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THERE IS NO PARADISE

Sally Baggett

There Is No Paradise

A Creative Thesis

Presented to

The College of Graduate Studies

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Sally Baggett

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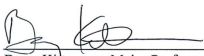
By

Sally Baggett

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


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## Dedication

I dedicate this creative thesis to my husband, Kenneth, for supporting me all the way through graduate school; to my parents, who inspired me to pursue my dreams; to my friend Misty, without whom many of these stories would not exist; to my unborn child, who was on my mind when revising this thesis. And finally I dedicate this creative thesis to my father-in-law, David Baggett, who encouraged me every day that I knew him. He is missed.

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## CHAPTER I

## The Oasis

Flora shivered beneath her boss's tattered blanket. She sat on her heels and leaned against the warm bricks. The moist, balmy breeze of the summer evening did nothing to soothe the convulsions that rose from her stomach. Every time Flora looked down at her shirt, she saw splattered blood. Her head was spinning, her pulse throbbing. The buzz of voices sounded uncanny out in the breeze. Was she at work? Wasn't she supposed to be handing someone a beer?

Flora glanced along the sidewalk and saw the pool of blood. Yes. She was still at work.

It started out like any other Friday night at the Oasis. A few tables occupied by bleary-eyed construction workers with their eyes nonsensically focused on the loud television in the corner. The floor slightly sticky from too much of the wrong kind of cleaner. The heavy scent of grilled chorizo hanging tantalizingly above the customers' heads.

A petite Hispanic waitress looked up when two men sauntered in. Their heads bobbed in time with their rapid-fire Spanish about the woes of finding work in this overpopulated section of Nashville. Flora, the waitress, thought nothing of their worn-out clothing and beady eyes. She saw it nearly every Friday night.

"Qué quisieran?" she asked. What would you like? She was careful to be courteous. Being from Honduras, she knew their blue and white tattoos signified membership in the Honduran mafia. She didn't know if these were active gang

members—they usually weren't if they came to the Oasis for dinner—but she knew she couldn't be too careful on this stretch of Nolensville Pike. She'd heard reports of a gang-related murder at the apartment complex next to hers the week before.

"Cervezas," growled the tall man on Flora's left. His equally swarthy but more stout companion nodded slowly in agreement, his eyes glued to the table behind her.

Curious, she turned to follow his gaze. She froze. A short, scrawny man, about 30 years old, also with a blue and white tattoo, leered menacingly at Flora's silent customer. He slinked out of his booth. When the other customers at the booth noticed their friend edging away, the three of them stiffened like cats arching their backs at the scent of danger.

"Hey Montez!" said the scrawny man in Spanish, his nostrils flaring. "What you think you're doing here, eh? You think you can just walk into any diner in Nashville and eat whatever you want? This is my table." He cocked his head back, holding his arms out from his sides. He swaggered toward the pair at Flora's table, forcing her to back away. She glanced at the man's booth, where the three customers were calling to their friend.

"Primo!" said one of them. "Regresa!" Come back!

The cousin ignored him. He sat confidently in a chair at Montez's table.

"You know who I am," Flora heard him hiss. "I haven't forgotten like you hoped." He chuckled. "I remember." He tapped his forefinger to his temple.

Flora's customers looked uncomfortable. Sweat beaded on Montez's brow. He pushed back his chair while his friend grew taller in his seat. Flora stepped backward, not wanting to draw attention to her presence. Tension had now spread to the entire room as more customers sensed a conflict at the four-seat table by the door.

“En serio Jaime—regresate,” said the man at the booth. Seriously, come back. Jaime waved his hand behind his back to silence his cousin, maintaining eye contact with Montez.

Montez didn’t look nervous, Flora thought. He looked vengeful.

Montez jumped out of his seat and grabbed at his waist. Jaime leapt to his feet, a gleam of violence in his dark brown eyes.

There was no time for more words. Montez thrust out his muscular right arm, pushing his enemy across the sticky floor. He drew back and pushed him again. The pair spun toward the door and rolled out of it, grunts and moans coming from their slowly rotating mass. One over the other, thrust, push, out the door.

As the door fell shut behind the wrestlers, Flora noticed a red sheen on the floor. Montez hadn’t been pushing the small man.

“Los empujes fueron cuchilladas,” Flora said out loud. His thrusts were stabs. Her legs buckled beneath her. The cold, dusky green linoleum floor reached up and grabbed her knees, pulling her towards it in a demonic hug. She tried to resist, but the linoleum was too strong for her. She toppled over her bruised knees and bounced her head in a slimy red puddle.

“Flora, estás bien?” said a familiar voice. The blanket felt heavy, like the velvet drapes in Tía Berta’s living room when she was a girl. That was back in Honduras, when life was more simple and, she felt just then, more safe.

“Sí,” she said, the word muffled by the blanket over her chin. She shivered slightly under the concerned gaze.

“Bien,” Señor Martinez said. “Voy al comedor. Necesito trapear la sangre.” I’m going to the dining room to mop up the blood. He choked on the word sangre and limped out of the office with more than usual heaviness.

Flora willed her pulse to slow. The images from before she fainted burst through her brain like flashes from a photographer’s camera. Push, push, she saw again. Except they weren’t pushes.

Flora roused herself from the cold leather couch ten minutes later. When she stepped into the dining room, she found herself in a flood of strobe-like red and blue lights. Murmured voices buzzed around the room. Men in blue interviewed groups of nervous customers and co-workers. Flora pushed through the haze that swam through her brain, stepping gingerly across the freshly mopped linoleum. She shoved open the barred front door, a swift, warm breeze greeting her. It felt like the breeze meant to refresh her, but it only made her stomach squeeze.

“Excuse me, ma’am, do you speak English?” Flora heard. She backed away from the handsome detective, confusion causing her cheeks to flush.

“Yes, I do, sir,” she managed, finding it difficult to say the words in a tongue that had never been easy. She came to Nashville directly from Honduras two years before. English had never been a priority in the Hispanic neighborhood her boyfriend Raúl moved her to.

“Were you here during the murder?” he asked. He pulled out a tiny notebook and swished a pen from the pocket on the front of his vest.

Flora swallowed an unexpected lump in her throat. “He died?” she said, her knees turning to water again.

“How did the fight start?” he said, then paused. “I mean, what did you see?” He was only interested in not “leading the witness,” as Flora knew from watching *C.S.I. Miami*, Raúl’s favorite American TV show.

As Flora prepared to offer a play-by-play of the last hour at the Oasis, she realized she didn’t know exactly how the fight had started. “When the skinny man went to Montez’s table, I was there, and I heard him tell Montez that the table was his. But I backed away because I was scared. I don’t know what else they said—”

The detective, whose nametag said Skinner, stopped her. “So you know something was said next?”

His direct eye contact was unnerving Flora. “Did I say that? I just don’t remember.” But Flora was beginning to remember. The smaller man seemed like he wanted to say something and Montez pushed him instead. But she wasn’t listening by then. She had been distracted by the violence.

“What do *you* think he said?” asked Flora.

“That’s all I need, ma’am,” said Skinner. He bowed slightly and turned to go.

“Wait,” said Flora. He pretended not to hear her, and walked into the restaurant.

Flora succumbed to the weariness of her legs and collapsed against the rough, warm bricks of the run-down building. Hot tears were already trickling down her soft brown cheeks, so she let them fall.

She was subpoenaed to the trial weeks later. “The state vs. Montez,” they said. She didn’t care, really. Yes, it was a tragedy. Blood had stained her favorite work shirt. The investigating detective had made her feel like an idiot. But she still had her job.



Business hadn't slowed; apparently vicious murders didn't scare most people. She still made enough money for rent, and she hadn't been haunted by nightmares. She wished they would leave her alone instead of making her talk about it again.

Even though she witnessed Montez stabbing Jaime, she couldn't recall anything that would make Montez want to do it. She might have overheard something, the lawyers insisted. They made her talk about it, step by step, over and over. But she couldn't answer them.

Jaime's cousin Carlos, the one who had tried to bring him back to the booth, proved to be the best witness. He thought he heard Jaime growl to Montez, "I'll do the same thing to you that I did to your father."

They let Montez go after three years of trials. The jury said it was "involuntary manslaughter," which meant they believed Montez had been blind with rage. "All I could see was red," he said. The judge gave him three years in prison and seven years' probation, but since he'd already served three years in jail waiting for his trials, they sent him back to Honduras.

Flora paced in front of the Oasis before going in to wait tables. She glanced over at the brown stained concrete near the heavy glass door. It reminded her of the mud puddles she and her brother used to play in when they visited Tía Berta, the aunt in Honduras with the velvet drapes. The sidewalk blurred.

"I wish I was with Tía Berta," Flora muttered. She dragged her tired feet back inside the Oasis.

## CHAPTER II

## Midnight in Dublin

*"Star, star, teach me how to shine..."* The mic stopped picking up Glen Hansard's delicate Irish croon as he turned it to the audience, compelling them to join in the song. Violin strains rang out from the Vicar Street stage, half the crowd cheering while the other half tried to stay in sync with Hansard's words.

I was one of these compelled singers, shouting each "star" and wishing the red-headed musician would look down and to his left. There I stood with my best friend Esther, only one row from the Frames as they poured their souls into music that could only be described as ethereal. They brought smoke and colored lights to enhance this sensation, but not caring how the show was produced allowed Esther and me to drift away on a sea of pale blues and pinks. We were led into a dream created by violins, smooth vocals, and Irish brogue.

And that was the problem. As we sailed away with Hansard and his Frames, we forgot why time was important or that public transportation has its limits. Or maybe we were being too American. They say that the decision-making center of the brain doesn't fully develop until the mid-twenties. Esther was 27 and I was 24. Just when our brains should have been fully developed, we proved science wrong.

"Hi, I'm Malu," said a voice next to me. I felt jarred by the interruption, like someone had splashed her Guinness in my face. I turned to peer into a pretty, tan face very close to mine. Her long brown hair and ambiguous European accent made me feel off balance. Was she Irish? Italian?

“Hi, I’m Mariah and this is Esther,” I said. Esther smiled at the girl, which reminded me of something. I leaned toward Esther’s ear. “Remember to tell me when it’s 11 o’clock. That’s when we need to leave.” She nodded and rolled her eyes. Esther didn’t understand my concern, but that was because she didn’t know how badly I needed to feel safe at night. I had never told her what the doctors told me three years ago. And I didn’t plan to.

