

## Choke

1965

Three saved dimes jingling in Abby's pocket sounded like a chocolate milkshake with extra sprinkles, air conditioning, and the cool, minty colors inside O'Malley's. Summer was drawing to an end and moisture in the woods seemed to lend an unfriendly weight to the already wet late august heat. Inside the house, the ceiling fans only moved the air about, making it miserable to sit in. It was a walk in the heat- forty minutes till the dirt became blacktop, and ten more after that till they were on Main street- but it was a wet Texas heat that seemed to sear more slowly into your parched flesh. She'd left Daisy with a bowl of ice cubes and water on the porch because it felt cruel to make her walk the blacktop this time of year.

She arrived at O'Malley's so hot she could feel it radiating off her skin as she sat down on the cushy plastic barstool. Chocolate felt too...thirsty right now, so she ordered vanilla. As Tim, the counter boy, laid it in front of her with a glowing cherry on top, he made a note of her pinkness despite the fact that she'd slathered herself in coppertone.

"Shouldn't be out right now- the folks on the radio say there's gonna be a storm later on anyway." He said.

Abby looked out the window to blue skies. The sun may be shining, but there was a heaviness to the air that felt like a warning. If she shouldn't be out right now, then who would spend money at O'Malley's? At two o'clock on a tuesday the place was near empty.

"Don't worry, I'll lay somewhere low if I get caught out, but I've gotta be back home by dark anyways." She was faintly aware of the bell jingling on the door, but it wasn't until she saw a reflection in the mirror in front of her across the counter that she looked up and saw Sterling in the shop. He was still wearing his blue jumpsuit with his embroidered nametag from the hardware store. A bubble rose to the top of her shake and burst. Timothy hailed from the counter, gesturing with his drying rag.

"Afternoon, Mister Wilson."

"Tim." To Abby's surprise he sat down on the stool next to her and laid down a dime. "Give me a coke." He said.

“Sure thing. Here you go, Mister Wilson.” The dime was replaced with a frosty glass bottle. Abby hadn’t moved through the entirety of the exchange, lips glued to her straw and eyes to her glass- neither did Sterling look at her. Abby tore her eyes from her shake and glanced at Sterling in the mirror. He was comfortably downing the coke with a beer bottle grip, obviously thirsty from the heat. She had to move sometime- it wasn’t like he didn’t know she was there. She slurped. He glanced over, shifting. It seemed almost as if he were looking for a direction to approach from. Once they’d reached the bottom of their respective glasses he seemed to have found it.

“I’ll drive you back home for dinner.” He said, finally. It was neither a question nor a suggestion, but his voice was low and calm. Nothing had happened this morning, not as far as he was concerned; Abby herself began to doubt that it had.

“Okay.” She replied. They finished their drinks in silence except for the slurping of the straw as she hit the bottom of her shake. Tim took their empties and they went out the door- as it opened it was like the blast of heat from an open oven door. He was parked on the street about a block down and Abby followed obediently.

Then in a world where nothing of consequence happened, something changed. Her eyes opened for the first time and the first things she noticed upon waking was oranges and herbs. Rosemary maybe. Getting off the bus was no big show, but in Gainesville you knew a stranger. A girl in a hat had just stepped off and for a moment she stood there taking in her surroundings, face covered by the brim of her wide hat. Then she took it off to reveal a fine bone structure and thick brows, but the eyes beneath them were a color Abby had never seen. They were the color of the sky in the eye of the storm; of an ocean perfectly at peace. She was in a short dress- short, short, patterned with flowers the same color as those eyes. Abby inhaled again to catch it...not oranges. Clementines. Rosemary and Clementines. She stared openly as the girl looked around, getting her bearings. Their eyes met for a second and Abby flustered, lowering her eyes shyly. When she looked back, the girl was no longer looking at her and she looked again, her eyes traveling from her slender ankles and up her shapely calves to strong thighs.

The sound of Sterling’s door slamming shut jolted her out of it and she opened the door to clamber inside. When she was in, she peered through the window to see if she could get a glimpse of that girl again, but she had picked up her suitcase and disappeared. Abby sat back in her seat as the engine rumbled to life. It felt like until that moment she

had been sleeping on some joyful thing and it had finally cracked open in the summer heat like an egg. She wanted to bathe in that feeling, that pleasurable ache that came from looking at something more beautiful than anything she'd ever seen.

