

BLUE HIGHWAY

- the first seventeen miles of over a hundred -

Mile One

Nicole's hands are a flurry of self-righteous effort—silver bracelet and hippy bangles (covering self-inflicted cutting scars) add to the racket of the search. Batteries, loose change, mini-screwdriver, an un-openable lock, all airborne a millisecond before crashing back into the kitchen junk drawer. With matching vigor the drawer is slammed shut. "Don't be mom's little bitch, Mel!"

"I'm not!" A teenage girl approaches cautiously from across the oversized home.

"Shit, where are they?" The feminine hands sweep across the marble-capped island, rifling mail, oranges, a pair of scissors, a volleyball uniform. With the fast upturn of her right hand, an ink snake slithers along her wrist, unable to escape the frenzy. Finally the hands catch their breath, settling on the scissors.

In the eight foot doorway stands Melanie, watching her big sister jump from F1-panic to F3, eyes ablaze, cheeks too.

"Then where'd she hide them?" Nicole snaps.

"Mom will kill me."

"She can't if I already have!" Nicole whirls, her blonde hair tumbling across her dimpled face. "I have to go to Dad's."

"Such a liar. You're going to Chad's apartment." Tears emerge.

“Mel, come on. Dad’s sick. He’s alone.”

Melanie sniffs. “Chad will be there.”

“Yeah, so what? Just give me—”

“You just want to go and leave me here.”

Nicole silences, then abruptly spins again, moving to one of the kitchen’s walnut cabinets, flinging the door wide. “Stop being so fucking dramatic!” It’s not there. She pops open all of the cabinets in the room, one by one, slamming them closed. Bang, bang, bang. Her gaze returns to Melanie. “You could come too. I mean, if you could.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Sure I do. Come on. Just tell me where Mom put them. Hurry up. She’ll be back soon.”

Melanie goes into a wet-eyed stare until finally, with a breath, she surrenders. “The frog thing.”

‘The frog thing’ requires no further explanation. They’ve both scoffed at their mother’s assemblage of pewter animals, including the metal frog perched on a glass shelf in the cherry wood curio made for the corner of the dining room—a dining room in name only. The matching colonial table is ideal for everything from class art work to homecoming corsage assembly, from Christmas wrapping to bill paying, but no formal dinner has been held there since their father left three years ago, October.

A blur of Prussian blue (short denim skirt), Persian green (bohemian shirt), and American toned, tanned skin move over Nicole’s favorite Kors sandals. In her hands, clasped tightly, are a set of Lexus keys. She hurries for the front door. Before leaving she pauses in thought, still focused

ahead, then wheels around and marches to Melanie. A big hug and, "Tell her I must've guessed where they were."

"She's going to be pissed."

"When is she not? Don't take her shit so seriously."

"You'll come get me tomorrow?"

"If I can."

"Text me when you get there," Melanie mutters.

A smile forms. "Ok chipmunk. I promise." Nicole pulls back. "I gotta go."

As Melanie watches her older sister move into the night, she whispers, "Love you." It isn't but a moment before she hears the ash-black convertible rushing away.

Mile Two

In an unremarkable, twenty-three year old single-wide trailer, the tinny metal door and interior carpet are about as expected, same with the peeling linoleum, water-stained faux wood paneling, and frayed couch held less-than-level by a six inch stack of Glamour. Halfway down the slight hallway (windows on the left, frail curtains), a nightlight flickers. In the lesser of the two bedrooms a five year old grandson sleeps peacefully. In the bigger bedroom, fucking time is over. The light from the closet falls across Lori's easily-mid-forties face, the residue from drunken sex wiped away. Under her back and around her is a man's hairy left arm, the tattoo of a snake disappearing under a second-rate watch band. She kisses that arm's hand, oblivious to the pale shadow there, the remnants of an exiled ring. The hand flops back across her bare, fake breasts. Lying to her right and dead-staring up at the ceiling, is Porter, ten years her senior—or

thereabouts. To her left, a lamp-lit table balances a jam-packed ashtray; five empty beer bottles; an empty, plastic, Smirnoff Green Apple vodka bottle (1.75L); and a three-quarter-gone bottle of Jim Beam Rye (also the big size). No glasses as none had been needed.

Porter blinks then looks toward his hand on Lori's chest. "Hey darlin'," he slurs, "What time's your left titty got?"

She looks at his watch. "My glasses are.... I think it's like one."