The music blared from a nearby speaker, making it almost impossible to hear. Malu and I continued shouting our conversation anyway.

“Are the Frames not so amazing?” Malu said, her wiry body swaying backward. I reached out to catch her, but she bounced back up before I could make contact.

“I have followed them all over Europe. They are my favorite band,” she said. I noticed her accent more strongly when she failed to use contractions, but I still suspected she was Irish. I couldn’t tell in all that noise.

“Where are you from?” I said.

“Brussels.” She spoke English so well that I never would have guessed. As though she could read my thoughts, she continued, “I study English literature at university there. I also write. Do you write?”

Her arbitrary train of thought caught me off guard. I had been an English major in college. “Yes.”

“What do you write?” she asked.

“I try to write fiction,” I said. She threw her arms around me.

“Oh, we are sisters,” she said, singing with excitement. With her arms around my neck, she swayed like she wanted me to dance with her.

“Who are you?” shouted Esther when she saw my predicament.

Malu hardly noticed my friend until I answered her myself. “This is Malu. From Belgium.”

Malu flung herself against Esther. “Oh, I am so glad to meet you and your friend. I am Malu.”

The two formally shook hands. Esther’s bewildered face did not match Malu’s ecstatic expression, but Malu didn’t notice. She launched into another speech about her great love of the Frames. “You see the violin player? He is my friend. I talk to him at every show. Hi!” She waved frantically toward the other side of the stage, as if the small man more than half an arena away from us—his eyes shut in enjoyment—could see her. “I know the band will not mind if we come back stage because of my friend. Oh, you must come meet them.”

Suddenly Malu’s over-exuberance didn’t bother us anymore. A dreamy look came over Esther’s face, and I threw my hands in the air.

“Malu, we’d love to meet the Frames with you,” I said. Esther and I had come to the concert secretly hoping to meet the band, maybe even sharing a song Esther had written.

“Of course you can come with me,” said Malu, who began leaping into the air. I didn’t care that this girl was certifiably insane. I wanted Esther to have a chance at hitting it big with her music.

Esther and I exchanged high fives and turned back to the stage. Every now and then Malu would yell some obscure fact about the Frames in my ear, and I would ignore

her. But one time she said, “I have a hotel room here in Dublin. Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

I whipped my head around and gave her a serious look. “You mean it?” I asked. She was startled by my reaction.

“Yes of course, dear.”

I smiled and nodded, reassured. The Irish family Esther and I were staying with outside of Dublin had warned us to leave the concert in time to catch the train. I wanted to follow their instructions to the letter, but Esther’s nonchalance told me I had better find other sleeping arrangements. I couldn’t tell her why I wanted to go back, so I banked on Dublin being a big city with a bus or cheap taxi that could take us back. But now I had Malu.

Esther Rose was a budding musician in Nashville. Sometimes I played tambourine with her to contribute indie-sounding backup, but mostly she could woo a crowd with her voice and a guitar. We had come to Europe for the summer not to expand her music career, but to have one big adventure before she got married and I went to graduate school.

I never told Esther about living with a sleep disorder. It was more than a sleep disorder—it was really a psychological problem—but I couldn’t bring myself to admit this weakness to Esther. I thought we would be college buddies who never saw each other again, so there was no need. My parents, who kept my secret, encouraged me to tell Esther after college once we became inseparable. I thought about telling her. But she

asked me to backpack across Europe before I could, so I decided to take some sleeping pills and hope for the best.

Esther refused to bring her guitar on a three-month tour of Europe, but there were moments I wished she had. Like the time I signed her up to play at a coffee shop. She refused to go because she thought she couldn't play on a strange guitar without any practice. If she had sung that night, I bet some Irish recording label would have discovered her.

We stayed outside of Dublin in a village called Greystones. It lies on the eastern coast of Ireland on the Irish Sea. Esther knew a girl in the States, and her Irish parents invited us to stay with them. Their town, the last stop on the DART train from Dublin, became our home for three weeks.

A funny thing about Ireland is how they name their homes rather than having house numbers. Knockdolian was the name of the home we found ourselves in, a big old Irish farmhouse. The O'Connor family took good care of us—they washed our clothes and dried them on an ancient wooden rack that they could hoist up to the top of the 20-foot kitchen ceiling. We loved Knockdolian, but that night—I'll admit it—we loved the Frames more.

Malu breathed heavily and I could feel her hot breath on my neck. I tried to inch away from her, but the crowd was too thick. Esther squeezed the life out of my hand as she pulled me along, although of course she could barely move. The entire crowd from the Vicar Street Theatre was spilling out the double doors.

“Go left,” called Malu to Esther. I could see my red-headed American friend try to muscle her way through a stream of drunk concert goers, but it was no use. The wall they formed was impossible. Our only choice was to wait our turn.

But this would not satisfy Malu. “Go left,” she said again, yelling loudly into my ear. I scowled at her, but she paid no attention to me. “We must hurry before the Frames leave.” Her exuberance faded as our delay grew longer. I decided to take over.

I grabbed Malu’s arm with my other free hand and pushed Esther to the side. “Follow me,” I said into her ear. I pushed my way through the line—which by now was more a group—nudging people out of the way, ignoring the curse words flung at us, praying no one would start a fight.

I found myself bursting through the doorway stage left before I realized how far I had pushed. I flung the sweaty palm and forearm from my hands and turned to grin at my friends, pleased with myself.

“Thank you Mariah,” said Malu, her excitement returning. “Just follow me. I know my way around this theater.”

We followed the boasting groupie down dark, red-carpeted halls, hoping to find Mr. Hansard around each corner. Esther had hissed the word “groupie” into my ear as the concert ended. I did not like the label, much less the idea of sharing it. But the chance to feel safe that night overshadowed all my doubts and misgivings.

Malu was already pushing us stage left. I was committed to Malu at this point, but I knew Esther still needed to be convinced. When she grabbed my hand to lead me out the doors, I noticed that she was following Malu’s instructions. I thought my point was already won.

Esther and I followed Malu up some stairs and down an even darker hallway.

"How do you get backstage so easily?" I asked our guide, knowing that a concert like this in the States would have had security guards everywhere.

"They are not as famous as they used to be," said Malu. "And Vicar Street trusts its fans." This was true. Before the concert, a free bar had filled hundreds of cups with as much alcohol as the people wanted. And the Frames' heyday was in the early 1990s.

"This is the way to back stage. I know I will see my friend soon. There he is!"

Malu shot down the stage passage like a cat after a mouse. She pounced on a shadowy figure bent over a violin case, and we heard sharp exclamations in Irish brogue.

"You think he really wanted to see her?" asked Esther. She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to size up their reunion. The small Irishman seemed to be pushing Malu back more than embracing her, but you can't always tell what's going on from across a room.

"I don't know. We're standing backstage with the Frames trying not to look like drunk groupies. You think it's working?"

Esther giggled, shooting me an amused look. "Maybe," she said.

No one paid any attention to us. The musicians packed away an endless number of guitars and drums while sound engineers scurried around bagging mics and rolling up cables. Sound monitors and cable boxes rolled to and fro behind the curtains, interrupting the stage lights like massive dark clouds moving across the moon at night.

"Excuse me," I heard behind me, and Esther pulled me out of the way in time to save me from a snake-like cable as it slithered under our feet. The young man coiling the



cable winked. “You can help roll cables, like,” he said in a thick Dublin accent. Esther and I chuckled at his Irish way of adding “like” to his sentence. We nodded and he pointed out the proper cables.

“You know how to roll them?” he asked, proceeding to show us the alternating coil technique in spite of our affirmative nods. He smiled approvingly at our method and moved downstage.

“Isn’t this what groupies do?” I asked Esther.

“Hush,” she said. “This work makes me feel like less of an idiot.”

I just shrugged and kept coiling. As I kneeled on the lacquered wooden floor, I stole a glance toward Malu. She stood chatting happily with her violin player, and I breathed deeply with relief. I was afraid she might disappear.

“What’s your name?” asked another young sound engineer, startling me from my thoughts. He gathered my tightly rolled cables.

“Mariah,” I said.

“Ah, from the States. How long have you been in old Ireland?” he asked, a charming grin lighting up his small features.

“A week. Do you work here at Vicar Street?” I asked, deflecting the attention from myself.

“Oh no, I travel with the boys. Your friend yonder travels with us too sometimes.”

My heart sank as I realized Esther’s groupie label was accurate.

“You probably came to meet the man himself. If you just wait here I’ll get old Glen for you.” The boy dashed away before I could protest.

“Esther,” I called. She was a few feet away from me and, it appeared, deep in her own sound-guy conversation.

“That kid just went to grab Glen,” I said. “Now we have to meet him, and he’s going to think we’re groupies, and he won’t take your music seriously, and—”

“Mariah,” Esther interrupted, “that’s exactly why I wasn’t sure about meeting him under these circumstances.” Her eye briefly wandered over to a holey wooden Takamine guitar as it passed us in the arms of a musician. Esther’s guitar at home was a Takamine. Her dad had given it to her. It was the reason she had started playing in the first place.

“But we can do this,” she said, reassuring me. “Just smile and be American, and maybe he won’t think we’re idiots. Just idealistic travelers.”

I gulped and nodded, composing myself as we saw the tall redhead make his way toward us.

“American fans, I see,” the handsome Irishman said, shaking our hands. “Pleasure to meet you. Do you know anyone in the band?”

Both of us mute, we pointed down the gallery toward Malu and her violinist. Only we didn’t see them anymore. Panic seized my throat and I struggled to breathe calmly.

“Ah, friends with stagehands. I see. Great fun to meet you lasses. In Dublin for long?”

“Just tonight,” Esther said. I had never seen her eyes so wide. Her cheeks flushed. *If she looks like that, I must look as red as a cherry*, I thought. In Esther’s excitement and my panic, we forgot to correct him.

“She’s a wonderful musician,” I blurted out. I instantly clapped my hand over my mouth.

"We must hear you play tonight, missy," said Glen, chuckling to himself. "Meet us over at Hub on Eustace Street and we'll see what happens." Then Glen winked, nodded, and walked away toward his road crew gathering at the back door.

Esther was shaking her head before Glen turned his back. She was frozen in place, only able to swivel her neck back and forth.

"I can't play," she said in a small voice.

"What? Yes you can," I said. "Besides, we have to follow Malu—wherever she went—so we have a place to sleep tonight. Let's go to this Hub place." I set off toward Malu's latest location at the other end of the stage, grabbing Esther's hand as I went. She walked mechanically behind me, allowing me to pull her. Then she stopped.

