

**WHAT
BEAUTY
THERE
IS**

CORY ANDERSON



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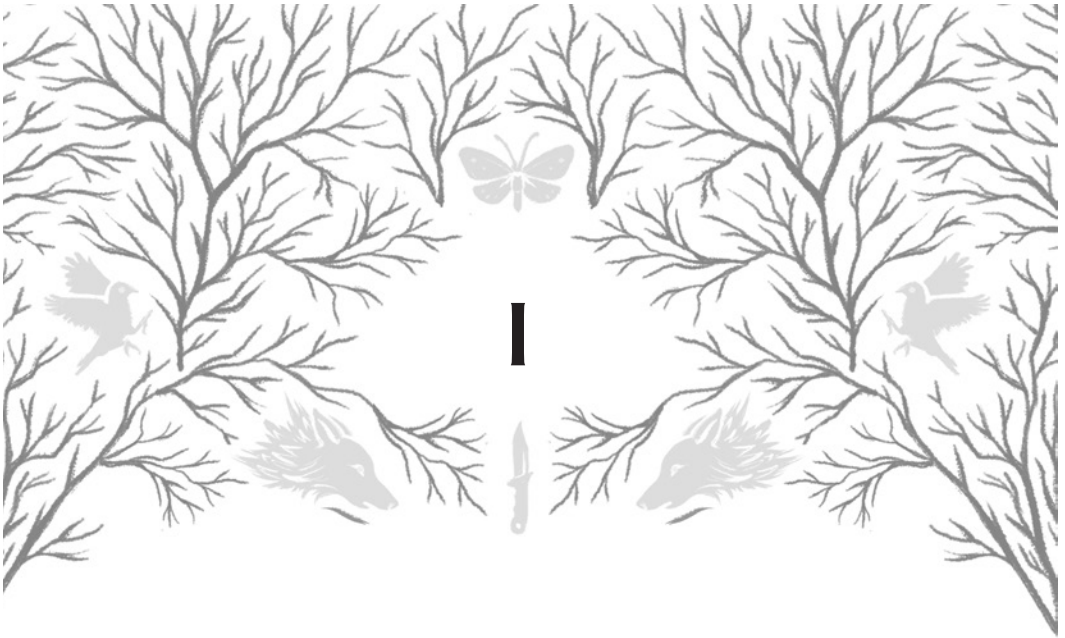
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For Brady and Kate,
who showed me what to put in my heart

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My life has faded to floating bits of black and white, but I remember the minutes with Jack in color, in a vivid haze of red and yellow and blue. Sensory things. The sound of his voice. The smell of him, like a forest in winter. I can see him lying beside me with the moonlight on his face. His hand holds mine, and I'm warm all over, despite the cold. I can feel his breath on my skin.

I don't forget these things.

I told Jack to stay away. He'll make you hurt, I said. He'll take what matters most. He'll do it with a smile and then he'll smoke a cigarette.

Jack didn't listen.

But I get ahead of myself. I go to the end when, to understand the truth, you have to start at the beginning.

When Jack opened the door, Mom wasn't sitting in the rocking chair by the stove. Her rainbow blanket formed a barren heap on the rocker, except for a tattered corner that slunk down to the worn carpet. She wasn't in the kitchen either, staring glass-eyed out the window above the sink, all bone and skin in her

frayed pink nightgown. Cold clung to the house's scant walls and crouched in dim corners where sun never hit. She'd let the fire go out. She never did that. Not even in one of her dazes.

In his mind, a steel clamp tightened.

He kicked snow from his boots and slung his backpack off his shoulders and hitched it over the peg of the kitchen chair. He took out his earbuds to see if he could hear her upstairs, but he couldn't. She hardly ever left that rocker these days except to use the bathroom. Once she'd have greeted him at the door when he got home from school, but that was in another time.

"Mom?"

He stood there listening for an answer, and one didn't come. Wind blew at the windows and rattled down the stove flue. He needed to get a fire going. If they had no fire, they'd be bad off. Matty would be home from school soon. Mrs. Browning let the second graders stay after and shoot hoops in the gym, but only for a while. He needed to get supper going for Matty. Night coming.

Still he just stood there and listened for her.