They did talk some as the truck rumbled on, about this and that. Sterling asked how Jenny at the 90 cent store was doing and Abby replied that she'd finally had her baby. The city was thinking of putting up a new clock tower soon. He'd picked up a few things in town; as the truck swayed down the dirt road, bottles clinked from a paper bag, a newspaper stashed in there along with a few other things. Abby watched the scenery go by. A long uncultivated field stretched out on either side of the road, growing right up into the line of trees ahead of them. This time of year they were starting to call drought; the grass was dry and as it died it turned gold. Fields upon fields of gold, a sea of coins presided over by a strong old oak, watching over them like a creaky old dragon over its hoard. Sterling's voice faded back in; she nodded, thinking what she'd make for dinner. Pot roast, he provided and she agreed. They had potatoes.

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"I got you something in town." He said. He tossed her a paper package. Curious, she opened a flap to reveal blue fabric. She hadn't asked him to go through the effort of getting her something, but it felt like an apology that she was required to accept.

"Thank you." She said. When she didn't move, Sterling looked at her pointedly, gesturing to her pants.

"Well. Go change." He said.

She turned and hiked herself upstairs, Daisy jogging herself up after her. Closing her bedroom door after the dog, Abby laid the package on her bed and unfolded it, holding it up to her body in the mirror. It was a simple affair, cotton, with a loose skirt and a little white peter pan collar, but the blue was a cornflower that looked nice with her hair. She looked at Daisy for affirmation.

"Yeah?" She asked. Daisy snorted, tongue flicking out to wash her nose. Abby pulled it over her head and smoothed her hands from waist towards the hem. The skirt flirted outwards with her hands. *Sometimes* Sterling said he was sorry. Never with words,

always with things. And she kept them because they were things, and they were pretty. Pretty things with ugly memories, but memories were tricky things. The way Sterling forgot things, she wondered sometimes if she'd only made it up. Memories could be corrupted like water damaged photos, but pretty things were indisputable. There was a glass rose in a bud vase on her dresser from the time his belt had gotten away from him and drawn blood. The summer she'd dislocated her shoulder, after they'd popped it back in a music box had appeared on the kitchen table, plus a pink bow. Her room was filled with things; sugar was sugar, and it made lemonade easier to make.

Attempting to flatten her hair, she let Daisy out in front of her and down the stairs, following her into the kitchen and taking careful pains to cover her new dress with an apron before she started. Sterling was taking his shoes off in front of the television, her evening cue- some men took a burbon before dinner, but as much as he loved his liquor, his habit was sweet iced tea and *Bonanza*. She poured him a tall glass, not forgetting a slice of lemon, and brought it to him before she unwrapped the round of pork in the kitchen. Onions, Pork, chopped carrots, small red potatoes, salt, mustard, and thyme. Quick, quick, so she wouldn't miss more than a few minutes. Once she'd set a little clicking timer she removed her apron and ran to the living room, taking her spot on the floor at the foot of the big chair. Both of them glued to the screen, it wasn't until the commercial break that either of them stirred. A hand descended on her head, ruffling the hair that she'd just straightened. She ducked out from under it but unsuccessfully, distracted by a coppertone commercial.

"You put that in the oven, now?" He asked. She nodded.

"Uhuh." One after another, surfers on the TV fell into the water attempting to get the attention of a bubbly brunette.

"Good girl." He said. Another one bit the dust and still the brunette noticed none of them. Sterling down the last of his sweet tea, the clink on the coffee table alerting Abby to it's emptiness.

"You want any more?" She asked.

"No, you go ahead and take it." He said, leaning back into his chair again. She stood and made careful efforts to smooth her dress before doing so. In the kitchen, the timer had a

while to go. She went back to the living room. A commercial for Chevrolet; she hadn't missed anything. As she passed in front of the TV, Sterling's eyes followed. "You look nice." He said, sounding rather pleased with his accomplishment. He patted his knee. "Come sit with me for a sec." He said. She hesitated and then carefully sat on the edge of his knee, and he pulled her into his side to watch the television. His arm hooked around her waist to hold her to him; she had done no wrong but felt tense anyway. "You like it?" He asked. She responded appropriately.