"A place to sleep," she said, as though she had forgotten about getting back to Greystones. "Mariah, it's after eleven—I think it's midnight. What are we going to do?"

I smiled. "Malu's hotel room."

"No, Mariah, we are not staying with a groupie," said Esther. "I think she might be high."

"What other choice do we have?" I said in protest. "We can find a cab, but I bet you won't want to pay the fare. Greystones is an hour from here and the trains aren't running."

Esther scowled. "You stay there if you want. I'm not going to."

"Esther, what's wrong with you? This is a free hotel room with a really fun girl."

"A really crazy girl, you mean," said Esther.

"I don't want to go without you, but that's where I want to sleep tonight. It'll be safe and dry and warm. So there."

Esther rolled her eyes. "We'll talk about this later."

I was too nervous to argue with Esther anymore. Anxiety propelled me across the stage. "Malu?" I called toward an open doorway a few feet away from the end of the stage. No answer.

"Just walk to the Hub. It's only 10 minutes," said the first stagehand when we asked him about Malu. "I'll take you over myself when I'm done."

Relief flooded my chest. Maybe Malu would be there, and maybe Esther would trust me.

Light rain drizzled down my neck as we walked with Devlin O'Rork, our midnight tour guide. I patted my fanny pack to make sure my sleeping pills were safe, ignoring the spongy feeling in my collar left by the rain.

It was one in the morning. Devlin, while kind, had been the last person out of the entire venue at Vicar Street. Esther and I were growing delirious with exhaustion. We talked to Devlin of life in Ireland, of growing up in a hard part of Dublin, of living in the shadow of the Frames.

Before we could walk far with Devlin, we arrived on the front stoop of the Hub. Loud music spilled onto Eustace Street from inside the tiny venue. We could barely make out Glen sitting and chatting in a booth. We were relieved that he was occupied. Maybe he had forgotten that he met us at all.

"Hello girls." Malu. All my anxiety faded away at that Belgian accent.

"You know someone in there? Ah, you'll be fine!" said Devlin as he disappeared into the bar.

Esther grabbed my hand. "Don't go in there."

"Stop being dramatic. We don't have anywhere else to go."

"I can't. I don't want to be a groupie," she said. "And Glen might make me play."

"Why don't you want to play? It might actually be a good thing. Did you ever think of that?" I asked, exasperated with her shyness. If I had half her skill, I would have already plopped down next to the Irish legend and demanded he listen.

"I don't know. I want when I play to be perfect. If it's not perfect, he won't like it," she said, "and I'll never be a real musician." A thin layer of sweat glistened on her forehead in the yellow street lights.

"Whoa. I wasn't expecting brutal honesty. But yeah, that's exactly why you have to play, Esther. Get in there," I said, pushing her toward the entrance.

Malu was now standing at the doors, motioning wildly for us to come in. "I already told Glen about you, and he said he met you," she said, clasping her hands in front of her chest. "Just like a fairytale." I saw the signs of another backward swoon and rushed past her, dragging Esther by the hand.

I found myself in a new situation. Esther was usually the one pushing me, telling me to snap out of it and overcome my fear. I had never seen this wide-eyed, stage-fright look in her eyes. Maybe she really could understand the fears I had never told her about.

"Malu, we need your help." I figured that would snap Esther out of whatever funk she was in, since she didn't seem to be a big Malu fan. But it didn't.

"Anything, dear," said Malu. "I—"

I pressed on without waiting for her theatrics. "We need to put a guitar in this girl's hands and we need Glen to listen. Got it?"

Malu smiled widely and spun around. "Colm," she said as she pushed her way toward the violinist in the booth with Glen.

Before I had time to give Esther another pep talk, Malu was thrusting the neck of a beat-up acoustic guitar into Esther's left hand. "Glen said to use his guitar," she said.

Tears welled up in Esther's eyes as she looked at me over the commotion. Malu was pushing Esther toward the bar's tiny stage, others joining Malu when they saw Esther's passive resistance.

Esther sat alone on a stool, bending over the strings so she wouldn't have to look at the crowd. She was elevated above everyone in the bar, like a queen on her throne. She strummed a chord, lifted her face, and the bar fell silent.

*"I wish that I was a little sparrow....,"* sang Esther. Her husky alto reverberated around the bar, hushing the crowd the way the Frames' lyrics had soothed us just hours before. I could see Glen smiling in his booth. A group of men close to the stage raised their pints, linked arms, and started to sway. Pretty soon, everyone was swaying in rhythm to Esther's song, myself included. I looked around for Malu's reaction, and I saw her smiling with her eyes closed. Maybe if Esther knew Malu liked her music, she would like Malu.

After her first song, the crowd demanded another. And another. Esther pulled me on stage, someone handed me a tambourine, and suddenly we were playing a gig in Dublin. We knew indie sound had a soothing effect on the crowd because Malu rushed over and told us that Glen wanted to talk to us.

I begged out of the meeting, but encouraged Esther to go. "I'll just hang back with Malu." I was feeling very tired, and I wouldn't feel peace until I had Malu's room key in my hand. It was 2:30 in the morning now.

"Malu, how far is your hotel from here?" I asked by way of encouraging her towards bed. Esther was moving toward Glen's booth, so she didn't hear our conversation.

"It is just a half hour's taxi ride. You want to go soon?" She must have noticed my drooping eyes.

"Yes, please," I said.

She pressed her room key into my hand. "Go now. Ask for the Marriott Shelbourne. It is room 117. Go, and I will bring Esther with me when we are done."

I grinned sleepily. This plan sounded good to me, and I walked out the door. I hailed a taxi. I got in the taxi and got out of it at the Marriot hotel. I walked down the main hall to room 117. I opened the door, unclipped my fanny pack, swallowed a pill, and fell on the room's one bed, unconscious in moments.

A loud banging hurt my head. I opened my eyes, hoping one of the cats in Greystones hadn't knocked something over. Then I noticed that I was cold and the room smelled different than the one I was used to. I realized someone was knocking on the door.

I rolled off the bed onto soft carpet. I felt dizzy and dry mouthed, always the result of waking up before a sleeping pill has run its course. I felt along the wall for a light and made my way to the door.

"Mariah!" came a muffled yell. I swung the door open quickly, trying to remember where I was. "Mariah," said a familiar voice. The face before me was blurry, but I could make out the familiar red halo made by her curly hair.

Esther shoved me out of the way and stomped over to the bed. She ripped down the blanket, kicked off her shoes, and climbed in without another word. Malu was not with her.

I closed the door and lay down next to my best friend on the queen size bed, hoping that her anger would fade with sleep. Anxiety tried to sweep over me, but drowsiness won and before I could follow another thought, a soft pillow swallowed my head.

More banging aroused me, but this time light streamed in behind heavy curtains and all grogginess was gone. I leaped out of the bed and flung the door open, glad to see Malu. "Thank you so much for last night," I said, but the disheveled girl only grunted and moved past me. She tumbled onto the bed where I had been lying and started to snore.

I heard a moan and saw Esther move. She saw me standing across the room and then shot out of the blankets as though she felt a frog under the covers.

"You!" she shouted, and I shushed her in vain.

"You left me there," she said, her eyes narrowing. "You left me alone with a bunch of Irishmen and a crazy Belgian. I had to spend an hour convincing Malu to let me come here without her. I didn't even know you were gone for a full half hour!"

She stomped her foot, and I blurted out the only thing I could think of to calm her down. "I have nyctophobia and I can't sleep at night unless I feel safe and if I can't find



somewhere to sleep I have a panic attack and then I can't function for weeks and I take sleeping pills even when I do feel safe."

I stopped, my heart pounding and breathing heavily.

Esther took a breath as if to speak, then stopped in abrupt understanding of what I had said. "You have what?"

"Nyctophobia. Fear of the dark. It's more of a sleeping disorder now. I was diagnosed three years ago. I've been in counseling."

"You've been in counseling for three years and you never told me?" Her expression changed from anger to sadness. "You don't trust me?"

"No, I do trust you—I'm here, aren't I?—but I was ashamed. I thought you'd think I'm a baby and that I couldn't go to Europe with you. I can be here in Europe. I just have to know where I'm sleeping."

"That's why you left me?" said Esther, anger returning to her eyes.

"I wasn't thinking straight when I left last night. Malu said she'd bring you home, and that was good enough for a sleep-deprived and frightened traveler." I stepped closer to Esther and squeezed her arm. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

Esther pulled her arm away. She turned to face the window, refusing to respond to my apology.

"Esther, last night you overcame a huge fear. You played your music on a famous guitar, on stage in another country, in front of a musician you respect. Can you have hope for me to overcome my own fear?"

Sunlight from behind the curtains grew brighter and brighter. Morning had come, and fear of the night fled with each ray. I could have hope of kicking nyctophobia on this trip if Esther could have patience with me.

She sat down in a chair by the window and looked up, weariness in her eyes. "You did push me up there. Glen said he's going to get me recorded. Wants me down at their studio this afternoon. None of that would have happened without you and your fear." She looked down at her freckled bare feet. "We'll see how long it takes for me to forgive you."

I smiled in spite of her heavy words. "We'll work on it, Esther. Maybe this will even make us better friends."

She glared up at me. "Don't push it. But you're right, we'll work on it. Now let's eat something and try to pick out songs for the studio."

I followed Esther out of the hotel room. Before we got out the door, I went back to scribble a thank you note to Malu on the complementary hotel stationary while she snored. She would never know how much she helped Esther and I that night in Dublin.

## CHAPTER III

## Blue Grass

"I'm telling you," I said to my best friend Willy. I was in the driver's seat as we sailed down a back road in central Kentucky. "I don't know how to convince my boss that I hate writing newsy pieces." My glasses fogged in the warm car. "I'm a feature writer. I hate being out in the field, in the rain, the snow. I hate pushing people into corners to force them to tell me details they wouldn't even tell their mothers." I drew an exclamation point in the air.

Willy shook her head. "Come on. News is exciting, and you love getting info out of folks, especially tidbits they wouldn't tell anyone else. But you're an employee, not your own boss—"

"Don't start with that, Wilhelmina," I said. When I use her full name, Willy either plays the offended dignitary, flipping her straight blond hair over her shoulder, or rolls her eyes. This was an eye-roll moment.

