same stoplight that Ezra bolted through still hangs, burning green as he approaches it now.

But the road is lively with people. They cluster along the sidewalks, gawking at shop windows or spilling out of stores with plastic bags.

Cars slink down the street, and Ezra dips between them. He and Jadon used to do that in the Trailers, until one time they weaved in front of their deddy's car and earned a good lick with a switch for it.

He hears Jadon's voice in his head as he approaches the next stoplight. "*Left. Make the next left.*"

Webster's Produce sits off to the side.

His eyes catch the store for a moment longer than they had that night. Two days ago, Mrs. Willadeene had been awful generous to him in that store. She had seen something in him that he hadn't seen in himself. Still didn't see, Ezra reckons, so it probably wasn't there to begin with.

Ezra pulls his eyes away from Webster's and dodges a car driving straight through the light. The driver honks, but Ezra speeds through the turn into the mouth of a neighborhood.

He slows, squinting past the sunlight drizzling through the patchy clouds. He hadn't ridden through this neighborhood since that night, but he could already recognize pieces from his memory. The houses look just the same — either red-brick ranch homes or white, vinyl-siding colonials — except the front lawns are a little lusher and the blinds are pulled open, revealing the rooms inside.

Jadon would like these houses, Ezra reckons. He'd always said he wanted a large house. One firmly planted and without wheels. With a real front yard, not just a smudge of grass that separates one trailer from another. Jadon would creep through this neighborhood just to take in the homes. The wide windows peering into the rooms. The lives he wanted but never got to live.

Ezra's stomach knots. They should be here together. He shouldn't have let Jadon take the fall for him so many times.



Ezra's eyes rake a brick ranch that Jadon would have loved. Ruby azaleas bloom in one copper flowerpot along the porch. Sunflowers in another.

The porch, crafted out of long wooden planks that wrap around the front of the house, is painted a dark reddish brown to match the rusty bricks. A girl leans along the steps, her short frame barely cascading to the cement walkway beneath the first stair.

Was that... Delilah Webster?

Delilah sits up as Ezra passes. Her long hair, bound in tight twists stretching down her back, sways when she moves.

Ezra didn't know many things about Delilah Webster, other than she was a year younger than him in school and she was the pastor's kid of the church they attended. She was probably stuck up. Probably annoying. And probably couldn't be bothered to know his name.

"Hey, Ezra." Delilah waves, gesturing for him to ride up the driveway.

For some reason, he does. Slides off his bike and lets it crash in the grass beside the cement path leading to the house. "You live here?"

Delilah shakes her head. "No. This is my grandma's house."

Ezra blinks. Her grandma... Mrs. Willadeene Webster.

She looks at him hard for a second. "What are you doing riding around? Shouldn't you be at school?"

He should be, Ezra thinks, but doesn't want to explain to Delilah why he ditched. That he needed to find a way to make his world right again after so many wrongs. A pastor's kid wouldn't understand. "Shouldn't you?"

Delilah eyes her feet — bare, sepia-brown toes curling against the chestnut wood — and scuffs them against the porch. "Yeah, I got suspended."

“What’d you do?”

Her lips tremble, betraying a smile. “Punched Fiona Hatcher in the nose. Got two days suspension for it.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Worth it.”

Delilah’s smile widens. “Yeah, it was.” Her eyebrows inch together like a furry caterpillar wriggling across her forehead. “How come you didn’t already hear about it?”

Ezra moves to sit next to Delilah. She scoots, making room for him on the stairs.

“I haven’t been in school for the last couple of days.”

Delilah raises an eyebrow. “Why?”

“I’s...” This memory is almost as painful as when he abandoned his brother. He was letting so many people down. Jadon. Mrs. Willadeene. There are so many people that he owes.

Ezra forces the words out. “Almost arrested.”

“You what?”

“Your grandma didn’t tell you?”

Delilah blows a breath of air out of her mouth. Her breath smells sugary, like cake.

“No.”

“I tried to steal some stuff from Webster’s and got busted. Cops almost arrested me, but Mrs. Willadeene told them not to.”

Delilah hums, like she knows everything Ezra tells her but wants to hear it anyway.

“Delilah,” a voice cuts through whatever she wants to say next. “String this mess of green beans so I can get them on the stove.” Mrs. Willadeene lumbers around the side of her house as

she says this, a heavy cloth bag in her hands. The front of the bag has the Webster's logo on the front, just like the shopping bags in her store. "Oh," Mrs. Willadeene says when she sees Ezra.

"Howdy, Ezra. What brings you over to my neck of the woods?"

Ezra's lungs flatten, all the air rushing out of him in a single exhale. He's surprised Mrs. Willadeene even bothers to look at him after all the trouble he's been for her. Why doesn't she hate him?

His eyes drop to his dark hands. Deeper brown than Delilah's. "I's just riding around."

Mrs. Willadeene hums. Smiles gently at him. "Well, Delilah'll have her hands full stringing them beans. If you give her a hand, you can stay for supper."

"Don't make no extra fuss for me, Mrs. Willadeene. I's heading out."

She narrows her eyes at him. Give Ezra that stare that only a mama can muster. "You had anything to eat?"

"No ma'am."

"Well, you like fried chicken?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Greens?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Pintos?"

Ezra's face screws. "No."

"Well. That's fine," Mrs. Willadeene says, waving a hand. "You can still stay for supper."

Delilah pushes off the front steps and brushes her hands to clear them of dirt. "We'll get going on the green beans, Grandma."

“Now don’t leave no strings on them, you hear me?” Mrs. Willadeene hands over the bag. “And if you get them all, there might be some pound cake and butter pecan ice cream in there for you,” she says as she heads into the house.

Ezra still feels flattened when she leaves. Mrs. Willadeene was too nice. He didn’t deserve her kindness at that. Not after nearly stealing from her store.

But even the other day, with that cold can of coke in his pocket, she didn’t look at him like a thief. “Every day you can choose to be good,” is what she had said to him. “Be better than the day before.” Mrs. Willadeene had seen something in Ezra — something good — but even though he doesn’t quite know where his good is, he wants to see it for himself.

“You must be something special for Grandma to insist you stay for supper,” Delilah says. “She don’t just let anybody eat at her table.”

Ezra picks a green bean out of the bag. Snaps off the tail. Digs into the flesh and drags out the glossy string. Maybe he needs someone like Mrs. Willadeene to drag the good out of him, so he can see it properly.

She promised him — God willing, and the creek don’t rise — that everything would end up alright.

Maybe Mrs. Willadeene was right.

“I’m not sitting out here any longer. Let’s go inside.” Delilah crosses the porch to the front door and holds it for him.

“Right behind you.” Ezra climbs the stairs in a single step and follows Delilah through the open door.