"Yes, thank you."

"You look like a proper girl for once." He added. Knowing he couldn't see, her mouth slid sideways. On screen, the Cartwrights were in a sticky situation that a good old fashioned shoot out would certainly solve. Sterling's strong hand was on her hip, her thigh. She ignored it as she had the hair ruffle- a vague gesture of affection that affected nothing if it didn't affect how well she could see the screen. She shifted and his loosening grip on her tightened again, clearing his throat. Suddenly she realized that she didn't know where his other hand was.

"Sorry-" she said, shifting again.

"It's fine, sit down." She did. He leaned forward, the muscles in his chest flexing against her back, and rested his face in the nook between her head and shoulder. Bothered, she attempted to shrug him off and his hand clamped down lightly on her thigh. It was a friendly warning to settle down. She stilled, eyes fixed on the screen. Abby's disinterest in the opposite sex had not prevented an education; it was simply the man of the house's liberty to provide her with one. Suddenly she was twelve and she could not move, eyes fixed on the screen but not seeing anything. Another hand now rested on her breast and for some reason she was conscious of every breath, having to will them in and out.

*Please not today.*

"Hush now. Watch the show." He said. She didn't know what happened next, the edges of her vision fading to black. The cartwrights disappeared. Somewhere inside this darkness, a miracle. The timer from the kitchen. He withdrew his hand. "Go on and check on dinner." He said.

Half out of obedience and half fleeing the living room, she scuttled away into the kitchen. Daisy greeted her in the kitchen- the whole time, the dog had been sleeping on the cool tile. The roast was indeed almost done. Once she'd checked, she folded herself up like a little bug next to the dog to wait for dinner to come round- where she would sit at the same table as Sterling and eat the same food and wash the dishes and go to bed and pretend that nothing. Nothing had happened.

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The sun was relentless. Stripped down to her shorts and her swimsuit top, Abby dripped sweat; pausing by the roadside, she watched jealously as Daisy slurped from a puddle in the roadside ditch. She hadn't brought water on this walk despite the sunstroke warnings on the radio. In truth she had intended to go to the city pool, but the longer she walked the further it felt from where she was. Grabbing a stick from the roadside she tapped Daisy's side with it to get her attention and made a preliminary throwing motion into the roadside grass. She whistled.

"Daisy, get it. Go get it, girl."

Lobbing the stick, she watched the dog go bounding into the tall grass, ears flapping. She waded in after her, heading slightly uphill towards the one big oak in middle. If anything right now, she just wanted to lie down in the shade. But the space at the base of the trunk was not unoccupied, a small checkered picnic cloth spread out on the dirt and a figure lounging against the tree. It was the girl from town, the one who had gotten off the bus, the one who didn't belong there.

"H...hi." Abby said. This girl was an invader in a space that was supposed to be Abby's alone, this spot underneath the wide oak, but Abby did not mind so much. She was too busy staring at those ocean eyes, the long brown legs that stretched from underneath her short hem. The graceful hands held a small metal lighter, not a cigarette, but a freshly twisted joint between her pretty lips. She'd halted halfway to lighting it, her lighter cap open and her hands cupped around the joint to block the breeze- not knowing who was approaching and why. Seeing the redhead and hearing this tremulous greeting, she put her hands down, removing the joint from her mouth and returning the greeting more confidently.

“Heya.”

For a moment they let the breeze blow between them, and then Daisy came bounding back with the stick, wagging around Abby expecting pats and then realizing that there was a new human who also had hands that could pet her. Promptly, she dropped the stick instead in the girl’s waiting lap, causing her to laugh. “Who’s this?” She asked.

“Hi...” She repeated, almost dazed. Then, “Daisy.” Abby said. It came out breathless. “I’m Abby.”

“Devi.” Said the girl, rubbing Daisy’s ears to the dog’s great delight. She sat there and wagged, panting and looking back at Abby as if saying *This is wonderful how come we didn’t do this sooner?* Devi motioned with the joint between two fingers, “Were you going to sit?” She asked.

“I was planning on it.” said Abby, thinking again that she hadn’t known that Devi would be there but grateful that circumstance had brought her. She sat down very carefully on the checkered cloth, criss crossing her legs. Devi gestured with her joint.