"How your mother came up with the name Angelika I'll never know. You're too full of spitfire to be called angelic."

"Depends on your definition," I said. But she knew that age-old debate, how my parents had settled on Angelika after Daddy chose the meaning and Mama the name for their only child. He always told me that "angelic" meant I had the power of heaven to do what I felt was right, so I'd better learn to know best from worst if I wanted to see my family in the afterlife.

It had always made sense to me to be full of spitfire. Not many women achieve what they want without it. Even Willy, sensitive and justice-driven Willy, throws some

grenades. But she usually only does that when an innocent is on trial or she's so curious she forgets to care about consequences. That's probably why Asbury University wanted her as a professor.

We continued to analyze my work dilemma. Although I felt agitated at my companion's defense of my pushy boss, I also felt calmed by the soft wall of drizzle outside our window, the mysterious and captivating green Kentucky grass shining as brightly through raindrops as it might on a cloudless day. As I curved sharply around a bend, the most shocking blue and verdant green river appeared on our right, and I slowed down to get a better look.

I love the woods. Moonrises, sunsets, and everything in between captivate me, and I like to pause and contemplate the wonder of veined, pale green tree leaves, the miniscule filigree buds of Queen Anne's lace, or the way paths are formed in the woods by felled trees when beavers drag the dead limbs to their dams. Once, on a camping trip in Tennessee, Willy and I stumbled upon a brand-new beaver dam. Willy touched it with her toes, but it was too fragile for human weight. The delicate parts of nature make me stop short in the middle of country roads on gray days, without regard for cars that may be behind me, drivers who may not see the gray bumper of Willy's small car.

The grind of metal against metal followed by the screech of tires registered in my ears as though I heard it through water. My body slammed backward into my seat. I heard someone gasping for breath after the tire squealing stopped. Not until I moved did I realize I was the one panting, and Willy hadn't made a noise.

I instinctively turned toward my friend, the bile of panic rising in my throat. She sat wide-eyed in her seat. "You ok?" I managed to squeeze out between gasps. She nodded, her eyes opening and shutting very quickly.

"My neck doesn't hurt. I thought it would hurt," she said. She twisted in her seat to test her other muscles.

"You'll probably hurt tomorrow. Let's get out."

It had stopped raining. We lifted our door handles and pushed, both thankful that the impact hadn't bent the frame and crushed the doors. I slid out onto the wet asphalt, moving slowly to test for injury. Nothing was broken or bleeding. Fresh country air filled my lungs and I shuddered.

Willy and I turned from our places at the car doors to face our assailant. Not wanting to appear shy, I tried to walk toward the brown truck stopped very close behind Willy's vehicle. Only, when I took a step, my legs wobbled like jello and refused to support my weight. "Stupid adrenaline," I muttered under my breath. I looked at Willy and nodded toward the truck.

Her eyes widened and she shook her head. "It's hard to walk. I can't go talk to him. Maybe he'll come over here." She bent her knees, sinking the weight of her upper body onto them with her hands.

"No, I'll talk to him. It's my fault." I turned and faced the truck. "Hello," I said with a wave. I again stretched to my full height, testing the unsteady legs. I steeled myself for a good berating by the gruff-looking old man.

“There a possum in the road there?” he said as he looked up from the worn leather seat. He sat gathering his insurance notes. The cab smelled of tobacco smoke and dirt. He wore overalls and a straw hat.

I was unprepared for his unruffled demeanor. “I’m sorry, sir, for slowing down so much. It wasn’t a possum, I just got distracted by the scenery. I’ll take full responsibility for this.” I swallowed again, pulling my shoulders up.

“The scenery?” he said. He shook his head. “I believe you’ll take the blame for this, ma’am. But that’s not the way the law works, is it? I rear ended you, so I’m at fault.” He was not happy and my heart sank with guilt. “We can skip the police report, though. If you don’t mind riding around without much of a bumper, that is. I doubt there’s much damage to my truck, and it would save me a lot of trouble.”

I looked back toward Willy’s shredded bumper. “Just give me a second. It’s her car,” I said. The old man’s eyes widened and he shook his head. “Great driver,” I heard him say.

I gritted my teeth in frustration and walked over to Willy. Adrenaline still made my legs watery and my hands shaky. “Willy, he doesn’t want us to report the accident since they would say it was his fault.”

Willy was silent for a moment. “What would you do?”

“Depends. If the car drives fine and I knew someone who could fix the bumper for cheap, then I guess I’d let it slide,” I said.

“Let’s see if it works then,” said Willy. She took the keys and made her way to the driver’s side. The engine started up as usual, and I watched from the road as she eased

out of park and moved to drive. I waved at the farmer to signal that we were test driving, and he nodded. Willy drove out of sight and returned moments later.

"It drives fine," she said as she got out. "One of my friends on campus does fix-it stuff. I bet he could find an old bumper at a junkyard." She shrugged. "Don't call it in." I smiled gratefully, but the smile was not returned. Great, I've ruined two people's days, I thought as I went to inform the farmer of his good fortune.

"She says we can forget about the cops," I said to the man, who now stood looking at his own bumper.

"Good. Didn't scratch my front bumper a bit. That's why I drive a Chevy." He looked a little happier that he wasn't getting a ticket, but I still felt his hostility. "Next time, don't be so foolish. Pull over before you stop," he said. He returned to the truck cab and drove away without saying a word to Willy. I thought he might have at least nodded towards her as he pulled away.

"Thanks, Angie," said Willy. "Now I have another car problem to deal with. The one time you're here this year you mangle my bumper. You're not allowed to drive the rest of your trip."

I looked at the ground. "I'm really sorry," I said. "I'll try to fix it before I leave."

"No, it's fine. I'll get my friend to do it next week. Just no more driving for you. Let's take a bathroom break in those woods before we go anywhere else. I've got to pee."

I stood in the grass beneath the tree line on the side of road, waiting for Willy to get some tissues before we walked into the forest to relieve ourselves. As I watched the gray sky and the river flowing beside the road, I considered my life. Would this forever

be our routine, Willy teaches for two semesters, I write for nine months, I drive up to Wilmore for four days, we go back to our lives? I had lived in small towns in Tennessee since college. For six years, I worked as a freelance writer. This allowed me to travel to other countries and write for newspapers via email correspondence. Last year, Willy encouraged me to find a full time job so I would have insurance. I earned a position as feature writer for the newspaper in Dover, Tennessee, but I felt trapped at my desk job. That was the real reason I visited Willy this time.

I crossed my arms over my chest, shivering not at the damp weather but at the cold thought that one day I would not be able to have another adventure because I was confined in Dover. I turned away from the river and toward the dark woods, taking a few impatient steps as Willy jogged across the road. She joined me and we went up the hill.

We heard the music before we saw its players. "What is that, banjoes?" said Willy from several feet ahead of me. While making our pit stop, we noticed a faintly marked footpath in the woods. Curious, we walked down the path for a few minutes, pausing at the sound of instruments twanging in a fast-paced bluegrass tune.

Drawn by the skill of hammers and picks and soft fingertips on carbon strings, the whirl of taut horsehair moving up and down, we meandered toward the music. I had seen bluegrass circles in Tennessee, and they are impressive sights. Soon we could make out a blue structure amid the leaves, probably the shelter for these players. We peeked our faces through the brush like raccoons, searching for the source of the sounds.

A group of musicians, young and old, mostly male, sat in a semicircle in a big, open yard between a rambling blue clapboard house and a barn. The barn was large and



unpainted. Its slats were placed loosely, as though the barn was built for smoking tobacco or meat rather than housing animals.

I was content to squat right where I was, but then Willy pointed. "Look, it's that brown truck that hit us," she said in a whisper. "Don't you think it would be ok to meet them? I want to be close to the music."

"No, Willy. That man was not happy when he drove away."

She rolled her eyes. "I know, but we let him off the hook by not getting a police report. Come on, Angie, this is a great opportunity to listen to good music and make new friends."

In spite of my thirst for adventure, all I had done and the places I had been, I didn't like the idea of confronting an angry man in the middle of the woods. But then dogs started barking, and we had no choice.

We stepped out of the woods and walked toward the circle.

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"Hi," waved Willy, tilting her body forward at the waist. "Do you mind if we sit and listen?"

The music halted with a grind. No one said a word. One younger-looking man nudged a chair in our direction, but the dour fellow next to him grunted, and the nudging stopped. No one met our gaze.

"Willy," I said, hiding behind her tiny frame.

"There he is," she said over her shoulder. The man from the accident, she meant. I glanced over at the field of vehicles along the muddy driveway, and sure enough, there was the brown truck, crouched like a bear ready to roar down on us.

"I don't like this, Willy," I said. I reached for her shirt to pull her back, but she missed my words and stepped closer to the circle. Like I said, she forgets to be cautious when she gets curious.

"Hello, sir. Remember us from a little while ago?" she asked, pointing to the man in question. He glared back at her, offering neither confirmation nor denial.

My head felt funny, and I realized I hadn't breathed since I told Willy I didn't like this. I couldn't move. I was frozen. I was alone with an idiotic friend and a posse of what looked like angry moonshiners. No one said a word. Tension held the whole group in its ugly grip. I wondered if I wasn't the only one holding my breath by accident now.

Willy cleared her throat. Oh no, I thought. Oh no.

"I asked you a question, sir." She let her sentence float on top of the tension, sitting like a cat in a tree.

At first nothing happened, nothing stirred, not even a banjo string. Then several of the musicians moved toward us. Willy stepped out to meet them, and of course I followed.

"If it isn't the girls I ran into earlier," said a displeased voice. I searched the handful of men coming toward us, and I met the gaze of the brown truck owner. There was a collective sigh amongst the men as though they were relieved that one of them knew us. I thought he could have acknowledged us the first time to save all this tension.

"How'd you girls find your way out here?" he said, stooping to grab the collar of a loudly barking Doberman.

I answered him. "We made a pit stop in the woods and saw a footpath. We followed it and then heard your music, so we followed that too."

"Ah," was all he said.

"Where y'all from?" asked another man, also holding the collar of a growling dog.

"Wilmore," said Willy. "I teach at Asbury. She's from Nashville. We don't mean to disturb you. We can go." She seemed frightened now, as if all her bravado faded in front of big dogs.

"Nah, it's fine. Come on down and take a seat," said a third man, much more at ease with the situation than anyone else. He nodded toward the group of blue, red, and orange lawn chairs. "I'm Peter. This here's Bert, and this fellow you met earlier, he's Arty."

