

**The Healing Power of Creative Storytelling: Utilizing Fiction as a Means of
Therapy in the Writer/Reader Relationship
Accompanying Creative Manuscript: *When Good Men Run***

Thesis

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By

Alicia Klepper

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Abstract

What if we wrote the challenging portions of our lives as comedies or the boring parts as grand adventures? What if we recast painful experiences into creative stories that allowed us to live in proximity to our circumstances and not be overwhelmed? Storytelling is how we bridge our lives with creativity as a way to heal from the past, process the present, and hope for the future. This thesis explores how the tradition of creative storytelling has evolved to enable writers and readers to uncover and connect elements of life that would otherwise be too painful to process. By bridging life events through creative writing, not only does the writer benefit from the therapeutic power of storytelling, but they also participate in building community through testimony. As readers discover shared challenges from writers who cast their experiences into the work, they find pathways to their ability to cope. Readers are then encouraged to utilize creative storytelling to discover their own journeys toward wholeness.

*Dedicated to my husband, Mark,
and our three beloveds, Gavin, Mary, and Isaac.*

And to my brother, Zac.

You are the reasons I believe I can do anything.

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Artist's Statement

Introduction

According to French writer Voltaire, “Writing is the painting of the voice” (Mitchell 17), and the voice is textured by experience. Its shades are deepened, and its strokes broadened by circumstances, choices, conditions, and consequences of the human endeavor toward discovery and wholeness of self. As a writer, I process the elements of my life through words, whether spoken or written, and the words most poignant and engaging are not yet settled until I see them in print—whether typed on a screen or scribbled on a sticky note and stuck to the wall above my desk. Words paint my life; they help me establish my grounding so I may journey sure-footed. Writing for this project will guide me back to the foundation of deeply rooted pain before leading me toward healing through creative storytelling. I believe it is through the uncovering and sharing of stories, by expressing experiences through narrative, that pain’s purpose can be found, and healing can be initiated. My thesis research and commentary will discover and discuss the origin and endurance of creative storytelling’s healing impact from a holistic approach that considers the writer’s process and the reader’s experience.

Impetus

The powerful thread of the narrative tradition that has survived through humankind’s experiences with cultural genocides, religious persecutions, community devastations, generational turmoils, and individual traumas proves the power of storytelling and written narrative. This same thread is woven into my writing motivation. Throughout my MFA program experience, I have been presented with several opportunities to explore and express the good I am oriented toward when crafting and exercising my art. After careful consideration, I discovered that the good I am oriented toward is the hope that learning leads to understanding,

making way for empathy, and resulting in love. Through the writing practices and projects that I am drawn toward, I have found that this linked process of learning, understanding, empathizing, and loving is formulated best in the context of story—mine and others.

Through several writing projects during my MFA, I had the opportunity to explore the lives of peers, professionals, and volunteers who were willing to reveal closely held experiences, desires, and pain from their past and current circumstances. Through seeing their printed words incorporated into works that called for hope, change, and understanding, several communicated that they felt heard, and that feeling brought even a small measure of healing to their difficulties and challenges. The results of these projects motivated the good I am oriented toward because when we step into the accounts of others, we encounter a perspective and experience that helps explain behaviors, beliefs, and thought patterns, allowing room for understanding and empathy.

As a writing student inclined to research, the response from my narrative writings prompted inquiries concerning the qualitative impact of personal storytelling on one's painful experiences that could assist them in developing healing strategies and results that would benefit them long term. If I can learn, understand, empathize with, and love others through sharing their stories, can I do the same for myself, or even more so for someone who has caused me pain? An additional inquiry that surfaced is whether this impact could be obtained through fiction storytelling, wherein I take accounts loosely based on someone or a significant event and create a narrative that would help me process and understand human behavior and its effect on my life. In other words, "Can I use creative storytelling to help myself process my past pain while also bringing empathized redemption to someone else?"