Snow melted under his boots and made puddles on the linoleum. He took off the boots and socks and lined them up by the cold stove out of habit. When he looked back toward the rocker, he saw the pill bottle on the table. The cap was off and most of the little round pills inside were gone. In the beginning, some doctor in town said the pills would help her rest from the pain after she got hurt, but that all happened a long time ago, and from then on she got the pills any way she could. Now she slept in the rocker day and night and didn't greet him at the door or eat or take baths or say things that made sense.

Wind, or something else, rustled upstairs. He went to the stairwell and stood looking up. The light dimmed halfway and shrank to darkness at the top.

“Mom?”

She had to be up there, in the bathroom. Maybe sick again from taking too many. He climbed the creaking carpeted stairs and flicked on the hall light and waited. No sound. A gust of air along the roof.

He crossed to the bathroom.

He imagined he'd find her hunched by the toilet throwing up, eyes sunken in cups of livid shadow, or standing in front of the mirror, starving-thin, like a crumpled paper doll. But she wasn't there.

Bathroom empty. Rose-pink porcelain.

Octagon tile, dingy white.

He thought of her lying somewhere outside in her nightgown with the life seeping out of her into the frigid snow. *Stop it*, he said to himself. *She's okay. Somebody came and got her and maybe took her to the store. That's all.*

But this was a lie. Of course it was.

He left the bathroom and stared at the closed door at the end of the hall, and that door got bigger as he looked at it. Only one room left in the house, and she wouldn't be in there. No, she never went in that bedroom. Not since they came in the night and pulled Dad from his bed with them both still in it and hauled him away.

No. That room was a grave. And she wouldn't go in.

He put his hand on the doorknob and turned it.

She was hanging from the ceiling fan. A belt was coiled around

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the fan's downrod and cinched around her throat. One of her frail hands twitched.

He tore to her and raised her up by her legs, but she was limp all over. Beneath her lay a wooden chair on its side. He let her go and shoved the chair up and stood on it and lifted her but her head lolled forward. Her eyes didn't blink. *Oh God.* He yanked on the belt and the fan shuddered. Plaster dusted his face. *Please,* he thought.

Oh, dear God, please.

He lurched down and rattled through the dresser and found Dad's hunting knife and unfolded the blade and got on the chair and hacked at the leather. Slash the strap, find a notch, and saw. *Dammit. Oh, dammit damndamn.* When the leather broke he caught her by the waist, but she fell sideways out of his arms and thumped to the floor. The chair tipped and sent him sprawling. He dropped the knife.

He crawled to her and turned her over. She lay there in the dull gooseflesh light with her face blank and little specks of blood in her open eyes. Her hair fallen over. A lump of bone knobs on the green shag carpet. One slipper on her foot and dried drool on her chin.

Such quiet.

He stood and hit the wall with his fist. There wasn't any force in the first hit, but the second time he scraped his knuckles on the drywall so they bled. Noise shook him, broken sounds of hurt and shuddering breath.

He sat by her on the floor.

He touched her hand and held it.

He just sat by her.

When the window darkened and the cold crept through the walls, he straightened and gathered her up. She couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds, but she was heavy. He got her to the bed and laid her there and then just stood looking at her. Shadows pooling violet on her skin. Her yellow hair. He closed her eyes and straightened her nightgown down around her legs. He folded her arms. He found her other slipper on the carpet and put it on her foot and sat by her on the bed.

He sat there a long time.

He locked the bedroom door and washed his face and then he went downstairs and got a fire going in the stove. The cold kept coming, and now the night too. He threw the pill bottle in the garbage and opened the cupboard by the sink and got out the yellow Tupperware bowl. He pulled off the lid and counted the money inside. Fifteen dollars and thirty-six cents. He counted it again.

Yup. Right the first time.

He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand and opened the pantry door. Half-full sack of potatoes. A couple jars, beans and peaches. Canister of sugar: almost empty. The potatoes were good Idaho russets from Mrs. Browning. He took three and washed them and cut them up. In a fry pan he melted a pat of shortening and then dropped the potato pieces in. His heart stitched pain in his chest and he ignored it.