"Thank you, Mr. Peter," I said.

Willy and I grinned nervously at Bert and Arty as we walked passed them, hoping they wouldn't let their dogs go just yet.

"You just sit there a minute while we get you some ice tea. You like ice tea?" asked Peter. I nodded, smiling gratefully. I sat back in a worn wooden lawn chair, letting the dusk breeze smooth tension from my face. Willy sat in a chair near mine, although not beside me. A young man took a seat between us.

"Hi, I'm Reed," he said, stretching his hand out to each of us. I was surprised at his friendly demeanor, considering how much coldness we felt from many in the circle. Willy pointed to his over-sized guitar. "This here is a dobro," Reed said. "You play it flat on your lap like a lap steel guitar. See?" He laid the big guitar-shaped instrument across his knees and started stroking the carbon strings.

It sounded like an instrument I'd heard in Vienna nine years before. I was backpacking across Europe with some college friends one summer. A girl we stayed with in Austria, Gunilla, took me to a beer garden. In a small room behind the beer garden, we stumbled upon a concert where a lone musician had pulled out two guitars and played them at the same time. One was an acoustic guitar, the other a steel lap. It was one of the most soothing sounds I'd ever heard.

Reed's chords started to make a song, and several others picked up their guitars, fiddles, and mandolins. The man called Bert picked up a bass violin.

"Here you go." I turned to find a sweating glass of dark tea in my hands, and I gripped it to keep it from slipping to the ground. I looked up at Peter as I tipped the refreshing liquid down my throat. "Glad you like it," Peter said as he made his way over to a small fiddle.

I was watching the musicians when Arty surprised me by sitting down in a chair next to mine. "How you liking this music?" he said without looking at me. He took a long draft from his own hefty glass of tea.

"I love blue grass music, Mr. Arty. This is fun for Willy and me." I wondered why he didn't play something, why he was talking to me at all.

"Willy is it?" he asked, nodding toward her. "Funny name for a girl."

I was used to this treatment of Willy's name. "It's short for Wilhelmina. But that's quite a mouthful."

Arty grinned. "So that car going to be ok?" He watched the players instead of me as we talked, but I would take what I could get. I knew he was not exactly happy to see me again.

"Willy has a friend in Wilmore who can probably fix it. Sorry again for the trouble, sir," I said.

"It sure wasn't what I needed on a day when I find out my prize bull has to be put down," he said. He sipped his tea and glanced at me for the first time.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Arty. That's terrible," I said.

"Sure is. But I'm glad I have my buddies to turn to." Arty gestured widely to indicate his friendship with the gentlemen before us. "I usually play guitar at these shindigs. Couldn't bring myself to play on a day like this."

"There's a time for everything," I said. I hoped my platitude wouldn't annoy him. To my surprise, he laughed.

"A time for everything. You sound like my Betty. She's inside yonder." Arty motioned over his shoulder toward the blue house. I could make out movement inside one window facing us. It looked like the kitchen.

"She's your wife?"

"Going on 40 years. Couldn't do a thing without her."

Arty was an interesting man. First he showed hostility, then begrudging courtesy, and now he was being open with me. Maybe he had a big heart under that gruff exterior. I wanted to know more about him and the lives of these bluegrass players, and now I felt comfortable enough to ask.

"So have you ever been down to Nashville to the Grand Ole Opry?"

Arty gave me a long sideways glance. "Lord, girl, no. Why would we, when we have shows here every weekend and a radio in the house? No, we don't really travel much."

I didn't know what to do with this information. I lived in a small town in Tennessee where I met plenty of people who hadn't traveled, who had never considered it. But the people in Dover rarely sat around and played music or invited strangers off the road to join in. Unless it meant their name would go in the newspaper. Arty's contentment with an ordinary life intrigued me. I wanted the key—maybe I'd use it in a story one day.

"I'm not worried about it," Arty said. "I get chances to travel, sort of. I listen to shows on the radio. Sometimes we go over to young Reed's there to watch television. And I like to read." Arty took another long swig of his iced tea. "Good, isn't it?" he asked, pointing to the tea in my limp hands, the condensation wetting the legs of my jeans.

"The best tea I've ever had," I said. I lifted the heavy glass to my lips. "Mr. Arty, do you ever want to see the things you read about? Don't you want to touch the pyramids or feel the spray of waterfalls in the Amazon?"

Arty gave me an amused look. "You're a writer, aren't you?"

"Yes sir," I said.

"If I was a writer, I'd want to see those things. But as I'm just a farmer who likes to play guitar, I figure I'm happy enough."

"I'm happy too, you know," I said. "I have a successful career as a journalist. And I get to go wherever I want." That last part was no longer true, but Arty didn't need to know.

"Sure, sure. But you have anyone to share all that with?" Arty asked. His question had no ready answer. I kicked the dirt at my feet, making a flat space for my tea glass. The sweet drink no longer energized me.

"I have Willy," I said, daring him to take my friend away from me.

"Does Willy travel with you?" Arty was getting on my nerves. I looked over at Willy, hoping she was ready to go. But Willy was picking on a borrowed violin. Somehow my nonmusical companion was hitting all the right notes, glee lighting up her face like a baby's when it hears its mother's voice. I rolled my eyes.

"She used to, in college."

"You know what? My Betty is inside working on a pecan pie. Why don't we go on inside and you can meet her?"

What a gracious host Arty was turning out to be. I smiled, glad to be doing something different. His questions were making me uncomfortable, like maybe I was alone in the world. Sure, I had friends at home in Tennessee, but they weren't as dear to me as Willy. I saw my parents on holidays. I lived for my job these days.

I followed Arty into the aging blue house, hoping to find water instead of the sticky sweet tea. Arty kissed a small, graying woman who turned to me with a cup of cold water.

"I'm Betty, honey. How are you?"

I took the glass. How had she known? "I'm Angie."

Arty pulled out chairs for Betty and me and took a chair for himself. Several other women Betty's age were visible down a long hallway, sitting in a circle talking loudly.

"You getting tired of the mosquitoes out there?" said Betty to her husband.

"Absolutely," he said with a grin. I hadn't really noticed them. "This gal's from Nashville, Betty."

"Oh, how lovely. We listen to the bluegrass show Saturday nights on the radio. But it's like we have our very own show right outside every weekend," Betty said, nodding toward the window.

"I see that," I said. "It looks fun. You all seem so happy," I said, looking down at my water glass.

"We are happy, dear," said Betty. "But you're not?"

I looked up quickly. "Oh, no, I am. That's what I was telling Mr. Arty. I'm happy with my job and my visits up here to see my friend Willy. And I've seen the world already. But you seem happy with just the way things are."

"The best way to live if you ask me. Goodness." Betty shot out of her seat and rushed to the oven as its timer beeped through the house like an obnoxious doorbell.

"That pie done, Betty?" called a voice from down the hall.

I nodded a thank you to Arty as I rose from the table. I needed to think. I walked slowly out the door and over to a column on the back porch. I watched the bluegrass show wind to an end. Willy waved at me from her violin. Reed nodded at me from his seat, reaching out to rescue Willy's violin from crashing to the ground. Peter laughed and I heard his hand make contact with the shoulder of the guitar player next to him. "Coffee's on," I heard someone call.

Could life really be this simple?



## CHAPTER IV

## Trudy

Trudy Goodfeather stood with her nose pressed against the plate glass window of a pet store. She cupped her small hands around her face to block the light and get a better view of the monkey inside.

"Trudy, get away from that window and come here at once," said Aunt Mildred from half a block up the street. Ten-year-old Trudy reluctantly pushed away from the window and turned to follow her aunt.

Uncle Herman stood next to his wife, tapping his foot and looking at his pocket watch. "Do you know what time it is, Trudy?" Instead of answering, Trudy tried to hide behind Aunt Mildred's blue alligator purse. "It is Sunday, March 12, 1978, and we have been waiting for you for 15 minutes." He pushed the purse out of the way so he could give her a stern look, but Trudy ducked behind his wife.

"This hopeless girl," said Aunt Mildred as she rolled her eyes and grabbed Trudy's hand. The couple pulled Trudy up the small Missouri town's main street, too much in a hurry to notice the longing in Trudy's face as she looked back toward the pet store.

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Charlotte Minnow appeared in Coleville, Missouri, while the town was in an uproar with 2012 Dogwood Festival preparations. Every Victorian home was decked out in flags and ribbons and signs. But Ms. Minnow was not there to be amazed by all the colors. She was there to shut down an unprofitable Dollar General outside the town square.

Charlotte pulled her car off I-57 and pointed it straight for the store. She had driven three hours from Nashville without bathroom breaks and was in a mood to get things over with. She intended to be home in time to see her niece graduate from college.

Charlotte let out a lengthy, hissing sigh. "I hope they don't put up a fight," she said out loud, thinking of the disappointed employees she was about to face.

After navigating a labyrinth of side roads, Charlotte found herself in the town square. Tall dogwood trees flanked Main Street, brilliant pinks and blues mingling with creamy whites. Charlotte rolled down her windows to let the sweet fragrance rouse her from her weariness. She reached the end of the tree parade, and there sat the industrial yellow DG sign on her left. She whipped into the parking lot, grabbed her briefcase, and with great relief escaped the confines of her blue Volvo.

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"Cara," called a frenzied voice from the front register. "Cara! Come quick!"

A tawny head raised itself from the particleboard desk in the back room. Cara Kissinger rolled her green eyes, irritated by the distraction from her end-of-month sales report. She knew she had to make the figures add up, her final attempt at keeping a store closure at bay.

She pushed away from her desk, the wheels on the ancient chair creaking from age and barely budging. She wouldn't miss that chair. The 45-year-old woman shuffled out of the office door and listened as her patent leather shoes squeaked across the floor she had mopped just two hours earlier. Another thing she wouldn't miss. Mopping.

"Cara," squealed the register clerk, "it's corporate. I just know it!"

"Settle down, Missy," said Cara. "*What's corporate?*"

Missy pointed through the dingy white blinds that shielded the front of the store from sunlight. A tall, thin woman in a business suit—carrying a very fat briefcase—was pounding across the blacktop at an alarming rate. Corporate if she'd ever seen it.

“Don’t just stand there gaping.” Cara wheeled around and gave Missy a glare. “Go straighten the shelves!”

Missy nodded. She dashed off into the clothing section, muttering to herself as she jumped from rack to rack like an irate jackrabbit.