“I was going to smoke this, but I can only do half...you want to share?” When Abby just looked at it, she held it out. “It won’t bite.” Devi said. Abby took it without trepidation, sniffing it out of curiosity; it was skunky but had an herbal, almost citrus odor. “Is this your first time smoking grass?” Devi asked. Abby nodded. She had the feeling that if Sterling knew it would be a fresh black eye, but she wanted Devi to think she was cool and what he didn’t know couldn’t hurt him. Devi took it from her and lit it, sipping and puffing until she had a good lungful and holding it before releasing a heavy cloud up into the air above their heads. Abby watched it swim up into the branches of the oak and disappear into the leaves. Devi handed it to her.

“Try. Hold it in as long as you can.”

Extricating it from Devi’s slender fingers seemed a task that Abby wasn’t quite up to, but somehow with some fumbling she managed to take it without touching her hands unnecessarily. It was awkward but she managed to get it between her fingers and to her mouth, sipping gently as she’d seen Devi do. It burned and she immediately coughed it out, sputtering. Devi laughed and refused it as Abby offered it back, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“No, do it properly.”

This caused her to try again with gusto this time, attempting to prove that she could hold her smoke. She was a little more successful, getting what could be considered a decent lungful and coughing it out again.

“Groovy.” She said, putting up a peace sign and earning herself a jab in the side with Devi’s elbow for teasing. She laughed, giving her back the joint and Devi laughed with her, then Devi lay down to let the breeze whisk away the sweat from her limbs. Abby followed suit and they lay there, strangers in the silence looking up at the leaves above them.

“I saw you getting off the bus the other day. You’re not from here.” Abby said, after a few beats. Devi passed her the joint again and she tried valiantly to hold it in without coughing. Despite her efforts, she squinted up at the canopy above them and coughed as she handed it back. The smoke made her stomach turn and her mouth was filling up with spit. Turning aside like a lady, she spit into the grass where Devi couldn’t see but was embarrassed anyway as if she were caught dipping. Their fingers brushed this time and Abby couldn’t tell if it was the grass but her whole system felt a big old mess, stomach fluttering. Devi didn’t seem entirely concerned by this statement.

“Yep.”

“So where’ya from?” Abby asked. Devi lay there contemplating the joint without talking and Abby was afraid that she might have said something wrong, but eventually she took a drag and released the smoke with a long suffering sigh.

“California.”

If it hadn’t been so hot, Abby would have sat up in her surprise. She’d never been to California but it sounded like paradise and she couldn’t imagine leaving it for pardon-her-french Gainesville.

“Why?” was the first thing that came from her mouth. Devi looked at her questioningly and then burst into laughter.

“You forgot some words in there?” She asked, passing the joint. In her fluster, Abby touched her fingers and nearly stopped breathing.



“I mean, why would you ever leave California for here?” Abby asked. Devi shrugged.

“Reasons.” She said. Abby passed the joint, which was slowly growing shorter. There was a silence in which she understood what she might or might not be saying. Abby nodded. She didn’t want to talk about it, they didn’t have to talk about it. They passed a few moments in silence. A breeze sprang up- a cool one this time, and they both sighed.

“I’m so hungry.” Said Abby. Then she blushed. She hadn’t meant to say that but all the sudden she could eat a whole horse. Devi’s eyes lit up and she poked a finger in the air, signaling for her to wait as she dug in her rucksack, finally pulling out a paper bag that ended up containing a single red peach. Both girls stared at it in its perfection for a moment and then Devi took a bite; she slurped but still juice ran over, dripping onto her overalls. Abby watched hungrily, a shiver running through her as she watched juice drip from her lips down her chin and into her hand, twining down her slender brown wrist. Devi sighed.

“Here.” She said thickly, holding out the peach and wiping her chin with the back of her hand but still lost in her mouthful. Abby couldn’t help herself, didn’t want to help herself, reaching out for Devi’s wrist and catching that sweet drop in her mouth. Without thinking to stop, that she shouldn’t do that- she followed its path back up her hand and to the fruit, licking at the wound Devi’s teeth had ripped into the fruit. It must have been the grass because as Devi had brought out the sun when she first saw her, Abby felt a star ignite in her stomach when she tasted that peach. It was liquid sugar and sunshine, the distilled essence of all that was good and sweet in Texas. Head bowed and eyes closed she opened her mouth to give words to this ecstasy, all that came out was surprised little:

“Oh!”

