

Alabama Angel

Casey is fidgeting, thumping her bitten nails on the edge of the steel chair in a waiting room with twenty others. A television is muted, catty-cornered above a small table with three tissue boxes. The closed captioning scrolls across the bottom of the screen as every single woman watches in silent, crestfallen agony.

The Supreme Court has stripped their federally protected rights away.

A bell jingles as the glass door opens and slams shut. Five women leave the clinic. The others remain, hopeful still.

Casey is called back to be seen by the doctor, a large man who likes to rub his stomach and pretend he's just as pregnant as his patients.

There isn't much he can do now. He will have to wait and see. He promises to call when he knows more about what will be allowed in this new era without *Roe v. Wade*.

Casey leaves. She goes through the motions and pretends like nothing is wrong, like there isn't a small nugget, a bean of a thing at just five weeks, growing inside of her sixteen-year-old body. The days go by.

She goes to summer school, a month-long program designed to correct her mistakes and get her back on the right track. Casey logs on to the course recovery website and stares at the screen. She pretends to read the study guide about rhetorical appeals until the timer shows five minutes have passed and she can click the arrow to go to the test. She scores 55%, reviews the study guide, this time reading for the answers to the questions she now knows will be on the test, and retakes it. 93%. Pass. On to the next topic.

"You skipped the other day," the teacher says.

“Sorry. Family emergency.”

“Uh huh. Don’t let it happen again. You won’t make it to senior year if you don’t finish the program.”

That’s not the only reason I won’t make it, she thinks. “Yes ma’am. It won’t happen again.”

Brandon sits at the Mac two stations away. He tries to talk to her, but the teacher demands silence, so she hides an off-brand ear bud under her long, dishwater blonde hair and listens to YouTube in a second tab until it’s eleven o’clock. Time to leave.

“Hey, Casey!” Brandon says as they leave through the lobby. “You want to go get some tacos?”

Casey doesn’t respond. She keeps walking and takes off in her mother’s old Hyundai they got off the used lot seven years ago, the engine light a permanent fixture on the dashboard. Brandon leans against the brick exterior waiting for his ride. She watches him through the rearview mirror, his eyes following her car out of the parking lot.

“How’d it go?” her mother asks as she hangs the car keys on the hook by the door. Casey’s three siblings gather around the wooden dining table where Savannah, aged 7, once claimed to have seen Mary’s face beaming back at her from its dull, scratched surface. Casey shrugs in response as Mom covers the supposed vision with macaroni and cheese, the good kind with cut-up hot dog bites thrown in.

Casey wedges a stool between her two brothers, Trevor, aged 9, and Zackary, aged 11, so they will quit slapping each other’s stomachs under the table. They grumble about the interruption until Casey scoops a portion of the macaroni onto each of their plates before filling

her own. Mom gives each kid a glass of red Kool-Aid and sits in the recliner in the living room. She swivels the chair to face the children as she eats off her TV tray.

“Hey there,” Casey says to Savannah.

Savannah shoots her a quick smile, but she remains focused on her drawing, plate pushed to the side.

“Don’t forget their halos,” Casey says. “Angels always have halos.”

Savannah nods, taking the job seriously. Dark ringlets bounce as they escape from under her large, red headband.

“Why is this one so much smaller than the others?”

“That’s the baby angel,” Savannah whispers.

“There are no baby angels, you idiot,” Zackary says.

“That’s enough,” Mom reprimands. “Casey, you better pass this class. It cost a lot of money to send you to summer school. Ronny will be mad if it goes to waste.”

Casey glances at her mom, scabs on her wrinkled forehead like ant beds in tall blades of grass. “Wouldn’t want to upset Ronny,” Casey replies.

“No, we wouldn’t. In case you forgot, this is his trailer we’re livin’ in. You got somewhere else we can go?” Her question is met with silence. “Thought not. You remember last spring, don’t ya? You’re all a year bigger, but that car out there ain’t grown any. Now eat your food and clean the dishes up after.”