The front door chimed. Charlotte Minnow rushed through the automatic doors, almost bumping over a display of animal-shaped wind chimes.

“Cara Kissing?” said the businesswoman. She reached out an empty hand to still the display from rocking, her eyes never moving from the blond woman at the register.

“I’m Cara.” Cara raised herself up and puffed out her chest a little, just in case this high-and-mighty corporate woman thought Cara didn’t have enough poise to be the manager.

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Charlotte, offering a curt nod as she put out her right hand. “I’m Charlotte Minnow.” Cara reached over the counter, mirroring the nod.

“I’ve come up from our corporate offices in Nashville. Is there somewhere we can talk privately?” asked Charlotte.

“If you’ll follow me, ma’am, we can sit down in the back office,” said Cara. She gestured toward the back room, and Charlotte tried to slacken her pace so she didn’t bowl over the smaller woman.

Cara pulled out the less-than-rolling desk chair for Charlotte, selecting a hard-backed chair from the staff lunch table for herself. Fluorescent lights in the ceiling buzzed above their heads.

“I don’t know if you know why I’m here, Ms. Kissinger—”

Cara held up her hand. “Cara, please, ma’am.”

“Sorry. Cara, do you know why I’ve come?” asked Charlotte, her brow wrinkling at the idea that this feisty little manager might not realize Charlotte had come to end her career in Coleville.

“I believe so, ma’am, although no one from corporate notified me that you were coming today.”

“Sometimes things slip through the cracks,” said Charlotte. “Do you know how the sales performance of this store has changed over the last few months?” She swiveled away to dig in her briefcase for the right papers.

“Yes, I do,” said Cara. “I submit the end-of-month sales reports myself. I’ve done so every month since we opened two years ago.” Emotional restraint made her voice sound more sarcastic than she intended.

“Well,” said Charlotte, relieved, “I’ll just show you a graph anyway.”

Cara’s heart sank as it became clear that Charlotte Minnow had not come to let the Coleville Dollar General know how terrific a job it was doing. Not that she didn’t know this was coming; she’d known since Valentine’s Day that sales were down. But it wasn’t for lack of marketing or ascribing to corporate demands. It was the town.

“Cara, I do hate doing this,” said Charlotte Minnow, shaking her head. “I’m going to have to shut your store down.”

"I thought as much, Ms. Minnow. But do you know why sales have dropped off?"

Cara was not about to let an opportunity to defend the store go by. She wanted Dollar General to know what kind of manager she was. "It's not because of us, or even our location. We've done all we can to advertise and make our store appealing. It's just, the population is dwindling around here. The Dogwood Festival makes it look like there's a bunch of us here, with tourists scouring the place right now, but the truth is, Ms. Minnow, people have been moving away."

Oh yes, thought Charlotte. The same old job scarcity story.

Only, "job scarcity" was not why people had been leaving. "They've been leaving in droves," said Cara, "since that chimp escaped from the Goodfeather House."

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Cara wanted the woman from corporate to understand why a Dollar General, usually the most frequently patronized shop in a small town, was failing. It had a lot to do—well, everything to do—with Trudy Goodfeather.

As far as Cara knew, it had all started when Trudy's frail and tedious mother, Martha Winkle, died during childbirth. Trudy's father, whom Trudy never met, was fighting in Vietnam when Trudy was born, and he never came home. Her only relatives, Herman and Mildred Goodfeather, adopted her. But the adoption was more for appearances than out of kindness, as Mildred was not ashamed to tell people.

The Goodfeather family home had been standing above the small railroad town of Coleville for three generations. Built towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by railroad tycoons, it was passed down from one son to the next until the only Goodfeather left was Trudy. Trudy was not a son, but as Aunt Mildred said, she would do.

Trudy at first loved Aunt Mildred and Uncle Herman, but their impatience and indifference towards Trudy stifled the adoration in her nature. This much the bridge club ladies gathered from Mildred's public complaints about her niece. A poor woman from New York whom Herman had reinvented by marrying, Mildred was a beautiful and middle-aged socialite when Trudy arrived. Mildred never had children, and so Trudy, the only offspring of the last generation of Goodfeathers, became the family's last heir.

Mildred resented Trudy's interruption of her life, but she tried to make the most of it by coaching Trudy into a proper Coleville socialite. But Trudy's emotionally awkward home life had done its damage. Her reputation of being chronically shy and boring grew until the other girls were tired of her, and no boys came to see her. Aunt Mildred gave up and left Trudy to herself.

Herman Goodfeather spent most of his time traveling for pleasure and drinking away the family fortune. His favorite destinations were western African safaris. He often returned with exotic objects like bronze tribal masks or giraffe hides sewn into capes. One day, when Trudy was 15, he brought home an animal instead of an artifact: a young chimpanzee.

Trudy hadn't forgotten the monkey she saw in the pet store when she was ten. Cara's mother once told her how one day Trudy walked into town holding the hand of a two-foot chimpanzee and went right into the pet store with the ape. Nothing happened at the pet store, but Mildred found out about Trudy's trip, and no one ever saw the chimpanzee again.

When Trudy was in her early 20's, Aunt Mildred became bedridden. If she had stayed healthy, everyone in town knew she planned to send Trudy to college in Europe.

"Trudy's relationship with that ape is disgusting," she told the bridge club. "All she does is walk around our property and feed it all day. I've got to get her out of here."

But less than a year after she got sick, Aunt Mildred passed away, and Trudy never went anywhere. Trudy arranged the grand funeral. Everyone who attended could tell that even though she wore a black dress and a veil over her face, Trudy was more relieved than sad. Before two years passed, an obituary for Mr. Herman P. Goodfeather, deceased abroad of unknown causes, appeared in the *Coleville Gazette*, and Trudy had sole propriety of the Goodfeather estate. When Trudy discovered that a large portion of her inheritance had disappeared with her uncle, she fired all the servants, took up residence in a section of the home that included a place to sleep, eat, and use the washroom, and saved the rest of the money.

Over the next 20 years, Coleville occasionally caught sight of Trudy when she came to town for supplies. The clerks with whom Trudy spoke always reported her sanity in spite of her antisocial quirks, and so Coleville and Trudy Goodfeather left each other alone.

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Ms. Minnow did not know what to say to the frumpy, determined blond woman in the metal chair before her.

"What a story," said Charlotte. "But do you mind me asking—and I feel this is the most important part—what has happened with this chimpanzee lately?"

Cara was not surprised that all Ms. Minnow cared about was business. "It's pretty simple. That 150-pound chimp grew up and decided she didn't like Goodfeather life anymore. She's been coming down from the house every week for the past month and

scaring the living daylights out of us.” Cara shook her head. “Most people would have given that old ape away to a zoo for safekeeping, but not a recluse. She’s the only one Trudy has.”

“But what does this chimp do exactly? Why do people get scared?” said Charlotte, trying to get to the point so she could leave.

“When you go out to your car later, take a look at my grey sedan. Dent in the trunk,” said Cara. “But she does other things too. Throws poop like you wouldn’t believe. I researched it on the internet once. Monkeys and apes throw poop to mark their territory, kind of like dogs do by peeing everywhere.”

“Does she come at night?”

“Mostly at night,” said Cara. “But sometimes during the day. I think it’s been daytime more often lately. Maybe she’s getting worse.”

“Or more bold,” said Charlotte. The women looked at each other uncomfortably.

“Isn’t there some way to get rid of the chimp?” said Charlotte. An idea grew in her mind. “Surely there are other businesses suffering. Hasn’t anyone tried to stop her?”

“Sure. But we need proof before the cops can do anything. The chimp keeps going to people’s homes instead of stores where there are security cameras. I hear that some people—the ones who stayed—have started putting surveillance around their homes. Some folks talk about how chimps kill each other over territory disputes. I don’t think many are waiting around to find out if that one is true or not.”

“What about the time she dented your car? Did you get a picture?” Charlotte was becoming intrigued. Maybe there was a way to save the Dollar General.



"I didn't put up video cameras," said Cara. "I just heard a bang one night and I looked out the window and saw a big monkey running down the street. Scared the fire out of me."

"What if we did something about that chimp, Ms. Kissinger?" Charlotte said, excited to find a solution to the unpleasantness before her. If they could get rid of the chimp, maybe the town would go back to normal.

"It would take some doing, but maybe," said Cara. "We'll have to wait until the chimp comes to town again."

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Trudy Goodfeather was a good pedestrian. She sold her aunt and uncle's vintage automobiles for food money long ago. Trudy walked briskly down the big hill into Coleville for her monthly shopping trip to restock the pantry. When she left, she made sure that her pet's cage was securely locked. Trudy knew Sia had been escaping, and even though no one had tried to take her away yet, she knew if she escaped again they would be in big trouble.

"Stay here today, Sia," Trudy told the chimp that morning. "If you try to get out, I will have to spank you. You know you don't like to be spanked." Trudy raised a threatening hand, and the grumpy chimp backed up and growled at her owner.

Sia was 35 years old, just ten years younger than Trudy. When Sia first arrived, Trudy had gone down to the Coleville library and researched chimpanzees. She learned how to take care of Sia when her aunt and uncle were more interested in showing the chimp off to their infrequent guests. They passed Sia's care off to a disgruntled servant, Jacob, the butler, who promptly turned the chimp over to Trudy's eager hands.

But Trudy also learned a difficult truth about chimpanzees from her studies. When chimpanzees age, they become aggressive and territorial, no matter how well socialized they are. And Sia had never been socialized beyond Trudy and a few servants. Trudy tried to solve this problem by taking her to the pet store, but of course Aunt Mildred put a stop to that. Sia and Trudy spent most of their developmental years together, roaming the ten-acre estate, climbing trees and learning that throwing poop was bad.

Before Sia turned 30, Trudy started noticing the signs of aging in her ape: marking territory with poop, aggressive poop slinging no matter what Trudy did, a grumpy attitude, and of course attempts at escape. For the last five years, Trudy had been able to keep Sia in a cage, though she hated to do it. But the latch was no match for the strong ape anymore, and Trudy needed to find a padlock for the cage door.

Sia sat Indian-style in her big metal cage in the kitchen and grunted. She lifted her left hand, and Trudy barely caught sight of the familiar brown mass before it came flying toward her head. Sia had good aim. Trudy ducked just in time to hear a moist plop against the pantry door. "You behave today, Sia," Trudy said in her most menacing tone. She was tempted to toss the poop back at the ape, but she cleaned it up instead.

