

## Legacy

“Do you want to take a spin in it?” Duncan asks Mallory as they stand in the parking lot of the high school, itself almost as newly minted as her driving license. Mallory doesn’t answer. She just stares at the shiny red sports car with the brown leather seats and chrome wheels. Her shoulders hunch forward, as if the added weight of her license makes her backpack too much to bear. She hesitates.

“I have to get home,” she says.

“But aren’t your parents away?” Duncan asks, opening the driver’s side door.

“Yes,” she says.

“What’s the hurry home?”

“I have chores.”

“I can drive you.”

“That’s okay. I always walk.”

“It might rain. I’ll drive you,” he presses.

He points with his eyes to a heavy grey cloud that has arisen in the distance. Mallory gives in and walks to the passenger door. The interior of the car is finished with wood. She runs her fingers along the elegant dashboard as he starts the engine. The aroma of the new leather seats reminds her of a pair of gloves her mother once had. They had been expensive. When she lost one of them, its mate lingered in her handbag, until one day it too disappeared.

“Waddya think?” Duncan asks.

She sits mute, watching as the sunroof silently opens to reveal the blue band of heaven high above them. A puffy, angelic cloud floats into the frame, and then disappears. She buckles her seat belt and folds her hands in her lap.

“Ready?” he asks, then puts the car in reverse and backs out of the parking spot.

Mallory knows that her parents wouldn’t approve of her taking a ride home alone with Duncan. They are strict, especially now that she attends public school. They can no longer afford private school tuition. Most of her parents’ money and time now goes to the Rhys Owens Foundation and the Living God in Christ Pentecostal Church. But it doesn’t matter. She likes public school. It is noisy and colorful and filled with smells and sounds and voices that she otherwise would never have experienced.

The town is small. Many people know Mallory’s father from when he coached Little League. Duncan played on one of the teams. Everyone knows Duncan’s father because he owns one of the two banks in town. He bought Duncan this car for graduation. Lots of kids get cars for graduation and then they go off to college. Both she and Duncan will be graduating next month. Duncan will attend the same university as his father and grandfather and will one day take over the bank. Mallory’s parents have been too busy

to help her with college applications to the Christian colleges they have chosen for her. Summer is coming and this year she will be running the Bible Camp. She can't think beyond that.

"So, have you driven on the highway yet, I mean, besides for driver's ed?" Duncan asks.

"Not really," she replies. "Just to church and back. Around town for shopping. Once out to Table Rock lake."

She is not all that keen on driving but there is no other way to get around. Some kids ride bicycles to school. A horse. She would be happier with a horse, she thinks. Once, Jonelle Williams rode her horse to school. It was a big deal.

"Do you want me to put on the A/C?" Duncan asks. She shakes her head.

He's not a bad person, she thinks. He is polite and well groomed. She has never heard him swear or raise his voice in anger. But she only sees him in class or at the football games on Friday nights. Sometimes, he sits with her and her parents, but not all the time. He has lots of friends.

Once, her mother told her to invite Duncan to church. She didn't. It wasn't that she didn't want him to come to church. It was that she knew her parents would never condone her attending a Presbyterian service. It didn't seem right that the invitation could never be reciprocated.

"So, where are your parents?" he asks.

"Dallas again," she says. "Something for the Foundation."

"You wanna listen to some music?" he asks.

"No," she replies. "That's okay."

The drive home from the school is no more than five minutes, but they manage to pass by everyone in town who can and will report to her parents that they saw her in Duncan Wilson's car after school.

As they pull into the driveway, a few drops of rain clink against the windshield. Duncan closes the sunroof. She sits watching as it shuts itself against the darkening sky.

"Do you wanna come in for a minute?" she asks.

"Sure," he says. "As long as it is okay with your parents."

She knows that it is not okay, but she tells him that it is. Old Mrs. Barnes from next door is no doubt watching them now, she thinks. She imagines walking over there and ringing the bell and giving Mrs. Barnes the name of the hotel where her parents are staying and then telling her to go ahead and call them. But she knows she won't. She looks down at the ground as she counts the steps to the porch. Twelve today.

The house is large and is relatively new. Her parents built it when she and her sister were still attending the Christian Children's Academy. Each time she opens the heavy front door, the first thing she sees is the memorial. The memorial honors her sister, Rhys. It occupies the wall that separates the foyer from the kitchen. In the center of that wall is a large photo of Rhys. In it, she looks over her shoulder at the

camera, her smile bright and wide. Rhys smiled like a movie star. Everyone said it. The portrait is surrounded by seventeen smaller photos of Rhys, one for each year of her life. Below these photos is a table weighed down by ribbons and trophies and awards.

