

# The Chandelier

“Are you going to have it ready in time? Carol will be here in three days,” Kristen said from the hall.

Inside, Will painstakingly pulled tape across the molding as flush as his hands could manage. Work that had once come easily, was now a struggle. “It’s going to be ready. Everything will get done.”

“Okay. If you need help, let me know, I’ll call Connor?”

“He might be running my business now but he’s not fixing my house too.”

“Did Marle’s teacher call?”

“I don’t think so.”

“We need that recommendation for her summer camp application,” Kristen said.

Kristen opened the bathroom cabinet. She’d been rubbing some expensive milk protein cream into her skin at thirty minute intervals for the past week. Ever since Carol accepted Kristen’s long standing invitation, Kristen had been like this. Suddenly, their life needed

desperate improvement. Carol was Kristen's cast mate from *High Tide*. They'd been close years ago, and Carol still thanked Kristen in some of her acceptance speeches. If it weren't for Marle, Will and Kristen's daughter, Kristen might have even attended some of those galas to cheer her friend on.

He had renovated most of the house over the past three months. He couldn't work like he used to, but with a handful of ibuprofen and a couple thermoses of coffee he managed to maintain some speed. Despite what Kristen's magazines said, sixty wasn't the new forty. To her, at thirty-nine, those headlines still held promise.

Will and Kristen met on a shoot. He'd rented the house out to a location scout for a small independent film, to Hollywood the price wasn't much, but in Maeystown it was a bounty.

For three days, Kristen and a crew shot in his home. By the middle of the second day, he and Kristen were entangled in his woodshed, he'd been off work due to a back strain. In the quiet moments after, she clasped his hands and marveled. "There's genius in these," she'd said. No one had ever talked to him like that. She said she was from the valley and for years they continued their tryst via short visits. They'd played a clip from the film at their wedding. That was ten years ago and the plan then, had been for her to stay in Hollywood half the year so she could continue pursuing acting. The pregnancy had changed that. She'd moved in and suddenly become a fixture in his life.

Will taped off the guestroom until the doorbell rang. He walked to the stairs and lingered over them as Kristen rushed to the door. He hoped it wouldn't be someone he'd have to greet. Two months ago, he'd replaced the Victorian staircase with floating planks welded to the wall,

like Kristen wanted. They had no give and made his knees ache. Each time he reached the landing, he squeezed back tears. The old stairs never did that, and had been far more beautiful.

Kristen leaned against the doorframe as she opened the door. It was Connor, looking stupid and proud, with a blazer and a cowboy hat.

“Come in,” Kristen said. Since Connor’s last visit Will had knocked out four walls downstairs, but Connor didn’t seem to notice. “So, what was it you saw me in? I hope it wasn’t too old. I’ll be mortified, if it was,” Kristen asked.

“A late night commercial,” Connor said. “You were great, you look the same. Maybe better.”

“I’ve always looked like this?” She asked and glared. “Should I be offended or charmed?” Her expressions shifted like a drunkard’s, and if one stuck overlong she’d fidget loose. This drew her to heavy objects.

Will descended the stairs slowly. Without the wooden steps and the spandrel, their rich drumming had been silenced. “You’ve been busy,” Connor said. “I hardly recognize the place.”

Will gritted his teeth as he reached the landing. He wouldn’t favor his leg in front of Connor. “She has a lot of plans,” Will said.

“I can see that about her,” Connor said and Kristen wrinkled her nose in a way that had once been cute, but after countless hours of yoga and Pilates, had a pinched quality.

The new midcentury modern sectional (a couch that nearly cost what Will’s truck was worth), whose extended seat often bore the insignificant weight of Kristen, as she watched another film she’d been in, took up the center of the empty space. The cow-spotted rug laid

before it didn't make it feel rustic or charming, and leant no humor to Will and Kristen's daily fights over the curtains. He whipped them closed, she wrenched them open. He didn't want anyone to see the inside. Who was he to change the house into something like this?

When Connor turned toward her, Kristen straightened and smiled. A marionette before an audience. Will took Connor outside. They stood on the porch.