Mom spins the recliner and unmutes *General Hospital*.

Evening arrives. Mom leaves for the night shift at Waffle House, and Ronny takes over the recliner where he will watch baseball replays the rest of the night unless someone stops by to buy some drugs. He has a charcuterie board of options.

“We’ll be back later,” Casey mumbles as she takes Savannah’s hand. Ronny sits between them and the door. They know to wait for his permission before they cross. They don’t want a repeat of the last time Zackary sprinted in front of the screen at the exact moment the Los Angeles Dodgers scored a point. His fingers were swollen and purple for a month. They still don’t bend right.

Ronny waves, a small flick of the hand, and they scoot by quickly, staying close to the television and far from Ronny’s reach. Casey closes the screen door carefully to keep it from banging shut.

The boys are outside. They toss a football back and forth, taking turns diving to catch the ball and landing in the dirt. Marmalade-colored dust enters their nostrils and clings to their skin. Kudzu surrounds the edge of the property, curling in on itself as it winds its way closer to the trailer. It has to be beaten back with a machete occasionally to keep it from consuming everything.

Hounds bark ceaselessly from the cage. One lies in the dirt, skeletal frame visible beneath brown and black fur, distinguishable from death only by its stomach rising and falling with each ragged, desperate breath.

A large American flag hangs from the side of the trailer, tacked over the rusted aluminum with command strips.

“Y’all be good and stay out of Ronny’s way,” Casey says. “You sure you don’t want to come with us?”

Zackary scoffs. "We're good."

Trevor doesn't speak. He never does.

The sisters walk two miles in the ninety-three-degree sun. They straddle the edge of the highway, watching for cars and avoiding the towering grass where anything could be lurking underneath. On the church steps, Casey straightens Savannah's blouse and pushes her sweaty curls under her headband. She tucks her own hair back behind her ears and wipes the dirt from her pants.

"Good?" She asks Savannah.

"Good."

Savannah goes with the children while Casey stays with the adults. There is a short sermon before the preacher opens the floor for prayer. One by one, people go to the pulpit and speak of their troubles. They kneel in the floor and pray while members of the church lay hands on their shoulders. Others raise their hands to indicate unspoken prayer requests. Casey bites her nails and watches.

Afterward, they move to the fellowship hall for the monthly potluck dinner. Both girls fill their plates and sit at the end of the table.

"Praise the Lord for the big step our country took last week," an older man with a gray mustache says as he sits, plate piled high with fried chicken. Others in the congregation engage.

"Glory to God," several respond.

"Every life is a precious and sacred gift from God. That's what the governor said, and Meemaw got it right this time."

“Y’all see all those people protesting? Horrible signs. ‘Keep your rosaries off my ovaries’. ‘Abortion is healthcare’, they say.”

“It ain’t got nothing to do with the constitution. Shouldn’t ever have been passed in the first place.”

“Now it’s just up to the states,” a woman nods. “Alabama stands for the unborn children unless the mother is in danger, of course. But if they still want to murder their babies, they can go to another state. Just get in their car and drive. They can still go to Atlanta for now.”

“They probably drove to the beach and partied too hard to get knocked up in the first place. What’s one more drive?”

They laugh and wipe ranch dressing from their chins.

Casey fills two disposable plates and wraps them in tin foil.

“Don’t forget a nice bowl of cobbler for Ronny, honey. He’s such a good man for taking you all in.” The lady shoves the bowl at Casey with a wide, honest grin.

“Thank you,” Casey says and hands the bowl to Savannah.

They walk home as the sun sets, careful not to drop the food while swatting the mosquitos from their bare legs.

Trevor and Zackary eat crouched on the cement blocks outside the trailer door. They split the cobbler, then throw what’s left from their plates to the dogs who fight over the remaining morsels of meat clinging to the chicken bones.

Around ten, Ronny turns off the porch light. They listen for the soft thud of his bedroom door closing, their signal that it’s time to enter. Casey waves goodnight to the boys as they tiptoe

to their room, a bunkbed on one side and Ronny's junk piled in boxes on the other. With one hand on Savannah's shoulder, she guides her down the hall to their room.