Background

Only when I began allowing myself to benefit from my oriented good toward others did I experience that profound movement toward healing for which my participants had expressed appreciation. While brainstorming for my first fiction course in my MFA program, I was prompted by the common idea that stories usually generate from threads of what the writer already knows and has experienced. Philip Gerard calls this “narrative intelligence” (Gerard 15). To create a character compelling enough to explore, I began asking myself questions about my biological father’s behavior and his choices that negatively impacted my life. I started pulling from the memories of stories about his childhood. I paired those stories with my journey of processing my childhood and how those experiences have formed me as an adult; moreover, I asked myself how his childhood formed the adult he became and guided his decisions. Essentially, I wondered how I could make sense of his pain and the pain he had caused by examining his life before fatherhood, keeping in mind that my childhood has influenced my adult decisions as well—both good and bad. I created a protagonist loosely based on my father and his childhood and adult experiences. Then I planted that protagonist in a fictional drama.

Manuscript

Introduction

Scott Abner is the protagonist of *When Good Men Run*, a fictional narrative that explores the complicated life of a man with dreams and goals that conflict with the nightmare life of his childhood. The reader learns about the protagonist through scenes, confrontations, and dialogue set in specific storylines of Scott’s life. Each story that contributes to the overall exposition of Scott is sectioned and marked by a particular year in his life in which a significant event occurred. The structure of utilizing time as marking points speaks to the long-term impact that

key moments have on one's life. As the reader learns about Scott through his experiences, an understanding of his current choices begins. In light of his childhood, the goal is for the reader to empathize with Scott's complexity as the plot advances through several obstacles and eventually comes to love Scott and hope for his final redemption.

The title, *When Good Men Run*, is a combination of the facets of Scott Abner that further hint at his complexity. At first glance, the irony of a good man running is not lost on the reader and will serve as a tool to entice the reader to discover how a man who runs can also be a good man. One of the goals of Scott's character exposition is to not justify Scott's running, but for the reader to understand it, empathize with him, and love him enough to root for his ultimate return and redemption. Another goal I have for the reader is that through the full circle of processing the protagonist, the reader can take the same orientation toward learning, understanding, empathizing with, and loving others into their lives and toward those they encounter—especially those complex and hurting individuals they meet.

Synopsis

Scott, 36, has been married to Debra, 35, for twelve years. They have two daughters, Melanie, 7, and Maggie, 3. Scott is leaving their Florida home to travel to Arkansas to begin a new job position. The plan is for Debra and the girls to join him once he finds a home and settles in.

The story's opening immediately introduces Scott and Debra's tumultuous marriage in which they are both conflicted by pain and anger. Through their exchanges, there are glimpses of Scott's temper squelched only by his despair. Debra toggles between stubborn control and deep sadness. They have a heated discussion the morning of Scott's planned departure that reveals

Scott's ongoing drinking problem, his penchant for running from difficulties, a history that he and Debra haven't recovered from, and the effects of their marriage on their daughters.

As Scott travels, sections of marked time reveal Scott's previous experiences. The first begins with Scott's childhood with an unstable addict mother and her string of lovers, one in particular, Jack, who verbally, emotionally, and physically abuses Scott and his siblings, Katherine and R.J. Scott's relationship with his siblings is explored as they endure the traumatic events together as children.

Another section explores the earlier years of Scott and Debra's marriage and the events that triggered the downward spiral they find themselves in today. Their stress has been increased by growing financial burdens, becoming parents, and marital infidelity. Scott's baggage that his history provides, his increased drinking, and his lack of healthy coping and problem-solving skills have him at the end of his rope. His only hope is a new job position in Arkansas, which uncoincidentally provides him the opportunity to run away from facing his problems at home.

Scott's planned two-day drive is interrupted when he stops for the night in a rural Mississippi town and meets Tabitha, 19, who initiates an attempt to rob Scott at the demand of her father (a local drug dealer). Scott kills Tabitha's uncle in the scuffle. In a panic, Scott decides to flee town, but not before Tabitha blackmails him into taking her with him, believing her father will kill her if she stays. Tabitha demands Scott take her to her maternal aunt and uncle in Wyoming or else she will lead her father and the law to him.

The remainder of the story includes Scott and Tabitha forming a familial bond akin to a parent/child relationship while traveling toward Wyoming. They get to know each other through telling stories from their past (prompting continued flashbacks to Scott's childhood), the necessary means to survive, being chased by Tabitha's father and his friends, evading the police,

an attempted attack on Tabitha by strangers they encounter, Scott becoming injured during her rescue, and a final confrontation between Scott and Tabitha's father. During the altercation, Scott learns that Tabitha's father is Jack, his mother's abusive lover from his childhood. Tabitha's stories collide with Scott's memories, and he realizes that he and Tabitha have the same mother. Scott also learns that their mother passed during Tabitha's birth, a closure for Scott since his estrangement from her when he was seventeen. The story concludes with Scott beginning his return home and the reader is left with the hope of redemption to be fully realized in Scott's life.