The front door squeaked open and Matty clattered inside, stomping snow, bright cheeks, damp wool hat pulled down to his eyes and coat zipped up to cover his chin. The coat had once been

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Jack's and, before that, somebody else's. A rip in the front exposed stuffing, but inside was flannel and warm. Matty slammed the door shut and pulled off his coat and hat and smiled.

"Jack, you'll never guess. I got every times table right. All the way to the twelves. I didn't miss even one."

The potatoes sizzled, and Jack turned them over to brown both sides. Salt and pepper. For a second things felt normal. Except his eyes. The hot sting at the edges. In his head a pulse began to beat. "Nice work, short stuff. Now hang your coat and wash up."

"You think we can have peaches tonight?"

Jack nodded. "To celebrate your times tables."

Matty hung his coat and bag on the wall hook by the stove and placed his boots carefully by Jack's, lining up the heels. He looked at the rocker and stood there a moment. Thoughtful. An expression of concentration on his face. He turned and went upstairs, and Jack heard the bathroom faucet turn on. There was a tang in his mouth. It tasted like gunpowder.

The door is locked.

The door is locked.

After a minute Matty came back down. He watched Jack cooking. Then he dragged a kitchen chair to the cupboard by the sink and got out plates.

Together they laid out everything and sat at the Formica table. Fried potatoes and peaches and cups of hot instant coffee. Jack knew what was coming and readied himself.

"Where's Mom?" Matty asked.

"She went on a trip."

“I checked the bathroom and she ain’t in there.”

“I told you. She went on a trip.”

“Well, who’d she go with?”

“A friend. Somebody you don’t know.”

“Like who?”

“Eat your potatoes,” Jack said.

Matty didn’t eat. He looked at her rocker. He looked at Jack.

“She didn’t take her rainbow blanket.”

Jack glanced at the blanket. Rows of crocheted yarn. The edges pulled loose and faded to orange where the red used to be. A gift from Grandma Jensen when Mom was just eight. Stupid, to forget that blanket. “No. I guess not.”

“I don’t think she’d go nowhere without her blanket.”

“Maybe she forgot it.”

“You think she’s okay in the snow?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“When will she be back?”

Jack drank a little coffee and burned his mouth. He ate his potatoes.

Matty watched him. “Are we okay?”

“Yeah. We’re okay.”

Jack ate. Chew and swallow. Sip of coffee. *You will do this for him. You will not let him know. You will not.*

Matty sat watching him. Then he picked up his fork and started eating.

Good.

Jack heated water on the stove and plugged the sink and

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poured the hot water in and washed everything and let it dry on the counter. After Matty finished his peaches, Jack asked him to get out his homework. Spelling.

“*School*,” Jack said.

The concentration returned to Matty’s face.

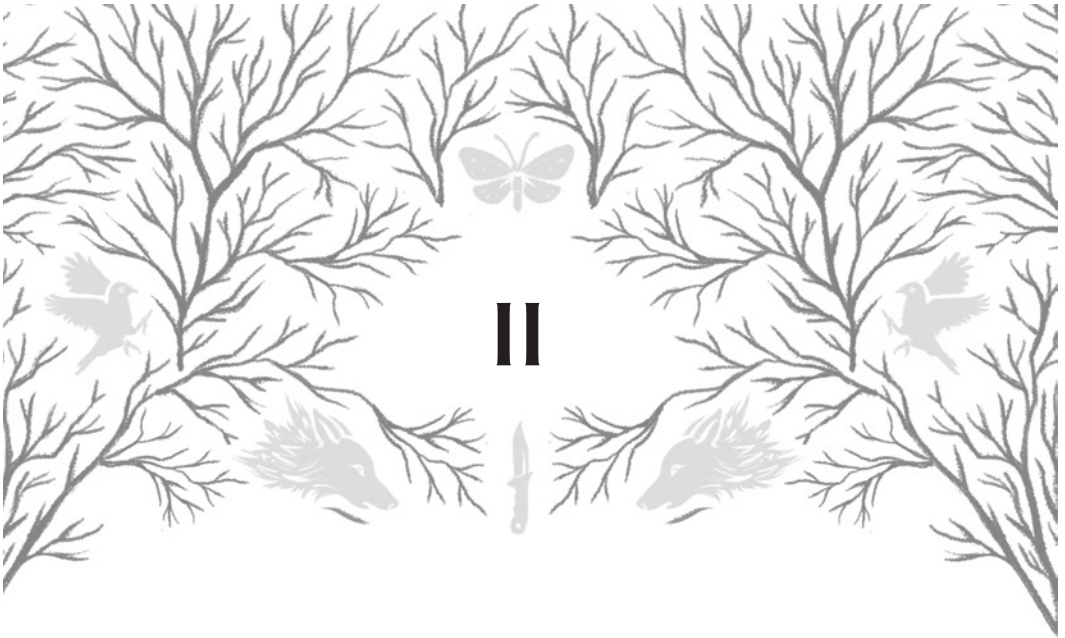
“*S-C-H-O-O-L.*”