They slip into pajamas and cuddle on Savannah's twin bed. "Goodnight," Casey says.

"Tell me a story," Savannah whispers.

"It's late."

"Please? Tell me about my daddy." She squeezes Casey tight.

"Savannah, I've told you about your daddy a million times."

"Then do it a million and one. Pretty please?"

Casey bops her on the nose. "Okay, your daddy is a nice man named Mike. He has black hair same as yours and a flat, wide nose like it was smooshed in a fight."

"Why is he fighting if he's a nice man?"

Casey winces. "He doesn't fight. It just looks that way. He works at the Mercedes plant, and he likes to work on cars."

"Why don't we live with him anymore?"

A flash. Blood trickling down Mom's face. Casey's head slammed into the handle on the kitchen cabinet.

"He, uh... he had to move away, and Mom didn't want to move. That's enough now, okay? Goodnight. Sweet dreams."

Savannah leans over to kiss Casey on the cheek. Casey hums “You are my Sunshine” until she feels Savannah’s legs twitch with the onset of sleep. Gingerly, she disentwines and sidles to her own bed just feet away.

Casey doesn’t sleep. She tries to form images in the popcorn ceiling and wonders what her own dad might have been like. She is drifting when, an hour or so later, she snaps alert at the clicking sound, the doorknob turning, the soft glide of the door opening over stained, brown carpet. The creak of pressure on Savannah’s mattress.

“No,” Casey whispers, sitting up. “You promised.”

The creaking stops. “What? I’m just checking on her. Making sure y’all are all tucked in,” Ronny says.

“Bullshit.”

“Watch your filthy mouth,” he snaps. Light from the pole by the road shines brightly through the window, illuminating Ronny in his white shirt and unbuttoned jeans.

A tear trickles down her cheek. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry what?” He pads over to her side of the room, Savannah forgotten for now. Out of the light and into the shadows.

Casey gulps. “Sorry, Daddy.”

He sits on the edge of her bed. “That’s alright. You know I’m just makin’ sure my girls are okay.” He tucks her hair behind her ear, a slow caress of her cheek.

She trembles. “Please don’t touch her.”

“And what are you gonna do about it?” he whispers in her ear. She is bathed in the smell of sweat and alcohol.

“I’ll tell. I swear I’ll tell.”

He roars in laughter. “Go ahead and try. I’ll kick your whole family to the curb. Without me, you got no money. No bed. No food. Besides, no one’s going to believe you.”

“I’m pregnant,” she says, barely a whisper.

“What’d you say to me, girl?” He snarls.

Louder, she repeats. “I’m pregnant. They’ll have to believe me.”

He backhands her, the old championship ring slicing into her lip. He climbs on top of her and pulls her bottoms down. She lies motionless, tasting the tinny blood, eyes focused on Savannah’s sleeping form. *Please don’t wake up. Please don’t wake up.* She is a ghost outside of herself, a soul seeking escape from the pains of the body.

He slides off her and cackles. “Can’t get pregnant twice. We’re going to have some fun, you dirty little slut.” He eyes Savannah eagerly, then hears a sound down the hallway and backs away. “Clean yourself up. I’m gonna go check on the boys.”

She skips school the next day. Her bottom lip is cut and swollen from the night before, but she manages to hide it. Anyone looking at her will think she is nervously biting it. Instead of facing her teacher, she goes back to the clinic. They said they would call when they knew more, but she gave them a fake number. She doesn’t have a cell phone, and she doesn’t want them to call Mom or Ronny.

She is the only one in the waiting room.

A tall woman with a long nose calls her last name, and Casey follows her through the door and down the hallway. Room number five. The same amount of times Ronny has visited her room. He always comes for Savannah, but he leaves with pieces of Casey instead. Chipping away at her bit by bit.