Vision for the Work

While working on *When Good Men Run*, I developed the protagonist from a superficial, insecure, and self-loathing man to one with deeply layered complexities and past traumas that he desires to process and heal. Even if subconsciously, Scott sees the opportunity to help Tabitha as a means to undo past wrongs, create purpose for the pain he has endured and caused, and redeem himself into the man he wants to spend the rest of his life becoming. This was my vision for my understanding of my father and his pain and the choices he made from it that hurt others. By writing Scott, I could distance my perspective of my father and see him in a different light, which will lead to learning, understanding, empathizing with, and loving him.

While the story and the protagonist are entirely fictional, my vision for writing *When Good Men Run* is to create realistic characters, set them into ordinary and extraordinary situations, and allow them to develop into the people they have wanted to be all along. The vision at conception included that of only Scott Abner. However, through several drafts and coursework development, Tabitha's story began to come forward, revealing that she and Scott are traveling on parallel paths of the pain of loss, the trauma of parental rejection, and the hope for redemption. Tabitha has slowly become myself the more I developed her character. Because

of this, the vision for the work became profoundly more personal as I am “journeying” with my father on the pages to each find our own healings in our own ways.

Even in fiction, the power of storytelling is a creative means to discover redemption for others and ourselves, bringing healing to both. While I am hopeful that readers will enjoy a narrative of redemption, I am more hopeful that they will ultimately be motivated to write their stories and thus journey toward their own healing.

Literary Context

Some literary contexts explored in *When Good Men Run* are more obvious than others. Scott’s and Tabitha’s childhoods play a crucial role in how they engage with their current world and their decisions regarding themselves and their relationships. Within that context are subtexts of rejection, loyalty, sacrifice, desire, redemption, and healing. The idea that there is healing in becoming what you didn’t have and redemption in being for someone what you needed for yourself is rife throughout the narrative. However, as is true in life, the process toward personal development is not linear for any of the characters. Throughout the story, they make decisions that move them further from their potential and seem to threaten their progress. These subtexts introduce the themes of inner conflict and turmoil, nature versus nurture, and inner will and determination.

Christian Significance

The Bible is the most prolific book of stories recorded in history. Biblical scholars testify to the various genres, themes, and contexts found in Scripture, including “narrative, law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, letter, and history” (Kurz par.7). No matter which context, genre, or style, the general theme that runs through the entirety of the Bible is human redemption as told through the telling of stories concerning individuals, families, communities, cultures,

civilizations, and nations. However, the Bible, more so than any other written work, is meant to be engaged from both the reader's and writer's perspective. The motivated Bible student asks themselves questions about both the protagonist of a story and its author to understand human nature and humankind's relationships with each other—and primarily with God.

In the fast-paced world of publishing and printing, the author has become a forgotten entity in the process of creating literature. As an author who is a Christian, this can stifle the calling of writing as a means of ministry to my readers. For *When Good Men Run*, if readers do not know or consider my testimony discovered through both the narrative and the process of writing, then they are missing one-half of the power of the story's context. To enlighten the reader concerning both the writing process and its final product as a collective experience could motivate readers (even the nonwriters) to utilize stories—with both fiction and nonfiction elements—to process their own painful experiences as an effort toward healing. In this way, authors and their readers co-labor through the pages to yield the harvest of hope for each other's healing.

Conclusion

As in the tradition of oral storytelling the powerful effects of sharing narrative are produced through the collaborated efforts of both the speaker and listener. The same can be true for the author/reader relationship when an effort is made to bridge experiences over the span of pages. In this way, creative storytelling is a conduit for producing healing in both the processes and product of writing narratives. Through the discovery and telling of stories, novice and experienced writers alike can journey toward their hopes for redemption and healing for others and themselves. The power of the written word and the profoundness of narrative have the potential to be powerful tools of healing for those who have stories to explore and share.

Critical Paper

“We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (Didion 11).