Trudy shook her head at Sia's behavior all the way down the hill, hoping the chimp wouldn't be able to push the cage door open today. Trudy decided that her first stop would be the hardware store, and her last the Dollar General.

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Cara helped Charlotte gather her papers and charts. The possibility of keeping the Dollar General open was having its effect on her. Her demeanor became more relaxed

and Missy, the store clerk, heard a familiar laugh from the back room now and then. As Cara and Charlotte walked out of the back room, they had a plan.

"First thing is to find some security cameras," Charlotte said as she followed Cara back onto the sales floor.

"We have some in here," Cara said, grinning. "All we have to do—"

Cara stopped and stared wide-eyed at a tall, slender woman with curly brown hair in the gardening aisle.

"What? All we have to do is what?" Charlotte said, following Cara's gaze but growing no wiser.

"Talk to that woman," finished Cara as she crossed the linoleum.

A look of recognition slowly turned Charlotte's furrowed brow into a satisfied smile. She matched Cara's pace down the makeup aisle toward Trudy, briefcase firmly in hand.

"Ms. Trudy Goodfeather, I presume?" Cara said when she reached the plant food. Trudy pulled a red bottle off the shelf and offered a slight nod. She turned to walk away, but Cara reached out a hand. "Cara Kissinger, store manager," she said. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

Trudy finally looked up into the manager's kind but stern face. "What is it about?"

"Just an idea I have," said Cara, turning toward Charlotte. "This is my boss, Charlotte Minnow." Charlotte reached out her right hand, a gesture that Trudy weakly returned. "We'd both like to talk to you, if that's ok."

Trudy's eyes were wide and her face was pale. "I really need to get home," she said, shaking her head. She gestured toward the bags she held from the hardware and grocery stores and turned toward the cash register.

As she did so, they heard a loud crash outside followed by angry shouts. The blinds were turned so they could not see out the front of the store. All three of them, followed by Missy, went out to see better.

Trudy gasped and rushed forward.

Cara ran back inside the store.

Charlotte Minnow dropped her briefcase and grabbed Trudy's arm. "It's too dangerous," she said to the distraught woman.

The scene in front of Trudy and Charlotte was the one Trudy had dreaded and Charlotte was hoping for. Tiny pieces of safety glass lay scattered around an old station wagon. The angry car owner was shouting at an equally upset five-foot tall chimpanzee, who was growling more and more loudly.

"Let go! She'll kill him," said Trudy, trying to twist her arm out of Charlotte's firm grasp.

"If you run over there, the chimp will kill *you*," said Charlotte.

Trudy bared her teeth at the businesswoman, tearing her arm away. "Sia!" she called, running toward her pet. "Sia, come here!"

But the chimpanzee ignored Trudy and balled her hands into fists. The station wagon driver saw Trudy and redirected his anger. "You should've put that monkey to sleep by now," he shouted and moved in Trudy's direction. Trudy stopped.

Sia moved in tandem with the man, but the man wasn't looking at the chimp. He walked slowly across the parking lot, irritated more at the broken glass and dented doors than the ape's threatening growls.

Sia looked at Trudy and back at the man. The chimp took a fistful of reeking brown poop and threw it toward him as a warning. She missed. He only turned back toward Sia to continue his rant. "You jerk! You broke my windows. We're gonna get you," he said.

Sia took one step toward him, and then moved so fast across the three or four yards of blacktop between herself and the man that all Trudy and Charlotte could see was a ball of brown fur. Time slowed as the man looked back at the chimpanzee, his face white as paper, his arms crossed in front of his face, his feet frozen on the blacktop.

Sia grabbed the man's arm with both her hands and brought it to her mouth. There was a sound of clothes ripping when suddenly a black net lowered over Sia's head. The man stumbled backward, falling onto the hood of his station wagon.

Police swarmed around Sia, who twisted and turned inside the net. She grunted and pushed at the netting, trying to break free. But five police officers held down their net while two more tried to tie the chimp's hands.

Trudy rushed forward, her only sign of distress the way she threw her body into the mix of policemen and ape. She felt a firm hand on her arm.

"Ma'am, I have to ask you to step aside. This is now an animal control issue," said a tall, middle aged officer.

Trudy ignored him and buried her face deeper into the net. "Ma'am," he said again, firmly.

Cara placed her arm around Trudy. "I'm so sorry. I had to call them. She would have killed him," she whispered. Trudy stiffened. She kept her face toward Sia, who ignored her mistress in her struggle. Trudy didn't know what to do with the arm around her. The arm stayed, and Trudy gradually relaxed.

Charlotte tugged on Cara's sleeve. "Let's get her out of here."

Cara whispered again. "It's time to let her go, Trudy. They have to take her away now." She pulled on Trudy's shoulders, and to her surprise, Trudy did not resist. Cara took Trudy's hand and they backed away from Sia. The policemen finally got Sia's hands tied, and Trudy could hardly see her pet as they bundled her into a fire truck.

"We have a few questions for you, ma'am," said a young policeman. He turned his notepad in his hands nervously.

"Let's go inside to the back room," said Charlotte. She nodded for the policeman to follow, and the four of them made their way to the back of the store.

The policeman got one-word answers for his trouble. Before ten minutes had elapsed, he had all the information he was going to get, and left.

This left Trudy alone with Cara and Charlotte, who sat watching the woman from their straight-backed staff chairs. Trudy looked at the pair of women, one with a soft look of compassion and the other with her arms crossed and eyes serious.

"Do you need some water?" said Cara, rising to find a paper cone beside the staff water jug.

Trudy nodded, lowering her eyes to her folded hands. She did not want to meet Charlotte's commanding gaze. Cara passed the cold paper cone into Trudy's hands, and the silent woman gulped the water like she hadn't had anything to drink in days.

“What’s going to happen to Sia?” Trudy said finally in a low voice.

“There’s a chimp sanctuary outside of St. Louis,” said Charlotte, reaching for her briefcase to fish out her phone. “I wonder if they’ll take her there. I’ll give them a call.”

Cara offered Trudy a tissue, but Trudy did not need it. She wasn’t crying. Her face was pasty white, her hair in a disarray that made a curly halo around her face. She looked straight ahead at the whiteboard on the opposite wall. Cara worried about the quiet woman, the recluse. She knew that the chimpanzee was Trudy’s only friend. Cara tried to imagine facing life without a single person to talk to after losing a loved one, what she would want in that situation.

Charlotte burst back in the room. She picked up her briefcase and returned to the door before turning intently to Trudy.

“They’re working on admitting her to the facility outside of St. Louis, like I thought. If the people there can’t rehabilitate her, they’ll put her down,” Charlotte said.

Trudy gasped and Cara placed her hand over Trudy’s. She scowled at Charlotte.

“Can I see you privately for a moment, Cara?” asked Charlotte, ignoring Cara’s expression. Cara wanted to stay and comfort Trudy, but Charlotte had such a commanding presence.

“I’ll be right back,” Cara said, patting Trudy’s hand as she rose. The door closed on Trudy, who still stared vacantly at the whiteboard.

“I’ve decided something,” said Charlotte. “With the chimp gone, I think sales will go back up. I’m going to tell corporate to leave your store open for six more months. I’ll reevaluate then.”

"But won't you lose money?" Cara was wary of the corporate office, distrustful of their financial whims.

"That's a loss I think they'll be willing to take. This Dollar General has a good location. It's the only one in a small town. Once people aren't afraid to live here, I bet big bucks will start rolling in."

Cara smiled. "Thanks, Ms. Minnow."

"Sure. It's been a long day. I'm going to turn in at the motel. You try to help that Trudy woman. She seems a little wound up."

"I know. I think I have an idea that will help her. Good night."

The pair shook hands, and Cara stepped back inside the office. "Are you ok?" Cara asked.

Trudy looked at Cara for the first time that day. "I want to go home. I need to think."

Cara nodded. "Before you go, I have a proposition for you. Why don't you come down and fill out an application to work here? I know you'll miss your chimp, and, well, I could use some help around the store."

Trudy tilted her head backward, her eyes widening. "I don't think that's a good idea, ma'am. I think I'll just go home now." She got stiffly to her feet and went in search of her shopping bags. She moved awkwardly, like she didn't know where to place each new step. Like she was lost.

Trudy was gone before Cara could say another word. Instead of following the woman, Cara watched her from the blinds. She saw the lonely figure turn into a silhouette as Trudy made her way up the hill in the growing twilight.



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One day before the Fourth of July a few months later, Cara had her hands full. A steady flow of customers in an understaffed store meant Cara was stressed. The front doors chimed, as they had been doing all day, but Cara looked up anyway. A tall, curly-headed figure stepped toward Cara's register, the area momentarily empty between rushes of customers.

"Ms. Goodfeather," said Cara.

Trudy smiled for the first time since Cara met her. "Hi," she said, looking down as soon as she had spoken.

Cara shut down her register and moved away from the counter. "Our Miracle-Gro products are on sale today. It's the end of planting season."

## CHAPTER V

## There Is No Paradise

A miniature castle rose from the boulders of the French coastline, cut out of the massive stones. Red sunrise-light bounced off the castle's sheer walls, off the linen curtains in the medieval windows, and into my starry eyes, eyes already dimming in the grayish light of reality.

The house on the French Riviera epitomized everything I went to Europe to see—medieval architecture, a romantic aura, even the glow created by early sunlight made the castle look surreal. It should have been a moment of epiphany, a moment where I gloried in the existence of something out of my dreams.

When I clapped irises on that celestial mansion, I knew I had not arrived in heaven. I had only come to another part of earth. I had been in Europe for six weeks by the time I saw the castle, and my experiences had told me the truth better than any statue or painting.

I went to Europe to find the paradise that I saw in books but that had escaped me at home in the States. I wanted to live the romantic life I read about in *Pride and Prejudice* and to feel the same sun that Monet did when he painted "Poppy Field." My travel plans had not gone perfectly, but until I saw that house I still clung tenaciously to my hope of finding bliss. If not in France, perhaps in Germany. If not in Germany, perhaps in Austria.

It was in Marseille, after five weeks of travel from the UK to the south of France, that I first truly felt this sickly sensation of hopelessness. Although the warm sun seeped through the glass roof of the train station, the sun's warmth perfectly matching the salty

breezes that floated refreshingly over my skin, I felt weary from traveling. I tried to make the most of the train stop by hunting down fresh baguettes, their heavy aroma vying for attention amidst the ocean spray and diesel smells.