“We can recommend some out-of-state doctors, but unfortunately there’s nothing we can do ourselves without being sent to prison. We can help with recovery. Unless the life of the mother is in danger, we can’t perform the abortion.”

The doctor rubs his large, round belly and smiles apologetically.

“My life *is* in danger,” Casey says softly.

“Girls under eighteen are more likely to give birth to premature babies and have complications during labor, but that’s just a statistic. There’s nothing so far about your pregnancy that puts you at imminent risk.”

Yes, there is, she thinks.

“Don’t worry,” the doctor continues. “Grass is always greener on the other side. Things look bad now, but you’ll make it work. It could always be worse.”

On her way to the exit, the tall woman gives her a hug and holds her hand. “I’m sorry,” she says as she slips something into Casey’s hand.

She goes back to the trailer for lunch. Zackary and Trevor are outside, backs turned, hiding something from view. A large, black trash bag lies crumpled to the side.

“What are you doing?” she yells.

They jerk up, startled, but when they see that it’s only Casey, they beckon her over.

“Ronny drug it out. Just left it here and put that bag over it,” Zackary says.

Flies buzz over a dead hound. Trevor, silent as always, focuses intently on the dog. He raises his stick and pushes the sharp end into the dog’s eye. He pushes, slowly and persistently, in and out, until the eye explodes. Trevor grins with satisfaction.

“Gross, bro!” Zackary shouts, but he’s laughing and slapping Trevor on the back. A job well done.

Casey backs away.

There is no grass here. Only a barren wasteland of dirt being consumed by kudzu, inch by inch, until nothing is left.

“Wash your hands and come eat,” she tells the boys.

Savannah sits at the table. She is drawing a picture of the Virgin Mary, pregnant and sitting in the manger with the animals.

Hot dogs today. No macaroni, no bun, just the wienie.

“Your teacher called,” Mom says. “Said you haven’t been showin’ up. She was checkin’ on our ‘family emergency’.”

“Mom, I—”

“Where the hell have you been goin’? Ronny’s gonna be pissed you wastin’ his money.”

“I’m ahead of schedule with the work, I promise, but can I please—”

“You lyin’ piece of shit. You’ve been leavin’. You’ve been takin’ my car and wastin’ my gas and don’t have shit to show for it.”

“I’m pregnant!” Casey screams.

Silence falls over the room. Savannah rounds out the shape of Mary’s belly. Trevor chops his hot dog, slicing the wienie with his fork into small pieces. Zackary picks up the whole thing and bites the end, smearing ketchup on his face like a blood sacrifice.

“That’s what you been doin’?” Mom asks, her voice a low, angry groan. “You snuck around and got knocked up?”

“No, I was trying to get rid of it. Mom, it’s... it’s Ronny’s. He tried to--” she stops, looks at Savannah. “Can we talk somewhere else?”

“Ronny’s?” Mom growls, showing the gaps in her teeth and those that remain are black and rotted. Casey’s lip, red cracks and purple swells, is telling its own story. Mom screams. “Bullshit! Ronny is the only reason you got a bed to sleep in at night. He’s a good man. He loves me. Never hit me once. You’re just lyin’. You’re lyin’ about school, and now you’re lyin’ about him. You just don’t want to admit you’re a slut.”

Casey’s fork rattles in her plate as she throws it down.

“You won’t have a baby in this trailer. You’d better die before you bring another bastard around here. Where you goin’? Come back here with my keys!” Mom yells, but Casey slams the screen door and starts the engine.

She doesn’t know where to go. She drives aimlessly into town, block after block, watching families playing in the park, women in fancy clothes entering official-looking buildings, men in suits and ties gathering at diners for their daily meat and three.

She spies the sign for the interstate. It leads out of town, out of Alabama and into Georgia. *They can still go to Atlanta for now.* The engine light shines at her like a death

sentence. With only a quarter-tank of gas and no money to her name, she knows she'd never make it.

Would anyone help her? Someone from church? They might not let her back in the door. She can see it now, a man like a bodyguard in his Sunday best, arms crossed and a snarl on his face. "We don't want your kind here."