Introduction

The undeniable power of storytelling is made evident by its presence since the beginning of time. Few things have the staying power through drastic progressions in cultures, civilizations, communities, and individuals as that of the narrative—and for a good reason: we are creatures drawn to the story. We want to know the who, what, when, where, and why of human behaviors and experiences. We want the narrative line that inherently threads itself throughout our lives, and we want it told and retold in creative and imaginative ways as education, entertainment, and art. As long as we are here, stories will be also. The question is why storytelling is a consistent mainstay and paralleled line along the existence of people. This paper seeks to evaluate some of the possibilities, its impact on those involved, and, more specifically, its healing power on those who have experienced crisis and trauma.

This critical paper will examine three aspects of creative writing as a means of effectual healing:

- the presence and power of storytelling
- the writer/reader relationship as a symbiotic relationship
- the therapeutic effects of creative writing for the writer and nonwriter alike

This paper will also introduce a Christian worldview by discussing the testimonial event of storytelling. My thesis research and commentary will discover and discuss the origin and endurance of storytelling’s healing impact from a holistic approach that

considers the writer's process and the reader's experience evoking the process of learning, understanding, empathizing, and loving.

Storytelling

“The human need for storytelling is not likely to ever go away. It is far too basic to the way people make sense of their lives—and among the most important stories they tell are those that seek to understand the past” (Cronon 5).

The National Storytelling Network describes storytelling as “an ancient art form and a valuable form of human expression” (*What is Storytelling?*). Oral storytelling is a tradition that dates back to the origin of humanity and has since spanned the globe to communicate and preserve a people's history, way of life, and future ideals, and as a form of art and entertainment. With the invention of writing tools and the progression of available resources, stories dispersed beyond the homes, villages, and communities from where they were conceived and birthed the literary tradition known today as the modern method of sharing narrative through writing.

Storytelling goes beyond its fundamental ability to communicate historical events or imagine future endeavors. Narrative art also can intertwine the lives, experiences, and events of the teller/author and listener/reader in a shared encounter. Juma states that “through storytelling, people can find a deep connection as their stories weave into their separate lives, unveiling their common humanity” (3). In some cultures, communal settings for storytelling are utilized to share individual traumas and sufferings to create a collective experience that serves to make sense of the events “as a larger collective struggle” (Kirmayer et al. 15).

The commonalities people share through storytelling derive first from shaping the experiences into the narrative. “Storytelling,” according to Gabriel, “is an art of weaving, of constructing, the product of intimate knowledge” (2). The “position of knowing” invokes “vivid mental images that approximate everyday human experiences,” an appealing element of storytelling (Walwema 20). Stories shape these shared occurrences in a way that produces

meaning and clarifies complex issues that often derive from human actions, behaviors, and relationships (21). When stories are employed to articulate these events, speakers/authors and listeners/readers are invited to investigate the motivations behind such decisions (learn) and thereby gain an understanding and comprehension of others and themselves.

The Healing Power of Storytelling

Part of the connecting characteristics of storytelling includes a connection to individual history. The art of storytelling, which has its roots in a communal nature, also influences one to explore personal enlightenment and comprehension. The learning and understanding that results from community and cultural storytelling apply to the individual when attempting to make sense of past trauma, present difficulties, and future fears. Friskie describes this phenomenon as “narrative identity” (20). This identity is formed when life experiences are internalized and integrated into a continually moving “story of self” that incorporates the “reconstructed past, perceived present, and imagined future” (20). The story of self is the narrative of the internal environment created by external circumstances and genetic predispositions. It is an available tool for those seeking to understand how they engage with significant (often painful) events (Friskie).

As the narrative identity forms, the “blend of memories, reflections, and pieces of self caught in time” creates the storyline (Friskie 20), often producing a narrative that is painful to articulate and difficult to comprehend. For this reason, storytelling is often used in counseling as a method of helping those healing from trauma to listen, receive, create, and process their experiences. By sharing their experiences in creative form, many individuals coping with trauma practice “a new awareness and a sense of clarity to painful memories” (19). Linking disconnected reflections and memories together to create a cohesive story provides an understanding of a complete picture and the possibility of a progressive outlook (Walwema).