"You've had this place a long time, right?" Connor asked.

"Thirty years."

The cornices along the porches demanded the hand-carved filigree of the ceiling molding he'd removed inside, along with nearly every other embellishment: the curlicue supports under the mantles, the diamond-patterned ceiling, the walnut wainscoting, the cast-iron radiators—all which had seemed to impress Kristen, at least until she asked him to remove them. They'd all been handmade and he had restored them all twenty years ago, returning the house he'd wanted since he was a boy to its pristine past.

"What are you doing here?" Will asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Did Kristen call you over to help?"

"No."

"You know I can take care of my own house."

"She just said she had an important visitor coming. I wanted to see if you needed anything."

“I have everything I need, right here,” Will said and patted the wall where the paint looked sturdy enough not to peel off.

“It looks beautiful inside. Outside too,” Connor said.

Will looked across the property, large even for Missouri. From the porch, the mailbox beside the road was a red dot. Before he retired, he used to pick up the mail on his drive home. Now, Kristen did intermittently. Most of it was junk, but even that bore his name. He remembered living in apartments and receiving strangers’ mail. The leftover, unforwarded bills, the magazine subscriptions all accumulated in the hall until someone else disposed of them. The unpleasantness of a stranger’s name beside his disturbed him beyond explanation.

“I could send a few guys to clean up the outside,” Connor said.

“It doesn’t need cleaning.”

“Maybe just a pressure wash and touch up, so you could focus on the important stuff. We could clear out that woodpile behind the shed, unless you’re saving it for firewood. Do a little weed whacking.”

Will had piled up the original molding and wainscoting he’d removed from the house, behind the shed. He should have stored the wood more carefully or sold it. The pile grew with the renovations. It was probably pest-ridden. He should have burned it, but even deteriorating, it provided him the illusion of being able to turn back, to undo what they’d done to the house and return things to the way they should have been.

“Would three men be enough?” Connor asked.

“What’s got you so desperate to send men over? Don’t have work for them?”

“No, no.” Connor laughed. “It’s just a big house, and we have labor if you need—I mean, want it. Everything’s fine. Could get this finished before Carol shows up and enjoy yourself.”

“Wait, you know her name?”

“It looks good like this, very modern,” Connor said.

“What did Kristen tell you?” Will asked.

“Nothing, I should get back to work,” Connor said.

“Fine, thanks for coming by,” he said.

Will shook Connor’s hand and returned upstairs without seeing him off. Will covered the guestroom walls with primer and remembered his first visit to California. Kristen had met him at LAX and they’d driven off in his rented Mustang convertible. The parking garage air weighted with the smell of oil and sand, heavy enough to nearly conceal the floral scent that draped itself over LA and could unexpectedly turn rancid, like the undertone of the smell of roses.

He spent that week driving Kristen and Carol to the beach, watching them rotate in accordance to the sun. He’d lathered oil on their perfect bodies and neither had shown any jealousy. Carol had squeezed his biceps and said, “These are arms that have lifted more than just weights. The men here are so artificial.” She smiled bleach-white.

He’d sat through a recording of a pilot but his memory of it was obliterated by the awe he felt for Kristen’s beauty and talent. Instead of seeing her expression or gestures and finding the source of emotion in them, emotion preceded mechanics, only via repeated viewings would anyone ever notice the expression Kristen had made to lead to that feeling.

What Carol lacked in talent she compensated for with charm. She spent most days on set surrounded by cast and crew. She always involved Kristen. Will watched from the periphery, happy to have a week off work, time to allow his body to suture itself back together, eager to be somewhere where man could solve everything.

The combination of the ocean's proximity and the smog made the sunsets hallucinatory. He told Kristen he thought that was how the sky would look after a nuke and she just laughed. "Don't be morbid," she had said.

"Will?" Kristen called.

"Yes?"

"Something's changed," she said. He walked out into the hallway.

"What's wrong?" He cradled her waist and she leaned against him.

"Carol just called. Something happened in New York. She's coming at eight-thirty tonight."