“Good. Now *pencil*.”

“*P-E-N-C-I-L.*”

Outside the kitchen window, wind smashed snow flurries against the glass and gusted them in circles and shoved them to the earth. An iron cold out there. Jack put his hands over his eyes. Dark pressed down on the roof and in on the walls of the fragile house, and she was lying up there on the bed.





What do I remember?

My father is a thief and a killer. He robbed a pawnshop with Leland Dahl when I was ten, but nobody ever caught him. No evidence. No trial. That started everything. A long scar jags across his forehead and down his cheek from the time my mother came at him with a knife. She paid for that. He's a killer, but he's something worse.

His eyes are hooks. They dig deep. They snare the soul.

Some people have ice in them. I know I do. It's what my father made me. Frost-covered, black inside. Even now, when I think of him, I go cold all over. Like I just stepped into a freezer.

But Jack—sweet, angry, quiet Jack—he burns me up. He breaks me to pieces.

We knew each other nine days.

They pulled out the sleeper sofa and spread nubby blankets and a quilt over the sagging mattress. Jack stoked the fire and locked the doors and made sure they had enough firewood to get through the night while Matty stripped off his clothes and put on pajamas in

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front of the stove. Batman PJs and a tattered cape. The sight of him shrank Jack's chest. His ribs poking out, and his knees. Like some poor orphan. And so it was. Jack picked up the clothes and folded them and put them on the bed.

Just breathe, Jack.

Breathe in and out and then do it again.

Matty burrowed under the blankets. He kept glancing at the rocker. Jack switched off the lamp and tucked the blanket edges around him to keep in the heat. Moonlight gleamed in through the window. He sat on the mattress.

"Can we watch TV?"

"No. It's past your bedtime."

"Sure is cold."

"Yeah."

The fire crackled. He sat there, breathing. In, out.

"Jack?"

"What?"

"Do you think Dad will come home soon? Like Mom said he might?"

"I don't know."

Matty was silent. Then: "You remember that Services lady?"

Jack remembered her. The lady from Child Services. He got under the covers and looked at Matty. His face streaked with dim bluish light from the moon and the snow. His pale cheeks. His hair still matted down and fluffed up in spots from the stocking hat. He needed a haircut. Jack pulled him close. "I remember."

"Do you think she'll come back?"

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“You think she’ll bring that sheriff like she said she would?”

“If she or that sheriff comes around and I’m not here, you just don’t answer the door. You keep the door locked, and you don’t answer.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

He could feel Matty’s heart beating.

“If they hear Mom’s on a trip, do you think they’ll take me somewhere?”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Okay.”

“I won’t let that happen,” he said again.

“Okay.”

Matty didn’t sleep for a long time. He fidgeted. He curled into Jack and then rolled over and huddled in the blanket with his back to the rocker. After a while his eyes closed. Jack thought he was asleep, but then he opened his eyes and looked at Jack in the gloom. He didn’t say anything. Just looked at him. Jack pretended to sleep. *You will not screw this up. You will not. You will do what needs doing. Like you always have.*

After a while Matty’s breathing turned steady.

Jack lay there and didn’t sleep.

Hours passed.

When he rose he laid a pillow over Matty’s ear and hoped it would be enough. The house was mostly dark. Outlines of shapes.

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Kitchen table. The rocker and the stove. He pulled on his coat and then his boots. Matty didn't move.