I grasped our train tickets firmly against my chest and tucked the baguettes under my free arm as my best friend and I pushed through unruly crowds that July day. We searched diligently for the car the tickets prescribed. Suddenly, our tickets did not work. French words berated our ears like sharp pebbles thrown at passing schoolgirls. “No! No!” The conductor pointed, dinging bells and revving engines swirling about my ears like the end of the world was at hand.

The conductor’s pointing finger finally made sense to me: we were supposed to be on the train behind this one. We turned and charged down the concrete platform, no longer concerned that our oversized packs would slip, no more care for our baguettes or packages or other bodies. Neither of us could breathe as my friend, Misty, curled her fingers around the edge of a distant car door and swung her body into the compartment. She reached for my hand and slammed my body against hers as the doors slid forcefully shut behind me. No sooner had I landed than the train began to slide down its dusty tracks.

We found our seats as quickly as two bumbling Americans can in a sea of locals far more accustomed to their own trains. After dodging some awkward stares and kicking two men out of our plush train chairs, we stowed our packs and caught our breath. There was a moment’s peace before the hopelessness I felt before returned to threaten my happiness; we hadn’t missed the train, but the possibility rattled my soul. Bile rose in my throat. Adrenaline pricked the top of my spine. My breathing and heartbeat

simultaneously quickened, both becoming rapid and shallow. My hands grew clammy and shaky, but I stuffed them, motionless, into my lap, and stared out the opposite window.

Alongside the hopelessness surged a sensation of utter loneliness. The feeling of isolation grew like a burgeoning wave, rolling up from my gut and straight to my tear ducts. It crested and charged toward the shore of my cheekbones, restless for a release from my shaking body. I caught the persistent wave in my throat, contracting my larynx to keep the tears from spilling out of me.

I caught the despair and isolation, arresting it in my imagination like the halted flow of tears in my throat. None of these struggles, these things that never went right, could shake my faith in something just beyond the horizon, something close yet irritatingly difficult to grasp.

We arrived in Nice the evening of the wedding of the Prince of Monaco, and were invited by a traveler we met to tag along on the one-hour train ride. We passed up this opportunity in favor of sleep. Would I have found paradise there? If I had seen that sun-drenched castle a day before, I might have known that what we found instead—a homemade dinner of ratatouille, French bread, gorgonzola cheese, and Belgian beer with a big-hearted Frenchwoman—was far better.

On the train ride from Nice back to Paris, my friend and I discussed our existence, trying to understand our position in the universe. What had we come to Europe to find? I had quit a lucrative job as an editor to spend three months in the same pair of underwear—so what was I looking for?

I had been admiring the beauty of the boulders that stood between our train and the Mediterranean, wondering if my existence could ever be as serene as the French Riviera at sunrise. I thought perhaps the eternity I was looking for might just lie within my grasp after all.

Suddenly the train rounded a bend, and there the castle stood, high on the cliff, bold and red in the morning sky. My heart thrilled, then sunk. There stood my dream made flesh—but it was still just a house. The castle was still in France, occupied by French locals who eat ratatouille and homemade cheese every day. Humans had constructed it, not gods.

What happened next was strange. In spite of the rapid onslaught of so many emotions over the last few weeks, peace settled over me like a feather blanket over a cold sleeper. It soothed the shivering places in my being. The peace rested deep in my soul, like reconciliation with the world. I knew I could continue this journey across Europe, through life, even, and find joy in each moment.

## CHAPTER VI

## Gorse

There is not much room on a bus. You squeeze past people with huge carry-ons and look for an empty pair of seats, but you see only aisle chairs. You scoot over the bumpy rubber aisle mat toward an empty seat, knowing you have to sit with your knees stiffly bent, your body cramped between your seat and the fuzzy back of the chair in front of you. You cannot lean against the window or against the sullen blond London girl who barely has time to glance in your direction. But you sit down, you shove your bags under the seat, and you smile at her anyway.

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“Your ancestors are from England,” my genealogy-buff dad had informed me for 25 years. “They’re from Lancastershire. That’s a county in England.”

He thought we might have relatives from a cheese-making village there, and he chased down the family manor on the internet. He took me on a virtual tour of the manor, explaining the Tudor-style architecture. He even pulled up a Youtube video of an Indian wedding hosted by the manor so we could see what it looked like inside.

My brown-haired, glasses-sporting father found out a few months later that we weren’t related to anyone in this village, and that the manor did not belong to our family after all. I was not asked to visit the home when I went to Europe a few years later, for which I was grateful. I didn’t fancy crashing a wedding of any nationality for the sake of my ancestry.

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"I am from Frankfurt," said my baby-faced German aisle companion. "I am studying for my Ph.D. next year, so I decided to tour the UK."

I sat amazed as 24-year-old Kurt recounted his adventures as a German college student, from his first time getting so drunk he couldn't walk to attending massive student Christian gatherings. The novelty of his German culture propelled me into four rich hours of conversation on the bus that day.

"Where will you stay in Edinburgh?" I asked finally, concerned that he had a safe place to sleep at our final destination.

"I don't know yet," he said, "but I will find a hostel when I get off the bus. Do not worry."

I smiled shyly, realizing I was acting like a mother. He probably had come to Britain not to find another mother, but to escape the one he had. Our conversation showed me that I had come to the same country to find the opposite—something like home.

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My heart fluttered in my chest. My mind clawed its way to consciousness, eagerly searching for clues to my whereabouts. I found myself in the same bus seat I had occupied for seven hours. I had just awakened from another nauseating bus nap, and in my sleepy state believed my heart was affected by the blurriness of constant snoozing. I shook my head and looked out the window, willing my breathing to slow.

"It's gorse," said a deep Scottish voice behind me. I snapped my head around, startled, and discovered the jolly smile of a middle-aged man sitting beside my best friend.

"What's gorse?" I asked through the gap in my seat.

"That yellow flower you see everywhere." He pointed out the window at the scrubby bushes with their yellow fringe. It really did seem to grow everywhere on the endless green hills. As I watched the countryside flash by outside my window, I pondered the word "gorse." An ancient reference to the plant surfaced in my memory. I thought I had read it once in a classic novel like *Jane Eyre* when I was fifteen.

"Does this mean we're in Scotland?" I asked.

"Yes," said the gentleman, "and you won't stop seeing gorse for a long while."

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Tears spring into your eyes. You cannot explain the emotions streaming from your mind to your heart as you watch the evergreen bushes through the bus window. You rise out of your seat and walk over to some empty ones left by passengers getting off in Newcastle.

"We're in Scotland," you say to your wondering heart, which flutters mysteriously. Do you have ancestors here? The sensation spreading over your limbs is one of coming home, of finding where you belong. You are on a bus, this is silly, your head says. But you let the impression unfold inside of you anyway. The grueling pace of traveling melts off, the irritation of foreignness dissipates, and tears of relief squeeze out from under your eyelashes.

Suddenly there is room on the bus.



## CHAPTER VII

## Kitchen Decorations

I tiptoed over the shiny wooden threshold, bouncing the screen door off my body with my backside. My childish footsteps echoed off the wood floor, surrounding me like the bells of a church and exuberantly announcing my entrance despite efforts to become invisible. I resisted the impulse to scurry into a bedroom here, a living room there, so that I would not get in trouble for exploring where I was not permitted.

We had come to the next-door neighbor's home for dinner. As far as I know, it was the only time I entered the house whose fenced-in yard was less than three feet from my bedroom window. We must have eaten barbecue that night because our hostesses ushered us to the back deck where their immaculate grill sat.

I remember staring wide-eyed at the fancy kitchen with its marble countertops, finished wooden cabinets, and the funniest little glass bottles of olive oil and roasted red peppers. I wondered if the ladies, Lynn and Delores, ever cooked with the olive oil. I thought it must taste strange. My mother had no decorative bottles in her kitchen. I didn't realize that was all the bottles were for, decoration. I still don't exactly understand the point of leaving a bottle of perfectly good olive oil, flavored by herbs or floating vegetables, sitting out on the counter to add color when you could be dipping some artisan toast into that delicious liquid and licking your lips with satisfaction.

The neighbor ladies, while I liked them, intimidated me. I did not want them to know how curious I was, how sometimes at night I would lean my forehead against my open window and watch their TV through the mesh screen. At less than ten years old, I would piece together their private lives based on the shows I saw through my window.

Did they argue over “Designing Women” episodes? Did they really like to watch monster truck rallies? I tried to imagine myself as Lynn or Delores, getting to paint the walls of my house whatever color I wanted.

Around this time, we were invited to their wedding ceremony at a nearby church. I overheard my parents discussing how the wedding couldn’t be real because two women couldn’t marry each other, and that was when I realized that they weren’t sisters. My dad balked at the invitation, and I heard him flatly tell my mother that his girls would not be attending. We discussed the wedding as a family, the awkwardness of the situation spreading through me and my sister’s hearts like watercolor on white paper. I didn’t know what a lesbian was, but I knew that I had crushes on boys at school, and that it seemed really weird to think that girls might have crushes on girls, too.

Later that summer, Delores used my chubby nine-year-old fingers in a photo shoot about the wonder of ice cream cones in a *Tennessean* newspaper article. The luscious cream, which I obediently held away from my body, melted temptingly over my fingers and down the sides of the cookie cone. I’ll never forget when she brought over the “Food” section of that edition—my hands were local stars.

I spent a lot of time with adults as the oldest daughter in my childhood home, the “Holly Street house” we call it now. I remember once when my uncle came for dinner that my dad acted strangely. He seemed angry. We sat at the dining room table for dinner, tension electrifying the air like an electric eel shocks its prey. As a girl, I felt it deeply when Daddy wasn’t happy. At ten years old, I could not understand why my father would be upset with my jovial uncle, but we stopped having regular visits from him after that.

A few years later, when I was thirteen, my parents told me that my uncle was gay. His confession did not shock my sisters and me like it might have. We understood that he chose to live like Lynn and Delores. Although our relationship changed, I still saw him as my fun-loving uncle who brought back souvenirs from Disney World, who let me and my cousins watch "Die Hard" during Thanksgiving dinner. He is the same one who hosted my biggest bridal shower, cooking food for 50 people in his 1850s farmhouse kitchen.

My uncle, like my childhood neighbors, loved to decorate and remodel his old-fashioned home. His kitchen will never be complete, though, without a few bottles of herbal olive oil in the windowsill.