"Me gotta gooooo!" Porter wrenches his arm from under her, wheels his nakedness from the bed, and stands. After a pause for his drunkenness to catch up, he begins gathering his clothes and dressing.

"Stay," Lori says.

He places a finger over his lips. "Shh, don't say that. The ol' witch will get on her broom and fly...up...if I came in in the morning."

"Yeah, mhmm."

"I can't satisfy you tomorrow...or later...if a toad. If I'm turned to a toad."

"Cain't get turned into something you already are."

Porter leans in and kisses her, stabilizing himself against the headboard. "Gotta go. Rest up your cooch." He moves for the bedroom's door, then shuffles down the little hall. Near the front door he grabs his faded red ball cap (with an embroidered dirty white star on front) from the nearby kitchen counter, pops it on his balding head, then eats whatever cold French fries are there, the ones the cat hasn't knocked to the floor.

Lori appears, wearing only a man's shirt, fully unbuttoned. "I should've fed you more, growing boy." She grabs his crotch and kisses him until again he pulls away.

“Gotta...”

“Alright,” she says, letting him pass.

He turns and steps through the front door, down the rickety steps illuminated by an bare amber light bulb, then continues across the gravel toward a faded Toyota pickup truck.

Behind him, Lori is on the steps. Her shirt is open, thus revealing everything, including her large breasts and barely-there pubic hair. “Hey! Old drunk dipshit. You’re gonna need these.” She tosses his keys.

Though it is a decent throw, he misses them. He chuckles, staggers, retrieving them from the caliche. “You’re a bad fuckin aim, Missy. But, you’re naked, so...”

“Don’t forget,” She says loudly, presenting her left hand, pointing to its ring finger.

“Yes. Yes,” mutters Porter. “Yes.” He pulls his wedding ring from his pocket and triumphantly holds it high for her to see. At that she disappears inside, snaps closed the door, and shuts off the bug light.

“Hey! That’s not... Now it’s dark!” He staggers, attempting to put on the ring. Steadying himself against the side of his truck bed, he wets his finger, aims carefully and slides it on. Once in his truck, he sits, staring behind the wheel. With a shake of his head he reasserts himself and starts the engine.

Mile Three

The four lanes of highway 114W are fairly quiet. Two lanes going each way. Nicole’s black convertible passes a car, another, then a car-transport truck. Her left hand rests on the wheel as the other checks the console for a hair band. She unbuckles to retrieve her purse from the

passenger floor. Soon her hair is in a ponytail and she's texting furiously. Rap beats thunder from the open-topped car as it accelerates into the darkness.

Mile Four

Porter's radio is playing a shit pop song, so he punches buttons till he hits old country. Ahead the road comes to a T. He stops midway into the crossroad and idles, contemplating the barrier in front of him. After his bleary eyes focus on the arrow indicating 114E, he heads that way. Overshooting the turn, the truck tilts in the bar ditch, empty beer cans on the floorboard rattle and slide to the driver's side. Tires spin back onto the two-lane blacktop.

Mile Five

Beyond the late-model black Lexus, the passing darkness is punctuated with yard lights, distant clusters of towns and streets, but little else. Nicole waits for a responding text from MOM, staring at the three dots floating in unison, holding her angry attention.

"Fuck you, Chad," she mouths.

She reads the inbound text: You're not in trouble. Just be careful.

Nicole's right thumb goes to work. As she passes a drilling tool vendor, its halogen security lights illuminate her car. In that instant, the cutting scars on her left hand become visible again. She notes them, then continues her text: I'm sick of you telling me who I can or can't see. Going to dads. Im 22!!!!!!

Another pause, then the reply: When you are ready to grow up, I'll still love you

"Whatever!" Nicole yells. She quickly pulls up her CHAD texts:

From Nicole: U home? Going to my dad's.

From Chad: No babe. Out.

From Nicole: Out where?

Nothing more.

Mile Six

The old truck is alone in its direction. But as the occasional vehicle hums by the other way, Porter strains to comprehend them. He blinks. He inhales. He squints. He concentrates. Then a sea of levitating red lights appears on his right, out in the murky expanse. He notes them, but must react quickly as the road not only turns ahead but an oncoming truck is...no it's just the reflectors on the guardrail. He over-brakes, then speeds up again.

Mile Seven

When Nicole's phone rings with the word MOM backlit, her hands ignore it though eyes, mind, heart can't turn away. The rap beats go on, the road narrows to two lanes. One in each direction. Again the phone rings. She mutes the music. She holds her voice close.