She trembled in his arms. "It's only eleven. I should be done by three. There might be some paint smell but it will be ready. I'll bring up fans." Beside them, the room's original furnishings lined the hall: a glistening headboard, dresser, and chandelier.

"You promise? This is important. I want her to see how nice our life is."

He nodded and they kissed. He closed the door. This guestroom and his workshop were the last original rooms left. There was an original closet downstairs too, but Kristen wanted it built out with shoe racks and shelves. That seemed unnecessary. All he wanted now were a few

things left original, some semblance of the past, at least something to remind him of the house he had loved and destroyed. The guestroom had to be the last change. It made sense. Carol needed a room that fit her.

Will had been retired four years; long enough to neuter the menace of empty days, but Kristen filled his days with tasks, as though if he kept working on the house, he could somehow span himself across the gap widening between them. If left alone, he would've mowed the lawn or whittled in his workshop, or started some collection. Life could have been nice.

He painted the walls and the ceiling. He was on the verge of finally fixing something to Kristen's liking. Recently, no matter how much coffee he drank or how much time he took, he always seemed to overlook some final step, like staining fresh wood or applying sealant or vacuuming up the last bits of sawdust. They'd worried it was a sign of incipient dementia or another neurological disease, but his doctor said he was fine. Kristen's therapist said it was denial. That Will was refusing to face the changes Kristen needed from the house. That was absurd. Regardless what he felt, he could paint any room's walls.

He'd finished the second coat when Marle bounded up the stairs. She'd just gotten home. She always came to him first. He opened the door before she reached it and let her hug him, his hands still wet with paint that grew rubbery in the hallway air. Marle already had her panda bear slippers on. Nine was a little old for them, but he'd never tell her to stop wearing them. She sat on the trunk in the hall and fiddled with the casing around its lock, pounding her feet against the floor.

"How was school?" He asked.



She wrinkled her nose like she'd smelled something bad and started to open the dresser drawers. Each one emitted a different smell. The lowest, cedar from the shoe bags left behind. The second drawer smelled like smoke from the fireplace they'd sealed off a year ago, during Kristen's "Green Crusade." The third drawer held a piney odor. All this furniture would unfortunately have to go down to the basement.

Kristen was already putting together the new bed and nightstand in the living room. The one thing that huge living space was good for was assembling things. He sucked in the smell of another time while he waited for Marle to answer.

"It was okay. The science fair's tomorrow."

"Oh yeah, is your project ready?" He asked, as though he and Kristen had not done most of it over the last three weeks. Perhaps Marle would be more interested in school if they gave her space, but it was too important at this point. Kristen needed her to get into that summer camp. Will said he could watch her if it didn't work out, but Kristen had just laughed when he mentioned it. It was a month long camp with a weekend break in the middle. The longest they'd ever been apart from Marle since her birth.

"You know it's ready. You made it," Marle said.

Marle's science project dealt with the strength of paper folded in different patterns. Initially, it had fascinated her. She had sat trying to fold paper beyond the point of flexibility, but a few weeks in, the project had been taken up mostly by Kristen. It was better than a volcano but Marle's disinterest worried them.

"Why don't you tell me about your project?" Will prodded.

“My project is based on how paper’s strength can be increased through simple folding. This shows how certain materials used in building are reinforced and prepared to bear higher weights. That’s B-E-A-R, not B-A-R-E.” As she repeated what she’d already told him about her project countless times she stroked the chandelier’s wrought iron. Its rods twisted in the shape of a flower’s silhouette. Black as a closet after a nightmare, her fingers touched its every surface. With the new furniture already being assembled, this too, would have to go. He’d make room for it in his workshop. At least then, he’d save something from the room.

“Good,” Will said, as he began to close the drawers. He had never had any assignments like that as a boy. Children had become people’s lives, not that he minded. He wanted to savor his time with his only child.

A dust bunny from the dresser had tacked itself onto her nose. He brushed it off and she blew it into the corner. It clung to a spider web.

Kristen called from the stairs, “You finally done in there?”

“Almost done.”