She looked up expecting anger but she was met with seafoam eyes smiling at her gently. Devi’s other hand cupped around Abby’s cheek, fingers winding into her hair. Sterling’s hands upon her were a weight, but Devi’s was a guide, pulling her past the peach and up to her lips. Right before they met, she murmured:

“It’s ok. Doesn’t it feel good?”

And it did. Kissing Devi was like eating that peach, soft and dripping sweet golden juice. She still smelled of clementines and rosemary and Abby realized that she was holding both of Devi’s delicate, angular wrists. Her skin was so soft, slightly sticky with peach. They broke apart to breathe and Devi held her face cupped in her palm, forehead resting upon forehead. The star inside her stomach had exploded into fireworks, a giggle bubbling up and then laughter, letting her head fall into Devi’s lap as she laughed. Soon they were both laughing, a chorus of birds under the leaves of a great oak. Never had Abby felt so much at peace with the world and all the evils within it, so connected to another human being, so loved. They exhausted themselves and lay there in a pile together, staring up at the canopy above.

“Yeah,” Abby said, breathlessly. “Feels good.”

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1960

Abby was at school; the shop was slow and Jason had sent him home instead of on lunch. Where he thought the money was coming from when he didn’t let Sterling work, Sterling didn’t know. There was his retirement pay coming in. When you were already in the hole it made it easier to tread water, but he was still drowning.

Here, in Abby’s room was the only place in the house he could look at them. Michael and Marion. It was a black and white snapshot of them in high school, one of the times it had started to become less of the three of them and more of the two of them. Marion at that age looked like Abby. The red hair, the freckles, the impish way her eyes tilted. But she didn’t have those green eyes. They were Michael’s grey instead. She had his nose too, and the easy way he sprawled out when relaxing- when she thought Sterling wasn’t around. He stood there in her pink room looking at that framed picture and remembering things that were both sweet and bitter. Remembering how he’d loved Marion and loved and hated Michael. This picture wasn’t quite right. He should be in it, right between the two with their arms all linked around each other’s shoulders. That’s where he had belonged since first grade. But it was the only picture he had of them. In a drunken fit of rage one night after Marion had died he had dumped all of those things into a metal barrel in the yard and set them on fire.

He supposed he'd been rash, but in the moment it had felt right. Michael had left him. Marion did the same. Neither of them had had a say about it, but what was most important was that *Sterling* had never had a say in it. Still holding the picture, the bed frame creaked as he sat down to look at it. He wanted to look at it now, he tried to look at it, but somehow all he saw were their last moments and the blood that had been on their faces. Hunched over there in his dirty coveralls, he wept. He tried to rub and blink away the tears and the blood and the headache that was starting to push tendrils in behind his eyes.

He focused on Marion's blurred face and somehow seeing her that way made it easier because she looked like Abby that way, with longer hair. He wish she'd stop cutting it, but it was a something she did in secret and he could not break her of it. Marion had been so much more compliant. They'd grown up together and she loved Sterling as much as she loved Michael. She was their girl. When it was the three of them with the boys about to go to war and Marion had married Michael, it had been a blow. A setback, at least, because whether he liked it or not he had come home alone and her open arms had also been for him. They had married right away because she now had a child to take care of but in their hearts neither of them had let Michael go.

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1968

Sterling got up to dress but Abby stayed seated where she was, the sleeve of her slip askew over one shoulder. She didn't remember getting up or going back to her room but she blinked and she was there. The more frequent these became, the more time she would lose. Sometimes hours at a time. She got dressed and put on her shoes, going downstairs and climbing into the car. As the truck rocked its way out of the driveway she rolled down the window, letting the breeze take the hair that had escaped from her work bun. She wore glasses now. It was the eventual toll of squinting at the tv from across the living room. They were big and round and gold rimmed so when the morning sun reflected through and around them, it made her freckles disappear into a gold glow.