He scooped up the rainbow blanket and walked upstairs to the bedroom and unlocked the door. She lay there on the bed with her arms folded and moon shadows playing over her. Almost iridescent in the leaden light. Like some emaciated Sleeping Beauty waiting for her prince. *Well, he ain't coming. And he never was any prince.*

He spread the blanket over her and pulled the bottom corners together and knotted them under her feet. Her skin was cold. Her hair in yellow wisps on the pillow. He looked at her face one last time. Then he knotted the blanket's top corners behind her head and rolled her over and pulled the edges tight. The sculptured blankness of her face hidden by yarn, a drift of colors across the bed. He tried to swallow but couldn't.

How can you do this?

You are a monster.

He hefted her into his arms. She was stiff, and he knew he couldn't carry her down all those stairs. Halfway through the hall he stopped with her in his arms and leaned against the wall to catch his breath. When he got to the stairs, he crouched and rested her flat on the floor and moved to her head. He gripped her shoulders through the yarn and lifted her partway up so she bent a little at the waist. With the weight of her on his knees, he dragged her down, one riser at a time. Sluggish thumps on carpet. *Drop her slow. Soft so Matty doesn't hear. There. All the way to the bottom.*

He looked at the sleeper sofa. It floated like a barge in the dark. Matty's shape lay swathed in the quilts. The pillow still over his ear.

Silence.

He crouched and lifted her. He could not hold her long.

Quiet. Be quiet and quick.

He faltered to the front door and opened it and stumbled through. Every noise loud as an axe cracking. He thought he'd wake Matty, but he didn't. When he got the door closed, his legs gave out and he dropped her. She banged down and slid from the porch into the snow.

He sat by her.

You will never see her face again. You will never see her. You will never.

He got up and looked around. Starless night. Frozen and hushed. A single flake floated down. Frigid blue, this wasteland. The stubble of desolate fields on all sides. No one around for miles.

He went to the shed and got the wheelbarrow and pushed it on its tire through the snow to her and heaved her in. Snowflakes light as lace dusted the rainbow blanket. He stood there, his breath a faint plume. The cold and the quiet. Ten heartbeats, twenty.

The moon stared down at him.

He wheeled her around the Chevrolet Caprice to a nice spot behind the barn, where the roof hung over and tall old pine trees wore coats of fresh whiteness and a patch of ground wasn't frozen too bad. A peaceful spot. He got a shovel from the shed and started digging. He'd forgotten gloves, and he didn't go back for them. He kicked the blade through layers of snow to the packed dirt, and he tried to dig. He got the ice axe from the shed. He dug and kept digging. Deep, so the dogs in the fields wouldn't get at her. So she wouldn't come up in the spring. He dug, and he didn't think. He flicked off his mind like a light switch.

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Cold burned into his skin.

On the shovel, his hands went slippery.

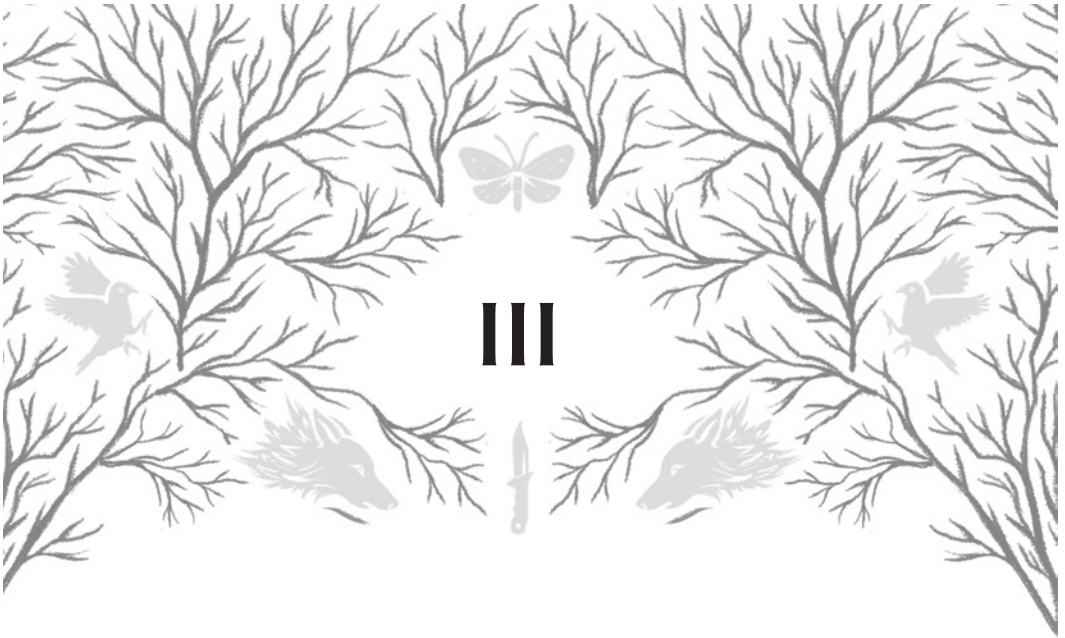
Lift, slash. Dig.