“You’re still working?”

“Still at it,” Will said.

Marle cackled, “No, he isn’t. He’s talking to me.”

Kristen poked her head into the hall, just a floating face. “Oh, so this is work? You better get over here, Marle. Your dad is very behind and my best friend has to sleep in that room tonight,” her words gentle but her look withering. “Call me up when you’re finished and I’ll let you know where we’ll put the furniture,” Kristen said and turned.

Marle ran down the hall and he forced himself to finish painting. He hated erasing a past he loved, a past he needed. His father would never sleep in this room, although it had been perfect for it. That had long been impossible. His father had died seven years ago, brought down by a fourth heart-attack. Exercise, diet, and a switch from beer to red wine had not helped.

He continued painting. Eventually, even this work calmed him. It had always been this way. As a boy, he'd been drawn to his father's construction sites by the promise of dirt and noise. Bodies preferred repeating themselves. His was no different.

When Will bought the house while working as a foreman for his father's company, his father called it a bad investment. After the first heart attack, his father's stance didn't soften. He said the house needed major renovations to last even fifty years. More work than home, he'd said; but nine years later, after the third heart attack, he said, "You've got an impressive house to go along with your business and family," and grazed Will's shoulder.

When he finished painting he called Kristen into the guest room. He searched her face for approval and but her eyes stopped at the unpainted space over the door. He'd done it again, somehow forgotten an entire section. She stomped down the stairs.

He repainted it and started to lug the furniture down to the ground floor. Before he even attempted to move the dresser Kristen was there, helping him, guiding his steps and lowering the dresser gently. She might want them out of the house, but she still handled the furniture like it mattered. She gave him arnica for his knee when they'd emptied the hall of the guestroom's furnishings.

The room buzzed with fans. Kristen sprayed expensive perfume in it. As he rested on the couch, so expensive it made ease come slowly, she carried up the other furnishings and segments of the bed.

Will awoke to the clang of pans from Kristen cooking dinner. Before her, no one had ever cooked him dinner. As a boy, he and his father ate leftovers from lunch, slightly moist from lying in the cooler too long and sat opposite each other in that two-room house, drinking Coke and, when he was older, Busch. His father's success remained secret until Will reached adulthood. They'd always lived like they were poor.

Will knew little about his mom, she'd left early enough for her absence to almost go unnoticed. His life had grown around it like a tree grows around an abandoned car or forgotten fence, pulling the foreign object into the heart of the tree, unfelt but still visible from outside.

He and his father spoke in plans for work. In cost per foot, in labor hours, in tool rentals, insurance costs, and when they'd exhausted those subjects they bitched about building permits. His father never said anything about Kristen, Will didn't know if that meant he had approved or not. She called Will for dinner.

He rushed past the empty rooms despite his knee. He hated how the house felt now and it was always worse at night. He reached his seat as Kristen set a platter of fish on the dinner table. Unidentifiable greens pooled beneath filets. Pride creased the corners of Kristen's eyes as she scooped the fish onto his and Marle's plates. He wanted to say something appreciative, all he managed was, "It looks... exotic."

“And I forget I’m the actress sometimes,” Kristen said. “You have a good nap?”

Marle’s eyes fluttered between theirs and landed on his.

“Just try it,” Kristen said. It didn’t taste like fish, too stringy and sweet. “It’s Monkfish. They eat so much lobster that they eventually taste like it.”

“Why not just eat lobster? We can afford lobster,” he said.

“I like the fish lobster,” Marle said, already half-way finished with her plate.

“You didn’t want to wait for Carol?” Will asked.

“Oh, no, that’s silly. I mean, she probably ate at the airport. We’ll just wrap some up for her. At least, then, if she doesn’t like it, it was reheated.” Kristen laughed rigidly.

Marle stared at the table.

The phone in the kitchen rang and Kristen rose to answer it. Kristen’s sighs and gasps punctured the silence he and Marle ate in.