"Yeah?

I'm not sorry.

Whatever.

It's just what I say.

So.

Mel? Seriously? You want to bring her up? She's also pissed at you!

But you're married, again! Already!

I don't care.

Daddy? Right. How's that fu... How's that fair?

I found them in your stupid frog.

No, she didn't know I left.

Whatever. She was there, but she didn't know I—

You can't take away my car! I am 22!

You know what?

Whatever.”

She hangs up while her mother's strained voice can still be heard. She's swiftly back to texting, her thumb flying. Send. The phone gets tossed into the passenger seat. “Fuck you!” Music unmuted. She spreads her tears across her high cheek bones and watches an approaching vehicle.

Mile Eight

Porter is onto the gravel, then back, resuming his radio belt-along, “...and Dimples who now lives in Temple's, got the law looking for me!” He gives no particular mind to the headlights cresting the hill ahead.

Mile Nine

Nicole sees the field of red lights on her left. She knows they are the cautionary lights atop a flotilla of wind generators spinning quickly-but-it-sure-seems-slowly in the night air. But her attention is pulled back as the approaching headlights appear to be in her lane. “Hey, fuck face, wake up.” She flashes her highs.

Porter's blurry view of the world includes the sight of two lights becoming bright then normal then bright then normal. He is still singing. *"Some folks think I'm hiding. It's been rumored that I died."* He shouts, *"But I'm alive and well in Tennessee!"*

By the time Nicole realizes the two lights ahead are not moving out of her way, she has only an instant to react. The pickup is upon her. A screech of brakes, suddenly bright, a whooshing gust, and the vehicles pass each other into the long hush of night. "What the hell?" she shrieks.

Porter skids to a stop, kills the radio, unsure of what just passed.

Mile Ten

Nicole keeps moving, though no music, eyes wide, hands clutching the steering wheel to keep from shaking.

Just after returning to speed, Porter's truck cab fills with sporadic red and blue from a patrol car behind him. "Oh fuck," he mutters. "Again, again, again. Dammit." A search light explodes as both vehicles pull to the shoulder. A slow roll. Blinded in the mirror, Porter doesn't see the yield sign ahead until he hears his front bumper scraping it, bending it slightly forward. The truck stops.

Nicole has just begun to relax. She can breathe again. As she reaches for play on the touchscreen controls, a patrol car passes, going the other way. She watches it in her side mirror until what she fears happens. It kicks on its lights, breaks, turns. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

Mile Eleven

Porter has his window hand-cranked down. He can hear the door of the other vehicle open, close, the approaching steps. "To submit, or not to submit..." His boots shuffle, corralling cans back under his seat. He sees the officer at his door. She is a short, frowning, thirty-something looker. "I'm not drunk..." he offers, studying her name tag, "L...T...Pearson. Your momma named you LT?"

Lieutenant Pearson paints a circle of white light around in his cab, careful not to miss a spot. "Having a good time tonight?"

His drunken gaze is still absorbing her. "Ah, it's alright."

She takes a whiff. "You've got a brewery in there."

"Yeah? Where?" he asks, looking around then back. He notes her petite hand on her big holstered pistol.

"License and proof of insurance please."

"Let me see." He reaches below his seat. Crunched cans clatter.

She unsnaps her holster and steps back in a rehearsed, singular motion.

"Wait sugar. Don't leave!" Again he leans. Another reach to where he can't see.

Another step back. Pistol is out, square on the bent driver. "Hands where I can see them! Step out of the vehicle! Let's go!"

Porter pops up grinning, wallet in hand. "Here it is!" He sees the gun. "Hey whoa, LT!"

Behind Nicole a different patrol car has its own search beam on, blasting forward. A tall officer approaches the open-top, driver's side. Nicole bites her lip, conjuring tears. With a look she

notes he is a black man, ripped muscles, chiseled jaw, fierce dark eyes. "I wasn't speeding," she protests.

"I see," comes the baritone reply.

"My father is sick. I've gotta get home." A pause, then "I've got to take him his meds."

More silence. "Can we make this quick?"

"That it?" the officer replies. "That as good as your act's gonna get?"

Here comes the cry. A sniffle. A tissue at the ready.

"Oh, she's got tears, ladies and gents. And practiced! You think you're an actress?"