When he got done covering her with dirt, he sat next to her. Swollen earth. Churned and blackened snow. Cold as it was, he just sat there. Nothing watching his back but the moon. A gray dawn curdling over the land. He wiped his eyes and got up and walked to the house.

In the living room, Matty still slept, the pillow over his ear. Jack took off his coat and boots and opened the stove and put a log on the coals to feed the fire. The faint light fell on the walls, brief and quivering. The palms of his hands were throbbing. He closed the stove and got down to his underwear, shivering. Then he climbed beneath the covers and pulled Matty close. His small body. In the darkness, Jack listened to each shallow breath.

What will I do now? he thought. *What will I do?*





Life can be brutal.

Jack knew it.

So did I.

I wonder sometimes why things happen the way they do. If there's any rhyme or reason. People say a butterfly in Brazil can flap its wings and set off a tornado in Texas. One little butterfly makes a storm halfway around the world. I think about that. Did I feel the flutter of wings when Jack and I met? Did I sense the coming tornado?

Looking back, I think I did.

Jack walked in front of my eyes, and everything changed.

I hear locker doors open and close. Metal clangs. Voices shout and laugh in the hall. Bright colors flash by. T-shirts and jeans. My first day at a new school. I'm about to open my locker. I've just finished calculus, and I'm thinking about limits at infinity.

I'm distracted.

I don't see it coming when Luke Stoddard walks up and starts

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talking to me. I find out his name later. Luke wears a football jersey. He has straight teeth. He's big, and he says something about showing me around, and he gets close to me, too close, so I back up against my locker. The metal presses into my shoulder blades. My elbow. The back of my head. He takes a step closer. He's going to touch me. I know he is.

I drop my books. Loose papers drift and scatter. They decorate the hall, squares of white confetti at a ticker tape parade.

Then I see Jack.

Leave her alone.

Jack says this to Luke.

Stay away from me.

I say this to Jack, a few minutes later.

I don't mean it.

I replay that memory in my head sometimes. The minute I first saw Jack.

Sweet, angry Jack. Quiet Jack.

Looking back, I think the butterfly flapped its wings then.

Winds started swirling.

Everything changed.

Jack woke.

Matty lay wrapped in the blankets, watching him. Silence. In a dream, Jack had been running through a field dressed in snow with the moon looking down. Smell of cold dirt in his nose. Something

lost he had to find. Waking, it all crumbled in the gray daylight, the colors decaying fast.

He ruffled Matty's hair. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Everything's okay."

Matty nodded. His eyes shining in the ashen light. Something nameless and binding.

Jack could feel the shovel in his hands. He got up and lit a fire while Matty put on clothes. The air felt brittle as bone. Grim daylight slanted through the window and crawled over the mattress. Matty looked at the empty rocker and didn't say a word about the missing rainbow blanket.

Snow fell in hard chunks and piled up on the windowsill. Jack sprinkled cinnamon over oatmeal and ladled it into bowls and brought the bowls to the kitchen table. Matty sat holding a blue paper in his hands.

"What's that?" Jack asked.

"Nothing."

"It looks like something to me."

Matty wouldn't look at him. "We got a field trip today."

"Sounds like fun. Where to?"

"I don't want to go."