Someone from school? Not the teacher who called out of frustration rather than concern. There to draw a paycheck and demand silence.

She has no friends. Showing up every day with greasy hair and holes in too-big shirts from the thrift store doesn't make you popular. Brandon. Maybe Brandon would care, but he doesn't have a car.

There's nothing and no one.

Casey parks by the curb, slams her forehead into the steering wheel, and sobs. Wrapping her arms around herself, she feels the edges of something in her pocket. The note that the tall woman at the clinic gave her as she left. Wiping her eyes, she pulls it out and unfolds it. A phone number is scrawled across it with the word 'eruption'. *What does that mean?*

She looks through the shop window beside her at the woman in paint-covered overalls pointing at samples as she speaks to a customer on the phone.

Can't get pregnant twice.

You'd better die.

We're going to have some fun, you dirty little slut.

She closes her eyes and sees the blackness oozing out of the dog's pupil, the fly delighting in the leftovers.

Casey enters the shop just as the woman ends her call.

Her eyes quickly track up and down Casey before greeting her with a half-smile. "Can I help you?" the woman asks. Her nametag hanging askew from her overall strap says Katelyn.

"Can I use your phone?"

Katelyn looks as if she's going to say no, make up some excuse about company policy, but she hesitates as she eyes Casey's lip. "Yes, but make it quick, okay?"

Casey nods and mumbles a thank you. She pulls the phone to her side of the counter, unfolds the paper, and looks around. Katelyn is watching her. As if caught, Katelyn leaves the counter and begins moving paints around down an aisle nearby.

"Hello?" A man, his voice heavy with sleep, answers after the third ring. Casey looks at the clock on the wall. It is almost two o'clock in the afternoon.

"Eruption," she whispers just in case Katelyn is listening.

She hears the rustling of sheets. She imagines the man sitting up in bed and rubbing his eyes, checking his own bedside alarm clock. "Meet me at 4:30 at the duck pond. Northernmost bench."

"Okay," she responds. She has no clue what's happening, but she is out of options. "Which one—" she begins, but she hears a click. The man is no longer on the line.

"Are you going to buy anything?" Katelyn asks, but Casey is already out the door.

Using the sun as her guide, she finds the bench. It's set back from the pond, so it offers a scenic view while also providing privacy from passersby. She settles in with the pinecones and straw, lies across the bench, and naps until the appointed time. A paddling of curious, hungry ducks lingers nearby for a time, but they leave when they realize that Casey has nothing to give.

"Hey baby, sorry I'm late," a man says as he approaches.

Casey startles and rises to make room for him to sit beside her. He is bearded, tall, and large like a lumberjack, possibly in his late thirties by the look of him. They sit together, a lion beside a meerkat. He puts his arm around her.

"Hope you weren't waiting long," he says loudly. "Relax," he mumbles softly. "It's just for show. Although you're so young, I should have gone for the father-daughter angle instead. How old are you?" He rubs her lip gently with his thumb. So much for hiding it.

"Sixteen," Casey responds, her brain on auto pilot.

"Damn. I hate it when they're young. Okay, so this is kind of like *Dirty Dancing*. I need two grand. It used to be less, but recently I've had to find some different suppliers. It's a risky business, but we've come a long way since the sixties. You won't feel great, but it won't be like it was for Penny."

Casey has never seen *Dirty Dancing*.

"Where am I supposed to find that kind of money?" she asks.

"That I can't help you with. Maybe the guy that got you in this mess? Take charge and get the money. You know how to reach me. But you better make it soon. I don't operate after twenty weeks." He kisses her on the forehead. "See you soon."

Casey goes back to the trailer, ready to apologize and wheedle her way back in, but Mom is stoned on the couch, so she returns the car keys to the hook and slips into her room.

She comes up with a plan. Take charge and get the money. If no one will help her, she'll have to help herself.