She wipes her nose. "Do you want my license?" She holds it up, offering it to him.

He doesn't take it. "Ok superstar, step out of your car."

Nicole freezes. A moment of panic. "I go this way all the time."

"I don't care. End of the line."

"It's my mom's car."

"Fine. Out."

She says "Alright," but doesn't move, judgment abandoning her.

"Now!"

"It'd be mine, I mean...if she'd get out of my life."

"Step out," the officer growls. "Keep your hands in sight."

"Why?"

"Ma'am, I'm done being polite. If I have to ask again, I'm taking you in."

"What'd I do? Is this some kind of stupid test?"

"You know, actually, yes."

She looks at his name badge. "Lieutenant Anson, you're being, like, crazy." She gives him a bitchy stare, then a wide-eyed silent *what?*

"Dare me. Be my guest."

She begins to open the door and step out, being careful to let her short skirt ride higher.

"This is really messed—" Immediately he has her spun, leaning away, handcuffs ratcheting on.

"What are you doing?" she shouts. "I'm out!"

"You were warned. You chose the route."

"No! I did what you asked you...creep. This is crap. What's this about?"

Lt. Anson begins ushering her to his car.

Mile Twelve

Porter is attempting to walk the shoulder's white line but can't keep it together. "How 'bout..." he mashes, "How 'bout I just crawl over there, to the back seat of your fine patrol car?" He looks up at the empty sky, arms outstretched, ready to attempt the nose touch. A few blinks, a boot out to regain his balance, then he holds a finger toward the policewoman. "Shhh. I'm wishing on a star." His eyes focus on her. "*You're* a star. Are you one of those stripper-cops?"

"You just don't stop."

He looks down at his feet and starts shuffling. "No. Lookie here. Walk, walk, walk."

Lt. Pearson sighs. "How much have you had to drink tonight?"

"What? Darlin, I didn't *have* to drink..."

"Right"

"...and I don't *have* to talk."

"How much *did* you drink, then?"

"Just a little. And a little. And a little more again," he laughs. She writes on her metal clipboard as he sits on the push bars on the front of her car. "Nothing coffee couldn't settle. How's the coffee at your station? I'll want good coffee! Just a little sugar, sugar. No creamer. No milk. And none of that sow shit," Porter continues. "Ha! I meant soy shit, but I said sow shit, like pig..." He squints as she approaches. "I didn't mean, but I said—"

"I'm placing you under arrest. Driving with impaired competency. Turn around. Hands behind your head." Porter complies, leaning against the hood of her car, the red and blue spinning lights flickering across his flushed cheeks. She begins to frisk him. "You have any weapons? Any sharp objects on you, in your pockets? Any knives or needles? Anything that might stick me?"

"Hey there, don't grab my nads. Unless that's part of your drill."

She has him handcuffed. "You have the right to remain silent and I'm hoping you will. Anything you say or do—"

"Oh, and a pillow!" he announces over his shoulder. "I hope your jail's got a good pillow. Last time, over in Amarillo, nothing but fucking concrete and a sheet."

She moves him to the far side of her squad car.

"You brought me in that time, yeah?" Porter goes on. "I think it was you. I ain't mad though, neither."

"Aren't you a winner," she mutters, pushing him into the rear seat.

A muffled yell comes through the closed door. "Yeah, right, last winter!"

From the back seat of the other patrol car, Nicole watches Lt. Anson behind the wheel, his square shoulders pushing against the double sewn seams of his deep brown uniform, his short buzzed black hair, his head leaning forward slightly as he sits in the driver seat, filling out a report on his metal clipboard. She surveys the car. There is no chatter from the radio. Nothing but a picture of her on the onboard computer screen. No words near the picture. She isn't even sure if that's her driver's license picture. She liked her hair better when it was longer like that. Looking outside, she sees crisscrossing sweeps of red and blue on the desolate grassland. There are no fences. The pen scratches. Her irritation swells. "Do you know my father, John Scone? The County Commissioner?"

Without looking up, the man asks, "Your father, who's sick?"

"Yes."

"Different county. Different zone."

"Just so you know," she quips. "Are you writing me a ticket?"

"Just a minute."

"I don't get it. Let me go! You can't hold... My dad is so—" She is stopped short by the uplifted back of his right hand, pen held in the fingers. Under her breath: "Asshole."

Lt. Anson slowly looks up, meeting her eyes through the center rearview mirror. "A little self-control?" He clicks the pen, sets the clipboard aside, and puts the car in drive.