Throughout the phone-call, Kristen’s features enlivened. She furrowed her light eyebrows, formed her mouth into a shocked oval, and even bent her sighs melodic. Her face sang rarely now, and its quiet had little to do with age or excessive yoga. He caught echoes of their relationship’s nearly vestigial past. This was the face she saved for strangers and monologues. She hung up and returned to the table with a sigh.

“What’s wrong?”

“Mrs. Evers won’t write a recommendation. She said we don’t participate enough in Marle’s education. We don’t even help with the PTA,” Kristen nearly spat the letters.

“What kind of summer camp needs a recommendation? She’s nine.”

“Did you just smile?” Kristen asked. “This is serious, Will.”

He nodded.

“Never mind, we’ll figure it out,” Kristen said and gripped the edges of the table. They’d already bought Kristen’s ticket to LA. A car sped down the driveway, headlights piercing the uncovered windows. Marle put her hands over her eyes.

“I thought she said 8:30,” Will said.

The driver stopped and unloaded Carol’s bags onto the stoop. Will tried to finish eating but Kristen shooed him off to the door. “I have to get ready,” Kristen said.

Will opened the door as Carol shoved a handful of crumpled bills into the cab driver’s hand. Neither counted the money.

“Ugh, I’m so sorry. I would have called but there’s something about backseats that lulls me to sleep.”

Will guided her in, but when his arm touched her back she swung around for a hug. She was forty-one, two years older than Kristen, but her face was unlined, and her chest pressed against his. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I’m fine, honey. Maybe a snack later, I’m all messed up from rushing around. You’re still looking good though,” she winked.

Kristen paused at the top of the stairs, and pulled herself taut, before beginning her descent, she looked like she was about to take the stage again but was interrupted by Carol rushing up to hug her. Will paused. Marle clung to his leg as the women screeched like girls. His daughter trailed up behind him. His knee stung.

“So what do you think?” Kristen asked.

“You’re lucky you got him,” Carol said and elbowed Will, “otherwise I’d worry for you in a little town like this. What are there, two gas stations?”

“Don’t get too jealous,” Kristen said.

“There she is.” Carol grabbed Marle before she shrank away. “Now you’re here, after all those pictures your mother sent me.” She spun Marle and laughed.

“Let me give you the tour,” Kristen said.

“She might even be more beautiful than you were,” Carol said as she tickled Marle and chased her down the hallway past Kristen. The guestroom looked like something out of Kristen’s design catalogues. A black duvet cover with white rings nipped the floor from the bed. Green curtains rippled along the windows. Kristen clicked the fans off.

“Wow, looks just like the hotels I practically live in,” Carol said.

“Wait until you see the whole house. This is all Will’s work, well the labor, not the design.” Kristen squeezed Will’s arm.

Marle lingered behind and sat in his lap as Kristen led Carol through the rooms. “Oh wow, what a couch,” Carol said from the open living area. “Who knew the inside would look like this?” She asked.

“Exactly! What with the outside like something out of *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Kristen said.

“Don’t say that. The outside’s beautiful, just different. You don’t have to pretend it’s not for my sake. It’s not your fault I live somewhere where the oldest building is eighty years old.”

“You look gorgeous,” Kristen said.

“You look so happy. Who knew this is what life away from Hollywood could be like,” Carol said and for a second Kristen’s face fell.

Will held Marle’s hand at the top of the stairs, as Kristen dragged Carol through the house below, back and forth across the floor in sharp lines. Each time they passed, Carol fell farther behind. Once the tour ended, he carried Marle down the stairs and found them on the couch.

Carol extended her legs across the loveseat, their length exaggerated by the black yoga pants stretched over them. *High Tide* was already on. With neither of them currently on screen they chattered away.

“Believe this was nineteen years ago? We weren’t even allowed to drink,” Kristen said. “Not that that stopped us,” she glanced at Marle, “oh, ignore me honey.”



Carol lay on her back, eyes patrolling the dark above her. The ceiling shifted from black to a dull white during beach scenes. Everyone in the room aside from Marle knew the film entirely.

The film was shot in the eighties but set in the fifties, but every female character was a lifeguard during a time when women did little beyond housework. Kristen had told him the swimsuits were not period appropriate either.