Jack studied him. He wore one of Jack's old woolen shirts. Two of the buttons were missing. A threadbare plaid. He'd combed his hair with water, but it wouldn't lie flat. "Why?"

"This paper says you can stay at school if you don't want to go."

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“Why don’t you want to go?”

“I just don’t.”

“Why?”

Matty sat there holding the paper. He looked almost in tears. Jack took the paper and read it. The field trip was to the Museum of Idaho to see dinosaurs, and it cost two dollars. Gas for the bus. A vise closed around Jack’s chest.

“Is the two dollars why you don’t want to go?”

“I don’t care if I don’t. That’s all.”

Jack walked to the cupboard and got the Tupperware bowl. He pulled off the lid and counted two dollars and handed them to Matty. “Look at me. We aren’t going to die if I give you two dollars.”

Matty looked at him. Those eyes gripped him. “Okay.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“We’re all right.”

Matty looked at Jack’s hands and looked away. *There is no description of stupid*, Jack thought, *that you don’t fit*. He said again, “We’re all right.”

“Okay.”

They ate the oatmeal side by side. Jack signed the permission slip and put it in Matty’s backpack. He warmed Matty’s coat by the fire and held it out for Matty to reach in his arms, and then he zipped it up. He watched Matty wait for the bus and watched him get on and watched the bus rattle down the road. When it disappeared over the hill, he still watched. All he could think was that he’d lied to Matty. They weren’t all right. They had thirteen dollars and thirty-six cents. They had a foreclosure notice in the kitchen

drawer and a broken water heater and an empty pantry and a dad in prison and a mom under the snow in the backyard.

He sat at the kitchen table and listened to the clock above the oven tick. “You need a plan,” he said. “You damn well need a plan.”

Everything depended on money. If he had money, he could buy food. Milk. Bread. He could pay bills. A job meant money, so he would get a job. Where? Somewhere in town. He’d have to make it happen. Find a way. But there was school to think about. He’d be missed if he didn’t go to school. And he couldn’t be missed. Being missed meant Child Services. Nope. Not an option. *They will take Matty. They will take Matty.*

So.

School.

Then job.

And what will you do with Matty while you’re at work?

No answer.

The clock ticked. Counting down the seconds to some invisible zero moment. Each tick louder than the one before. Time moving in the narrow space between. Pulsing slowly. Blood from a wound.

His hands hurt, so he went up to the bathroom and bandaged the blisters. He combed his hair and brushed his teeth. He slung his backpack over his shoulder. Then he got in the Caprice and drove to school.

A substitute teacher talked about history. All the presidents over the years and who was best or worst. Jack stared out the window.

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Images in his head—they kept coming. He would not look at them straight on but instead saw sharp, fractured bits reflected off the backs of his eyelids. Incomplete pictures. Like pieces of a fallen mirror.

Her slipper on the carpet.

The knife in his hand. Cutting leather.

His eyes burned, and he closed them. He crossed his arms on the desk and shoved the images down to some unspoken place and leaned his forehead on his arms.

Go to the grocery store and then the diner. Gas stations next. Both of them. What will you say? I'm a hard worker, sir. I have no experience, but I work hard. I will do what you need. I'll do it well, I swear, whatever you want—stock shelves or mop floors or clean toilets, I'll work hard—

The bell rang.

He raised his head and swallowed. Pain in his throat. Hell. *You cannot get sick. What will happen if you get sick? You know what.*

In the hall, he opened his locker and crammed in his history book. Students passing him. Talking and laughing. Some in groups and others alone. Lunchtime. If he went out to the parking lot, he might sleep for maybe twenty minutes in the Caprice. He turned and headed for the doors. *You just need some rest. A little nap. That's all.*

“... prettiest thing I ever saw.”

Luke Stoddard stood by the lockers with his back to Jack. A senior. Quarterback. Talking sweet nothings to some girl. He wore tight jeans and a ball cap with the bill cupped so it lay over his eyes. He had a reputation for his touchdowns on and off the field.

“I could take you places,” Luke was saying. “Show you around.”