At the Sac'nSave she put her apron on in the back room, clocking in on time and heading to her register. When she got home her feet and lower back would ache, but it was repetitive and everybody knew everybody so they were polite enough. Gossip was rife in the back room and at the registers, but she knowing that she herself was the subject of several rumors- true or not- didn't participate. Devi worked at O'malley's now, in her frosty mint green striped uniform, with those eyes to match. When they couldn't have lunch together Abby would go eat at O'Malley's and Devi would pretend that she was

just another customer, pouring her coffee with a secret smile. That afternoon Abby walked home with something in her pocket, a one dollar and twenty five cent secret that Sterling would never know. When she got home she sat in front of her vanity mirror, holding it furtively in her hands as if it were a baby bird she were protecting; she had smuggled it home from work, paid for with some of last week's wages. At the store there had been a couple to choose from, mostly frosty peachy colors, but this lipstick was red. She hadn't yet tried it on and sat there, clicking and unclicking the tall cap until she found the bravery to open it and lean into her mirror, smoothing it over her lips with two swipes. She dabbed it with one finger, smearing the pigment to the corners and edges and then sat back, rubbing her lips together and looking in the mirror. It didn't clash with her hair, but instead made it look all the more fiery. In the tube it was a fire engine red, the color of ripe apples and peppermint candies, but on her mouth it was an *eat me* red, the color of blood rushing to the surface of skin, the color of lips that had been kissed until they tingled. It would come off the moment she kissed her, perhaps smudge irreparably but she thought that perhaps Devi would like it. This seductive color. Something to wear privately, when it was only the two of them and they thought about kissing.

She realized that she was caught in a reverie and it dawned upon her what was wrong. Slowly, she loosed her hair from its ponytail and took off her glasses, and without them it was revealed to her once she couldn't quite make out her own eye color. Her mother blinked slowly back at her. She'd actually gone a few days this time before she had thought of Marion again, but it was impossible not to be reminded of her when she looked at her own blurred features. It didn't matter that the final details were different, the general look was very strongly of her Marion Jo. She'd lived and died a beautiful woman. An elegant woman. Even when Sterling was hitting her, she'd still managed to take it elegantly. Abby supposed she had learned the same over the years. The worse it got, the more grace she had to show, because if she didn't, more punishment would follow. Was this a truth that her mother had tried to teach her through example? Abby replaced her glasses.

She was herself again and grace ill befit her, all knees and freckled elbows, but the red upon her mouth was the same tempting red, the same flame as her loosed and frizzy hair. It said *eat me* but this time it was speaking to the wrong person. It suggested that the wrong person might see it and think what she'd so hopefully thought that Devi would think. There was nothing on which she could wipe the bloody lipstick without

leaving a stain so she stood up and went directly for the bathroom. She could flush toilet paper. Opening the door, she caught herself too late, not realizing that Sterling *had come home early and was in the hall*. Shocked and at a loss for what to do, she slammed the door shut, standing there stupidly for a second until a wave of what felt like icy water crashed over her, prompting her to fumble for the lock but it was too late, the handle had turned and he was forcing her backwards into the room. His face was blank in a way that she recognized as fury. He backhanded her across the face and she saw stars, bending double from the force of the blow. Advancing as she stumbled backwards onto her bed, he shouted down at her.

“What kind of whore activity are you bringing into my house??” Tears of pain welled in Abby’s eyes, knowing better than to answer a rhetorical with an explanation. He kicked the bed, making it shake and her shriek. In response to weakness he went in for the kill, grabbing her by the front of her shirt and yanking her up off the mattress and shaking her. She whimpered but nothing more. The blow to the face had smudged the red outside the confines of her lips, marking her bloody. The last time he had been this angry he had seriously hurt her. She’d spent nearly a week in bed, unable to even get up to cook him his meals. He’d been apologetic once realizing this, but this time was different. She’d done a grievous wrong and she knew she was going to be punished most grievously for it. He might kill her this time. He might, in his rage, rape her. Something he had never done violently before. She didn’t think she would survive that. She was tougher than she was as a kid, as her ribs did not crack on the first punch, but would they at another?