"What?" she exclaims at the motion. "You can't take me... What did I do?"

"Inspector Miller has some questions for you."

"Who? About what? Listen, you're just doing your job, I know, but this time..." As they pass her Lexus, she sees it illuminated by the patrol lights. She twists, watching it slip away.

"It'll be fine," says Lt. Anson, turning off the spinning lights.

"Maybe you're not a cop. Maybe some sort of creeper."

"Bit late to figure that out...I mean, if I were."

She sits back, mouthing, "Sure."

"Hey, you're a young rich girl. Maybe the black man up here is just your chauffeur."

"Whatever."

Mile Thirteen

Lt. Anson's patrol car has left pavement for double-rutted grass leading bumpily to an isolated, solid-slatted building, reminiscent of an timeworn depot. A solitary porch light marks the way. Nicole sees it, then peers into the gloom of her side windows for any indication of where they are. She sees nothing. She looks again at the approaching building and notes another patrol car parked in front. There is the main door, weather worn, covered by a rickety overhang. As the car comes to a stop beside the other, the vehicles' hoods are illuminated, but little beyond.

Lt. Anson opens Nicole's door and she slides out, cumbersomely, pulling against her handcuffs. Once standing, a sturdy wind whips her hair and tap-taps the sign reading STATION nailed below the building's front light. "Let's go," says the officer, ushering her toward the door, palm between her slim shoulders. As frightened as she is pissed, she squirms till he takes his hand away.

Mile Fourteen

Stepping inside, Nicole reaches light and blinks at it. Lt. Anson is still beside her.

"It'll just be a minute," he instructs, uncuffing her. "Stay near."

She rubs her wrists while regarding her surroundings, smelling the intoxicant of fresh cut lumber. To her left is a long wood-walled hallway—not wood paneled, but appearing lined with boards on the vertical, roughhewn and abrupt, each abutting the next, floor to ceiling, all the way until they conclude at a closed, polished, ebony wood door with a gleaming brass handle. Directly in front of her and perhaps six feet away is the arched entrance to a slight, dim room wherein she sees the toes of a well-worn pair of snakeskin boots. To her right: a shiplapped wall with an assortment of iron hooks hefting coats, hats, a scarf, and a wide leather belt with a gun snapped in the attached holster. She grimaces at the gun, so close she could touch it. A step forward and a turn to the right and she's peering into a room whose dull-green door is half-cracked. Must be where her cop disappeared. Perhaps it is a kitchen. The door comes toward her, clicking closed. She glances again at the boots ahead, then left again, down the long hall.

Along the hallway's left side, which would be the front of the building, are two sets of bulky windows. Though their six foot mahogany shutters are latched closed, the outside air whistles through the sills, tapping the shutters ever so faintly. A slackening drifts over her, breathing slowing, as she takes in the beautiful warmth of the hall. Long golden oak planks run the length of the floor. Clean but not polished. No rugs. From the high ceiling (tiled with large, cerulean tin squares) hang a series of light fixtures: clear glowing bulbs under white metal domes under short white metal poles piercing the ceiling through two-foot cherrywood medallions. The right wall is divided by a closed, pale birchwood door. Between it and where she stands hangs an amateur-but-decent painting of a German Shepard. The frame: faded pine. She studies the image. It reminds her of Buddy, the dog they'd had up till that Christmas when she was in fifth grade. Nicole doesn't notice, and wouldn't admit it if she did, but she's smiling, wistfully and still.

Hearing the green door open she turns, and is met by Lt. Anson, coffee cup in hand. He draws a sip, then sighs. "You'll start in here," he says, leading her into the doorless room across the way.

Mile Fifteen

She enters. The lights come on. It is about the size of an freight elevator, about eight feet square. Barren of furniture save two wood benches running the length of each opposing wall, both modestly upholstered in a midnight-blue, velvetish fabric. On the left bench a man sleeps on his back, socked feet crossed, boots on the floor nearby. She is already sitting on the other bench before she realizes Lt. Anson is gone. She observes the slumbering man, noting his soft snores—hole in one sock—untucked shirt—dangling left hand sporting a band—white-starred ball cap cocked over sun-wrinkled eyes—head on a creamy, satin pillow.