Storytelling is an investigative experience that seeks an outcome. The elements of a story are characters, conflict, and resolution, and it is essentially “the recounting of a problem in a way that makes us want to know what happens next” (The Association of American Law Schools 505). The process of narrative art allows one to engage in a solution-oriented endeavor without the demand for explicit language. Working with a representative story rather than the lived traumatic experience provides a conducive way to identify solutions without reliving the event directly (Hammel 7). Healing from trauma and psychological/emotional pain through problem-solving creative writing is one of the many available outcomes of storytelling. By exploring personal accounts through narrative art, one can discover the complexities of human behavior that often create trauma and pain in the lives of others, nuances overlooked outside of creative exploration.

Writers as Agents of Healing

“Jacques uses the expression the ‘art of healing’ to describe the physician’s activity, but the same expression also describes the writer’s therapeutic power” (Berman 412).

The writer brings the inner world out, demands that the internal and external universes contend with one another, and links the past with the future from the present posture. It is with this burden in mind that Schwartz stated,

“Literature is written language located in potential space, the language we locate there. Since each of us lives out his own identity and its variations in interaction with social and historical circumstances, each of us brings to the literary transaction a unique style of attempting to unite inner and outer realities-our potential spaces and transitional objects are often shared but never identical.”

(765)

Unlike oral storytelling, the writer must weigh each word for accuracy in tone, meaning, implication, nuance, and effect. Berman states, “Writing involves, to a far greater extent than speaking, an observing ego, a special consciousness attuned to all of our thoughts, feelings, and actions” (409). Writing is the expression of identity that is presented to the audience. Even though writing is an independent endeavor that spans time and distance, a writer can touch upon the inner lives of their audience more than any other form of creative art. This connection occurs over the slow formation of a relationship from shared experiences presented across the pages of the story. This effect is described as a “three-way sharing connection” involving the teller (writer), the story, and the audience (reader) (The Association of American Law Schools 513). The writer/reader relationship creates a symbiotic event when this connection is acquired.

The Writer/Reader Relationship

When stories are shared, the audience is pulled into the experience (The Association of American Law Schools 517), creating an active participation of both the creator and receiver. A therapeutic exchange occurs when the writer and reader approach the story with authenticity and sincerity (Juma). The exchange makes possible an emotional connection only when it is contingent upon shared experiences, beliefs, and “a sense of common purpose so readers are invested in a resolution” (Walwema 21).

According to Walwema, “A storyteller shows a grasp of the fundamentals of her/his subject in ways that are believable by displaying expertise and by projecting a sense of shared understanding with audiences” (23). The subjects and displayed expertise may be the author’s real experiences processed through narrative art. The possibility of impact multiplies as the writer produces stories that help him/her process and articulate

painful experiences, discover creative solutions and resolutions through their stories, and publish those stories to initiate or continue healing for others. In this way, writers become agents of healing for themselves and their readers.

As one skilled in their trade and attuned to their purpose possesses the means to provide their services expertly, the tools writers use to “counter the traumas of the past are primarily the materials of the art form: words and sentences, narrative structures, and literary genres” (Webb et al. 5). When readers actively engage in writing that is rooted in therapeutic handling of trauma through narrative art, the writer/reader relationship reflects the oral tradition of storytelling that has proven to prompt community in shared suffering, learning the stories of others, understanding human behaviors, empathizing with other’s pain, and loving them through their difficulties. This exchange across the pages brings writers to the foreground of their work, much like the speaker when a story is told.

The Disconnect

“Appreciation of literature is the getting at an author, so that we like what he is, while all that he is not irrelevant (Crothers para. 19).

It is natural for those who love stories to become intrigued by their creators to the point where readers “value even the smallest details that throw a light upon their character and mode of living” (Walsh 111). In the nineteenth century, writers situated their storytelling in first-person narratives that allowed the readers a perception of access to them (Hochman 177). Readers began to experience fiction as an “intense, virtually personal interaction” (178) that created a “sense of contact between the writer and reader...one of the fundamental pleasures of fiction-reading” (180). This growing interest in authors’ personal lives was primarily considered a harmless outcome that credited the

writer's ability and effectiveness (Hochman 179) and helped grow readership and a sense of community.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, mass printing became more accessible and affordable, causing a sharp increase in book printing and recreational reading (Kuminova). The demand for sales and profit triggered an explosion of creative writing, and "literary texts came to be written for an anonymous population of readers, and then purchased as mass-produced objects to be widely read without any tangible social connection to the author" (Kuminova 59). According to Tompkins, the dependency of writers on sales of their printed work rather than personal connection to their readers created a purely economic relationship that severed social context (qtd. in Kuminova 68) and created a heightened interest in a superficial nature.