Jack kept walking, but when he saw the girl he stopped. She stood there, holding her books to her chest with no expression at all on her face. Mostly it was her eyes that stopped him. They were like looking into deep water. At once glistening and dark. Far down in those depths, something flashed and disappeared as if swallowed. Jack knew that flash.

Luke moved closer to her. “You’re kind of a shy one, aren’t you?”

Jack stood a little off to the side, watching. The girl dropped her books. Papers drifted and scattered, and Luke laughed. The girl didn’t move. Her hands were clenched at her sides.

Luke reached out to touch her cheek. He was slightly bent over when she raised her arm and jabbed down with knee-jerk quickness and, in the same motion, dropped her hand. It was something Jack felt more than saw. The pencil stuck out at an angle from Luke’s forearm.

Luke recoiled sharply. He looked at his arm, gulping air, and yanked the pencil out and dropped it. A splotch of red expanded on his sleeve. He was choking on his own gasps.

She stared at him. Still as a stone. The pencil lay at her feet.

He shoved her against the locker. “Bitch!”

“Leave her alone,” Jack said.

When Luke turned, he saw Jack standing there, quiet. “What?”

“Leave her alone.”

Luke’s breaths slowed. He spread his feet and smiled. “Josh Dahl. Or Jack. Right? What do you want?”

“I said what I want.”

“You did.”

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Jack didn't answer.

Luke looked at the girl and looked at Jack. "Do you know who I am? Because I'm not somebody you really want to mess with."

"I know you," Jack said.

Luke flushed. A few kids had stopped and stood watching. The girl said nothing. She hadn't moved at all. She might have been mute for all Jack knew.

"How's your daddy, Jack?" Luke said. "How's he doin'? You see him much?"

Jack waited and didn't answer.

Confusion passed over Luke's face. Doubt. "What do you want?"

Jack felt very separate from himself. Far away. As if he were observing himself talking to Luke from a distance. He looked at Luke's hands. "You need good hands in football, don't you? Quarterback's gotta have good hands. To throw the ball."

"What?"

Jack just stood there, watching him.

Blood dripped down Luke's arm and splattered on the floor in droplets. He licked his upper lip. "Is that some kind of threat?"

Jack just waited.

Luke looked down the hall in both directions, as though there might be some friend there. No one moved. Quite a crowd now. No more talking. No laughter.

Quiet. Somewhere a locker creaked open.

Luke gave a little shrug. His mouth labored to find words. "Whatever. Asshole. You're not worth the time." He glanced at the girl. "Neither is she."

He studied Jack a moment longer. Then he stepped backward and turned and pushed between kids and blundered out the door.

A murmur rose from the crowd. Faces from the past. Kids who had once been his friends. Years ago. Jack could hear bits of conversation.

“Damn. Did you see Luke?”

“She stabbed a pencil—”

“That’s Jack Dahl. His dad’s the one who—”

Jack gazed steadily at the students he saw talking. Their voices died at the sight of him, until there was no sound anywhere. He stared at them. Each one. Their faces. What would it be like? To be like that? So normal? He watched them until, one by one, they glanced away. He knew who they were thinking of. *You are just like him*, he thought. *Backed into a corner, you are just like him.*

A bell rang, and the crowd stirred to life.

Noise now. Spectators, moving on.

He looked at the girl. Her head was down, and her dark hair hid her face. He crouched and gathered the loose pages and picked up one of her books. The cover showed a hot-air balloon, with faded letters across the top. *Calculus, Fifth Edition*. He straightened and held out the pages to her.

“Are you okay?”

She lifted her head and met his gaze: He saw her clearly for the first time. Apple cheeks and naked skin. Eyes an aching hazel. Her voice rasped from her.

“Stay away from me.”

He stepped back.

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She snatched the pages from him. He saw a tattoo on the inside of her wrist. It was a heart. Black as onyx. A small, black heart.

She turned on her heels. Her back very straight, her hair a riot of kinks and twists. She headed down the hall to the girls' bathroom in long strides and disappeared inside.

Jack stood there stupidly, holding her book in his hand. The hall empty now. Then he opened the cover. Her name was printed in black letters at the top, with her phone number written beneath it.

AVA.

He stood for a minute, examining the book. And he wondered why Ava was so afraid. Then he opened his backpack and put the book inside.