Wheezing, she knew what she had to do, kicking out and striking him squarely between the legs. With a wheeze of his own, he released her and she dropped to the bed once more, tears of pain smudging her vision. He was now the one bent double but he was the only unfeeling god she’d ever cared to worship and he’d get back up. Falling over herself in her haste to exit the room, she launched herself from the bed and out the door before he could grab her streaming hair. She thundered down the stairs and skidded into the space dividing the living room from the kitchen, but she hesitated. Back door or front? Front door would give her access to the truck, which she could drive, but she might be in for it just as bad if she stole his truck- as opposed to running out the backdoor and into the woods where he might not be able to find her. The split second she took to make this decision was all it took for him to catch up with her.

Daisy had woken up in the living room and sensing his intent to harm, she launched herself between the two, barking. Now all hell broke loose. Sterling grabbed Abby by the back of the arms and pushed her into the kitchen, Daisy leaping and snarling. Her teeth caught and Sterling screamed, releasing Abby and letting her stumble forward. Daisy had gotten between them before, but he had usually dragged her out of the house and chained her in the yard, or else kicked her out of the way and closed the door. This time was different- he seemed fed up with this animal getting in the way and he directed it at her full force. Grimacing with pain and fury, he grabbed a knife from the knife block. Abby lunged for him, grabbing his arm, but he shook her off.

“I’ll deal with you in a second, unless you want this knife in you instead!” He shouted, grabbing Daisy by the scruff of the neck and dragging her into the living room and towards the front door. Abby followed, kicking and scratching and trying to get him to focus back on her- from her mouth flowed an unending string of “No!!”s and “Stop, Sterling, stop!! STOP!!”s but he didn’t, kicking open the screen door and throwing the dog bodily from the top of the porch steps. She yelped as she hit the ground and rolled. As she tried to right herself, he came down the steps and raised the knife, grabbing her by the leg and plunging the knife narrowly into the dirt by her belly.

Daisy screamed-a terrifyingly human scream-when Sterling jerked her back into his reach. Abby thought she heard the sickly snapping of the dog’s hind leg, bone separating from the ligaments in her hip.

Tears of fury, tears of sorrow, tears that had bottled themselves up with the anger and shame she had kept inside; They smashed their way through the dam, rushing through the defenses of her heart.

Daisy wriggled desperately to get away from him, his more and more drunken stabs sinking deep into the dirt of the yard. Abby grabbed the first thing that came to hand, a board that was lying in the yard. She gripped it with all of her meager strength, fingers rasping on the splintery wood. Dark as it was, she didn’t see the rusty nail on the end. Trapped on her back, Daisy screamed again, twisting away just enough to avoid the more and more erratic stabs of the kitchen knife as she squirmed and yammered.

“Bitch! Hold still, you little- never going to get in my way aga-”

“Hey Sterling?!”

The tone of her voice made him turn his head to look, but he had hardly time to process before the board came whipping into his field of vision. Putting the entirety of her one hundred and five pounds into the swing, the hardwood connected with his skull with a sickening-

THK

-his neck snapping into an unnatural position. Releasing Daisy, he stood there on his knees for a moment, spasming. Abby dropped the board but it was still stuck to the side of his head, a nail driven deep into his temple. Daisy scrambled away on three legs, panting fearfully. Abby backed away a step, her voice a whisper, afraid of what she had just done.

“-don’t touch my dog.” She said. A dull thud rose from the ground as he fell face first into it, the nail still embedded in his skull. He twitched and jerked like a chicken lost its head, but it was worse when he stopped because that meant *oh, God, is he dead he’s dead I killed him he’s dead*. The stunned disbelief that locked her in place was pushed up and out of her body like vomit, borne by a wave of much less easily recognizable emotion that made her limbs feel like jelly- ants dancing on jelly, weak but full of painful static. For the first time in her life she’d really *stopped* him, not just run away, but he was *dead*. She’d never tried to run away because there was nowhere to go; Sterling had told her that enough times. A part of her screamed that he could be a monster, but he wasn’t *that* much of a monster and he provided for her and she’d *killed* him *OH GOD*. The jelly in her limbs hit her joints and they gave out, sending her to the ground in a heap.