"Here's the shrine," she says. "The wall of memories."

Duncan stares at the display for a few seconds and then gives her an uncomfortable smile.

Moving around the wall, she leads Duncan into the kitchen. He takes a seat on one of the four stools stowed under the kitchen counter.

"Do you want a glass of iced tea?" she asks.

"Sure," he says.

"It's sweet tea."

"Okay."

She pours him a glass and tells him she'll be right back. Her intention is to go to her room and change into her cleaning clothes, but she finds herself moving down the hallway, counting the steps to Rhys' room. It is spacious - almost as large as her parents' bedroom. The carpet is pink. The canopy bed has twinkle lights. She turns them on and then looks around. This room, indeed, the whole house, seems to be waiting, as if Rhys will be back any moment. All her things are here, almost exactly as she left them. Her mother dusts and vacuums the room and washes the bed covers every week.

Mallory slips off her shoes and climbs onto the bed, staring up at the canopy. When she was ten, she was so jealous of this bed. It was like something for a princess, magical. Now, she feels nothing.

"Hey, where are you?" Duncan calls out.

"In here," she replies.

Duncan follows her voice and finds her there, on the bed.

"What're you doing?" he asks.

"I'm not allowed to be in here," she says. "But it's not like I don't miss her, too."

She glances at a large photo that occupies a space where once there was a poster of a blonde Jesus praying, his blue eyes cast upwards towards heaven. Now, from under a tiara, Rhys the beauty pageant contestant smiles through the glass of a bejeweled frame.

"She was my parents' pride and joy," Mallory says.

Duncan is silent. She looks up at him. He is staring at the photo.

"My mother still cries every day," she says.

It has been five years since Rhys died. And every day, Mallory's parents grieve as if they have just received the news. She remembers that day, too. She was there, sitting on the sofa as two state troopers gave them the news. Her mother began to wail. Her father held his head in his hands. The troopers apologized as if they had been responsible.

“Our house is sad now,” she says.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.”

“I better go,” he says.

She follows him outside to the car. As he opens the door, she stops him.

“I’d like to take you up on that drive,” she says.

“Okay,” he replies. “After supper?”

“Can you pick me up?”

“As long as it’s okay with your parents,” he says.

“I’ll call them.”

He agrees to pick her up at seven.

Inside, Mallory wanders the spotless house. She finds herself moving in numbered steps to Rhys’ room. Rhys’ baby shoes sit on the dresser. They are white leather with pink laces. She picks them up and sniffs at them, at the faint odor of leather and talcum. She opens the dresser drawers and stares at Rhys’ clothing. In one drawer are baby clothes, fancy little dresses and frilly little socks. In another drawer are pretty pajamas and little panties with the days of the week printed on them. In another are sets of shorts and t-shirts, and in another, socks and jeans. She takes out a pair of jeans and holds them next to her. They are too long. Rhys was tall and thin. She is not.

In the walk-in closet she finds Rhys’ Barbie doll house and the Barbies and their clothes. Dozens. They wear gowns, like the ones hanging in the closet. She feels strange and sits down. Everything sparkles. She picks up a Barbie doll, examines it, then pulls off its head. She does the same to the rest. Then the arms. Then the legs. She abandons their corpses in the bottom of the closet, leaving the door open and the lights on. She counts the steps as she moves down the hall to her parents’ room, her mind blank, her hands and feet numb.

The dressers in her parents’ bedroom sprout dozens of photos. Most are of Rhys. There are a few of Mallory. In one of them, she is ten, standing next to Rhys, who is fifteen and the recipient of a trophy. They are both smiling and holding hands. She feels an ache in her chest. She loved Rhys, too. They had been so close. The emptiness she feels has no words. Rhys was special. She was thoughtful and she loved Mallory and always knew how to make her feel special, too. Rhys never excluded her and always told her that she would grow up to be beautiful and talented. But that didn’t happen.

One by one, she relieves the frames of their photos. She rips the photos into strips as she goes, leaving them in the middle of her parents’ bed. She looks again at the photo of her and Rhys and slips it into her back pocket.

In the living room, more photos of Rhys with various family members smile into the emptiness of the house. These she has dusted every day for five years. A strange rage seizes her, and she begins hurling them into the fireplace, one by one, frame and all. All of the photos. All of the family. All of them, together in the fireplace. She stands there, holding the last one in her hands.

The last thing that Rhys had said to her was, "I'm sorry, honeydew, but you can't come with me this time. I promise I'll take you to the lake tomorrow. Don't worry. I'll be back soon." But she didn't come back.