One week later, the door glides open. A recurring nightmare that she can't escape. Ronny, jeans unzipped, slithers onto Savannah's bed. She sleeps soundly on her side facing the wall.

"Hey, Daddy," Casey says. "I've been waiting for you." She tries to keep her voice steady. Her hair is braided in pigtails, and she is wearing Savannah's pink unicorn pajamas. They are large on Savannah, bought two sizes too big so that they last longer, but they fit Casey in just the right way, making her look childish while showing just a hint of her stomach. She sits up for him to drink her in and wiggles her finger for him to come to her. A razor-sharp machete is tucked under her pillow.

"You are so stingy," he says with a grin. "You want to keep me all to yourself, don't you? Why not share the love?" He runs his hand up and down Savannah's thigh.

Casey tenses, waiting for the child to move. Still as the dead.

"You promised we were going to have fun together. I've been waiting." Her voice is high and playful.

"Comin' around, ain't you?" he asks. Finally, he leaves Savannah's bed. "One of these days, there won't be nothin' you can say that's gonna make me stop. I will get what I want," he

flicks his head to the other bed, “but for tonight, I think you and I will have this playdate you’ve been waitin’ on.” He cackles as if he’s made the world’s best joke.

Ronny drops his pants to reveal his erection. He grabs the edge of the blanket and throws it back. Crawling on hands and knees, he makes his way on top of her. “Lie back, baby girl,” he says as he nudges her lip with his ring. She follows instructions, lying down and putting her hands underneath her pillow. He pushes inside of her, eyes closed, grunting, nails digging into her hips. Casey grasps the handle and slides the machete out from under her pillow.

“Where do you keep the money, Ronny?” she asks, her voice deep and serious.

He opens his eyes, confused and furious. Casey sits up quickly and presses the cold blade into his stomach. A thin sliver of blood trickles.

“In the bank, you dumb bitch!” He raises his hand to slap her.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Zackary says as he rises from the other bed, not Savannah after all. He aims a pistol at Ronny who throws his hands in the air.

“Not your drug money. You don’t put that in the bank. Where is that? We went through your room. Found this handy gun, but we didn’t see the cash. I know you have it somewhere, Ronny.”

The gun clicks. “Ready. Aim. What’s next?” Zackary laughs.

“It’s in a safety box in my truck!” Ronny cries. “Get out of my house, you ungrateful—”

“Sorry, Ronny. You’re not going to have much of one left when we’re done with it. Ready, Trevor?” Casey shouts.

Trevor knocks on the kitchen wall. He’s ready.

“It’s your turn to lie down, now.”

“I need a bandage. You cut me!” Ronny is screaming, but he hasn’t moved a muscle. Zackary moves closer and puts the gun to Ronny’s head. Sweat trickles down Ronny’s brow. Casey gets off the bed, carefully removing the machete from Ronny’s stomach. As she changes into jeans and a shirt, Zackary nudges Ronny down with the muzzle.

“Turn around,” Zackary says, and Ronny rolls over so that he’s lying on his back. Casey pulls rope out from under the bed and ties Ronny’s arms and legs to the post. She’d been learning a lot more at summer school than just course recovery. YouTube can teach you anything, such as how to tie expert knots.

“Bye Daddy,” she whispers into his ear.

They leave him there, tied to Casey’s bed with his pants around his ankles, and run. “Now!” they shout to Trevor as they pass through the kitchen and out the trailer. Gas leaks from a propane tank as Trevor stands above it with a match. Trevor smiles, a glint in his eyes, drops the match, and runs.

The trailer explodes into flames in the rearview mirror as the four children drive away in Ronny’s truck. Savannah had been sleeping peacefully in the cab all along. “How much is there?” Casey asks Zackary, who has managed to open the safety box. “A lot. Thousands.” Behind them, the kudzu burns.

Casey smiles.

“What do we do now?” Zackary asks.

She thinks about this. She could use the money to call the man, get rid of the baby, but they have other options now, too. They drive west out of town.

“Let’s get some tacos.”