On the wood wall above him are two paintings, a bird dog and a tabby cat, both painted and framed in the style of the Buddy. The back wall to this room is barren save an analog clock, chest high. It is ticking, the second-hand moving, the minute and hour hands pointing straight up. For a second she wonders if is indeed midnight, but quickly realizes it must be wrong. She pulls her cell phone from her denim skirt pocket. Exactly 3:00.

There is an unread text from MOM: It will be fine. We can't always agree.

"Yeah, like *none* of the time," Nicole snips, then flips to DAD and starts typing: Can you come get me? It's not till she hits send that she reads the NO SERVICE in the top left corner. "No," she mutters, closing her eyes. A deep breath, held, then a protracted exhale carrying the words, "Oh, shit."

Mile Sixteen

Just beyond the small room comes the sound of approaching voices, a young man asking, "They're in the hold?" Then the deep voice of Lt. Anson, "Where else would they go?" The green door creaks and in an instant a slender young man in an ill-fitting police uniform is in the archway. He carries two blankets and smiles at Nicole, taken aback by her loveliness. She pulls her knees further together, a quick glance, her skirt is as far down as it will barely go. He lays one blanket on the man's bench, then hands the other to Nicole.

"Thank you," she says, barely audibly, placing the folded blanket over her exposed thighs. She nods towards the man. "Is he gonna be—"

"Yes. Are you Nicole Skeen?"

"Scone. Like what you eat."

"I'm Officer Samuels." He points to his name badge reading the same. "That's me. I mean, I'm him...me."

She smirks, "I see."

He sees what's in her hand. "I need to take your phone please."

A nippy frown. "I'm allowed one call. At least."

A cordial smile, then a whisper. "I think that's only in the movies."

"I'm know my rights. You know, I'm not naïve."

"By no means!" he replies, hand steady, outstretched, palm up.

"You'd better give it back when I leave," she says, handing the phone over.

Samuels straightens his back, tightens his lips, then snaps his heels together, all in mock formality. "If you want it then, then it you shall receive!" With that he pivots and is gone, footsteps receding.

Nicole moves her head side-to-side, eyes closed, then open again. Is this as for real? These people. But there was something charming about that young man. She stands, clutching the blanket, then leans on the frame of the room's arched entrance. Across from her is the closed, solid front door, its wood a weathered cherry, burgundy and dark. To her right the expanse of the hallway ending at the shiny black door. Across that hall, the big front windows still rattle a little. She looks left. The green door is open, and beyond it is a kitchen.

Nicole sees a large, uniformed, Latino woman cooking at the gas stove. The fixtures may be aging, but they appear spotless and tidy. And other people are in there. The young man, Officer Samuels, is talking with Lt. Anson, handing him her phone, saying something. Suddenly Lt. Anson's gaze flashes up at her, as if he knew she was watching from the hall. She jumps back, plopping on her bench. Heart racing, eyes wide, she murmurs, "No. No. No."

Mile Seventeen

Awake but still reclining, the middle-aged man peeks from under his reddish hat. Nicole's skirt has risen some, knees slightly parted. He smiles, taking in the white of her undies. "Nice show."

She follows his eye-line and angrily adjusts her skirt.

He sits up a little, leaning into the corner of the back wall. He offers his hand. "I'm Frank. Everyone calls me Porter." She turns away. He continues. "Been out partying? Yeah, you have. Bet

you're a snorter." He pantomimes sniffing cocaine off the back of his hand. "Probably doesn't take much to loosen you up. Get some whoopee." He reaches to touch her bare knee.

"Don't touch me," she barks.

"Hey, don't jump, baby. You got no reason." He sits back again. "We ain't children. I'm just a man, admiring. We're all grown."

She sighs. "Leave me alone."

"So why'd you get thrown in the clink?" No response. "Ok, my turn then. Had me a tiny bit to drink. But don't tell them. None of 'em know." Getting to his feet, he peers around the archway toward the kitchen, then back at her. "Whole cop committee." He sits again. "You're sure pretty." In a practiced magicians move, right hand deftly over left, his wedding band is slipped free and into his pocket, eyes on her breasts.

They both look up when Lt. Anson walks by the wide opening, giving them no mind. He is carrying their phones. He proceeds away, down the long hall. Trailing after him is an old man—the first person they've seen not in uniform, but rather a jacket and tie. The old man pauses his shuffle for an instant, making eye contact with both Nicole and Porter. He produces a gentle smile. In his hands are two small glass jars—one half full of water, the other containing an assortment of paint brushes, bristles up. He moves on.