To the film, the whole issue of time was moot. It was just another date, and although Kristen tried to argue that that was the film's intention and that it lent it timelessness, it didn't. It was probably just laziness.

“Why don't you put Marle to bed and bring up Carol's luggage?”

Will nodded.

“Please leave the black bag downstairs. I don't need it while I'm here,” Carol said.

“Put it in the closet down here,” Kristen said, her eyes fixed to the form of her young body onscreen.

Marle followed him upstairs, carrying Carol's Prada purse, while Will carried the matching Louis Vuitton suitcases. He would probably need to buy Kristen a matching set once this visit was over. Will put Marle to bed and left the suitcases at the foot of Carol's bed.

On his way back to the closet, Will passed the couch.

“You remember this scene? It took so many takes, I was about to crack,” Kristen said.

“It was difficult, I mean it wasn’t like working with Herzog or something, but it was bad. At least then you might wind up with something decent. It’s hard to reshoot for a hack.”

“What?”

“I just meant in general.”

“Gerard was talented,” Kristen said.

“Sure, he was pretty and you had that thing with him, but that didn’t make him talented,” Carol added. The empty space amplified every word.

“No,” Kristen said, her vowels elongated.

“You hear from him anymore?” Carol asked.

“No, after the wedding that wouldn’t have been right. Stability trumps insanity.”

“I heard he opened a few video stores and sold the chain a few years back. Isn’t that embarrassing? To rent movies out when you used to make them? It’s better to change careers completely, not to linger around chasing some vague facsimile of what you wanted.”

“So, what do you think? Do I look ready?” Kristen asked.

Will opened the closet and an interior light clicked on before he could reach for the chain. The closet had been entirely redone, its shoe rack already half-full, organized by color and style. Will squeezed the door. Connor had done this behind his back. He set the bag down and slammed the door before stalking back to the living space.

*High Tide* was on mute during the scene where Kristen's character administered CPR to a young boy she'd rescued from riptide. A crowd gathered around her. Her chest throbbed with each resuscitation attempt. The boy died. Kristen had probably seen him die a hundred times. Will fixed his eyes to the screen rather than look at her.

"Listen to this monologue. Give me some notes," Kristen said and stood.

Carol seemed to melt into the cracks between the cushions. It was sad enough to see Kristen chasing after Carol like this, but knowing Connor had done what Will should have done made something in him twist and writhe.

"Before you start, who finished the closet?" He asked, his tone already more hostile than he intended.

"You did honey, don't you remember?" She turned toward Carol, "Sorry. It's been a crazy few months. We've redone the entire house."

Carol twisted her neck back to watch Will. He imagined her squirming like that in bed.

"Drop the act. Did Connor finish it today?" Will asked.

"I don't know when, he just told me he would fini—"

Will left. He grabbed the sledgehammer off the grid of tools hanging from the wall of his workshop, disturbing the geometry of points and steel.

Unsure of what would follow, he teetered on the blank ridge above rage before stomping back to the closet. Kristen rushed after him while Carol stood at the edge of the hall. Kristen's

shouts grew garbled as Will's body shook with what he took for joy as he hefted his sledgehammer and smashed at what stood before him until his blows met no resistance.

The closet wall demolished, the door unhinged, its slats littered the floor. Splinters dusted the shoes and Carol's bag, but even with the damage spread before him he felt buoyant. A muffled sob caught in his ear. Kristen cried into Carol's chest. He set the hammer against the hallway wall and knelt.

There were many things he could have told Marle in the aftermath, as Kristen packed her bags and Carol called another cab. Marle watched Will and waited. He avoided the lies people told in situations like these, didn't say that they'd grown apart, or knew how to push each other, no, he afforded himself no easy explanations. Not after that. He wouldn't blithely say that he had made a mistake.

What he offered her wouldn't simplify anything, wouldn't protect him from whatever might happen next, but he said it anyway "I love your mother," he said and Marle held his hand as he cried in the hall as his wife left in a cab with a woman they hardly knew.