Her mouth opened from its twisted state, but there were no words so what came out was a little noise caught halfway between a whimper and a shriek. Half of her wanted to fall down and just die there, but the other half couldn’t stop *looking*. She couldn’t tear her eyes away because he couldn’t either, those eyes wide and staring, accusing. *What did you do to me*. She fought the urge to run, trembling as she called for Daisy, trying to recover the dog in the dark. Even with the light from the porch she could hardly see through her tears and she tripped, falling into the dirt and skinning a palm before

getting up again. She tried listening through her own thick, rapid breathing, calling and calling. At last, she found that Daisy hadn't gotten far, hiding behind the chicken coop with one back leg dragging. Daisy couldn't be more than thirty pounds, but Abby struggled to pick her up, the dog snarling and whining in pain and fear. Abby winced as she lifted her, her face too close to the upset dog for comfort, but Daisy did not bite, only yammered in pain as she left the ground. She tried to calm her, babbling.

"It's okay it's okay, come on Daisygirl, you're gonna be okay lets go come on, it's okay baby-"

There was no plan, but it came to her that she should run. Not into the house or the woods, but away; far away. She didn't think about what was to come next, only thinking that she needed to get Daisy to the truck. It was unlocked and she managed with great difficulty to open the passenger side door, depositing the dog there and stroking the shaking animal's face with both hands to soothe her before closing the door. Then, she ran inside the house. In the living room she stopped for a second, unsure- then she dashed into the kitchen and hauled the bag of dog food out from its nook between the fridge and kitchen counter and dragged it, bent double, outside and into the bed of the truck. Then she went to Sterling. He hadn't moved in the dirt. She twitched around him in a half circle trying to figure out what the best way to go about this was, but she had never covered up a murder before. The folk of Gainesville would likely not be too upset if Sterling disappeared, but the local police might have a thing or two to say about him dead.

He was heavy. She tried dragging him by the legs, but that made the board still stuck to the side of his head stutter and jolt against the dirt. Distastefully, she dropped his legs and tried yanking the board out first. It came with a gush of blood surprising for the size of the hole. As she continued dragging him, he made a trail of it in the dirt. It could have taken her an hour or more to get his body up the front porch steps and in through the door, but he didn't have to go any further than that. Heart hammering, she ran upstairs and yanked her blue suitcase out from underneath the bed. As she packed, throwing things haphazardly into the case, her face had dried, tear tracks staining her cheeks. As she was turning to put a pair of shorts into it, she caught a look at herself in the mirror and realized that she was still wearing the lipstick, and that it had been smeared grossly across her face when he had struck her. She scrubbed at it with the back of a hand but didn't spend much more time in the mirror, speeding her way through packing and



slamming the lid of her suitcase shut- she froze then, staring at the wall as she realized something. She'd remembered Daisy's food, but what about her?

Lugging the suitcase she ran downstairs and actually started when she saw Sterling's body in the livingroom, staining the carpet silently. She'd almost expected him to sit up, but he did not. Cautiously, she went to the body and dug in the left pocket, finding the wallet she expected there. Opening it, there was some cash; not much, but it would do and he would not be using it. She took his keys and threw her things into the bed of the truck, checking on Daisy for a moment. The dog was shaking but she weakly licked Abby's hand when she stroked her and that would have to do.

She got matches in the kitchen and the gas can from the garage, upending it and dragging it through the house, stopping to wet Sterling's body as much as she could. A trail led outside onto the porch and she lit a match there, stopping for the first time to consider what she was doing.

She dropped the match.

It flared at her feet, flames running through the open front door and setting the house ablaze. Then she ran. Jumping in the truck, she started it and hit the gas, gravel spurting out behind the tires as it jumped forward, running from the flames. Daisy whimpering in the seat beside her she didn't look back, hitting paved road in a minute and forcing herself to slow down. She was bloody and smelled like gasoline, driving a stolen truck with an injured dog in the passenger seat. If she got pulled over it the story would be clear. Keeping just the speed limit the whole way into town, she killed the engine as soon as she got to the bank, shutting the door quietly with both hands and running up the stairs in the alley. She hammered on Devi's door, heart beating a tattoo inside her ribs. The door opened and she didn't wait for Devi to ask what she was doing there so late, pushing past her and closing the door behind her. Devi was in a silk robe; she'd obviously been woken, but there wasn't enough time to apologize.

"Whats g-" She began, but Abby was peering through the curtains to make sure the street was still dark. She didn't hear the sirens of firetrucks yet, which meant she had time. Not much time.