Mallory wanders into her own room and digs with anger through her crafting supplies until she finds a Sharpie. She blacks out the eyes and mouths of all her photos, even the ones in her yearbooks. She dumps the contents of her memento boxes onto the bed and finds the necklace that Rhys gave her for her twelfth birthday - a silver chain with a delicate crystal cross. She puts it around her neck and resumes wandering the house, counting the steps as she tries to remember the sound of Rhys' voice.

Now, standing before the memorial, she stares at Rhys' forever blue eyes. Her arms hang at her sides. She stands there, frozen in place until the sound of the doorbell startles her. Duncan is back. She can't believe it's seven already. He has changed clothes.

"I'll be right out," she says, and closes the door, leaving him on the porch.

She takes off her blouse and replaces it with one of her sister's t-shirts. It is dark purple. Fancy white letters spell out "Be the Light Matthew 5:14." The words are surrounded by delicate flowers and vines. She brushes her hair with Rhys' hairbrush and puts on a pair of Rhys' earrings and applies some of Rhys' lipstick. She leaves the house, not bothering to lock the door.

"Where do you want to go?" Duncan asks.

She has no ideas but manages to smile. They end up in the parking lot of the county electric cooperative, where a group of Duncan's friends have gathered in their cars. They all admire his new red BMW and start asking him technical questions. Duncan is polite and introduces her, and they say hello, to be polite, she thinks. She says hello back.

"The sound system is great," Duncan is telling everyone, and turns up the radio.

She gets out of the car and wanders the parking lot while Duncan shows everyone something in the trunk. The sun will be setting soon. She is supposed to call her parents at eight. They want to know that she is not doing something she shouldn't. She never does. She is a good, dutiful daughter. She does all her chores and never complains. She tends to their daily needs. But they don't see her. She is not their beloved Rhys, to whom they always devoted their lives. Even now. Rhys is still their entire life, even though she's gone. What they have left is Mallory, the one who isn't their golden girl or shining light. Mallory knows that she is just ordinary. She will never be Rhys. And no one will ever love her like Rhys loved her. She aches for that love.

Overhead, the sky is bright. There is a slight breeze. Duncan and his friends have moved on and are now looking at the engine of someone's giant pickup truck. She doesn't know most of these boys. She doesn't want to.

She picks a few flowers that are growing alongside the road. They are purple, Rhys' favorite color. She remembers being in awe of Rhys, tagging along after her and intruding on her and her friends. Rhys never complained and would pick her up and hug her and kiss her. Rhys would hug her to sleep when she was sad. Now the sad never leaves.

Mallory admires the flowers, then drops them on the ground next to Duncan's car. The boys are now revving up the truck's motor and laughing and whoo-hooing. It is noisy. She takes the opportunity to slip into the driver's seat of Duncan's car. The music is so loud it almost hurts. And then, she watches herself start the car and put it in gear, as if she is someone else, someone now tearing out of the parking lot in Duncan's red car.

Her hands feel strange, gripping the wheel. Her heart pumps. She speeds towards Eagle Ridge, to that bend in the twisting road, where the cross stands, decorated with silk flowers. Rhys had been with her friends that day. She had been driving the brand-new car that her parents gave her for graduation. A shiny red convertible. Five years ago, almost to the day. She was late. Speeding to get home. She lost control. Too fast, the state troopers said. She had been going too fast and lost control. The car hit the rock wall. She died instantly, they said. Her friends survived. The rock wall saved them from plunging over the cliff.

The tragedy had brought the whole town together, everyone said. They had all loved Rhys. Hundreds and hundreds of people came to the funeral. They cried and hugged her parents as Mallory stood there off to the side and invisible, listening to all the condolences. Everyone kept saying, "what a tragedy. Such a beautiful young girl."

Such a beautiful girl. Our princess. The light of our lives. Such a treasure. A real talent. How lucky you were to have those years with her. She's with her father in heaven now. Jesus had called her home, they all said. And Mallory stood there alone, watching her mother's lips move as she thanked everyone. And then later, after the kitchen had been piled high with baked goods and casseroles and platters of fried chicken, her parents wept and held each other as she watched, uninvited, her grief silenced as she went about her chores.

Behind her, Mallory hears police sirens. More than one. She imagines three or four police cars are following her. She imagines that in one of the cars are the same troopers who stood in the living room and told them that Rhys was dead.

She hits the gas. The curve is coming up. She knows it well. They drive up here every Sunday after church to tend the cross and honor her sister's memory. Now, she can see it, the rock wall, and next to it the opening in the ridge that leads to the valley below. She veers toward the opening, then looks up through the sunroof at the blue band of heaven above, ready to join Rhys there.