Mass printing created a near-celebrity status for authors, which only fed into the increased interest in their lives outside their work. The formula of anxious and withdrawing writers and demanding readers finally broke down their once dynamic relationship. The writer became relegated to the background of the reading experience, impeding the therapeutic opportunity storytelling had in the once symbiotic relationship. The fictional narrative grew distant as authors became remote. This unintended outcome caused a shift in reader behavior. They pled "for the return of a personal storytelling voice in fiction, and [expressed] their regret for the disappearance of the chatty, authorial aside, the lost 'flavor of [an author's] individuality'" (Hochman 180) (Crothers para. 14).

Returning Writers to the Foreground

The Reader's Role

"A true book is the author, the book, and the reader" (Mitchell para. 14).

“To read is not a virtue,” states Wharton, “but to read well is an art” (515). The artist is the *creative* reader (Wharton, emphasis mine), a receptive and integral participant (Hochman) who is “in a measure a co-operative author” (Mitchell para. 14). “The work is divided between the writer and the reader” (James 485) in an interdependent relationship, as the latter toils to receive from the former the experience of literature through a dynamic opportunity of shared healing through creative writing. That potential is threatened when authors are removed from the driving effect of their work.

To heal the fracture, Bigongiari asserts, from her research on Virginia Woolf’s perspective of the author-reader relationship, a contribution of effort is required from the reader to seek the connection through learning and understanding. Bigongiari states, “Woolf envisaged for the reader an active part in the construction of the meaning of a literary text. To her, reading also entails striving for a deep knowledge of the real-life author’s mind” (144). Through active reader engagement, Bigongiari believes that this endeavor can provide the reader “access to the ‘presence’ of another human being: not a character, but the author” (144). Access to another human’s experiences and perspectives (learning) is crucial in prompting understanding that makes way to healing through shared stories.

The Writer’s Role

The content writers bring to their work is never entirely segregated from their experiences and circumstances. Gerard defines this engagement as “narrative intelligence” when discussing “the ineffable way in which an author inhabits a piece of writing, the way in which itself becomes an embodiment of personality in highly distinctive ways” (15). According to Gerard, this embodiment creates “the soul of the

work” (15). It is within the essence that storytelling becomes a testament to shared experiences, resulting in learning, understanding, empathy, and love for self and others.

The writer desires to give the reader a moment of reprieve from the growing collision of their inner and outer worlds. Stern stated, “[If] I am ever told, [my book] made you smile; or can conceive it has beguiled you of one moment’s pain—I shall think myself as happy as a minister of state; —perhaps much happier than anyone (one only excepted) that I have read or heard of” (2). The draw of fiction for both the writer and reader is to experience a world outside of oneself. It is the exploration of another’s experiences, challenges, and victories—whether through creating them in one’s mind and transposing them to print or throwing oneself into the pages of an author’s creation. The event of fiction reading “gives us the experience of “what writers and readers know least about in life—how another mind thinks, how another body feels” (Cohn 5-6), which is the seed of empathy.

Since storytelling’s transition from oral to literary tradition and the production of printed content on large scales, writers have had to create ways to reclaim their work as art rather than a commodity by reestablishing “a ground for communication with the elusive indefinite audience” (Kuminova 80). One of the first methods of creating writer/reader relationships is the inclusion of the preface in literature. The preface serves as a tool to “reach out to the unknown reader and ensure that a sense of direct personal contact is created, even very briefly, to set up a communication channel (84). Essentially, the burden of the preface is to “get the book read and to get the book read properly” (Genette 197) by prompting a connection between the writer and the reader, an essential component of effective narrative art. The reconnection of the relationship created what

came to be known as the “veil of print” (Kuminova 73), through which the writer and the motivation behind their work become visible to the reader once again.

In today’s digital world and social media options, writers make themselves available to their readers to influence their experiences more directly. In whatever medium the connection occurs, the writer/reader relationship is a crucial element that allows each to co-labor and bring the narrative art to its fullest intended potential. For the purpose of this paper, that potential lies in the possibilities of healing through shared stories.

As the “veil of print” enlightens the writer’s motivation for their work—whether rooted in their own experiences or that of others—they create characters and narratives that draw upon the real-world traumas they and their readers have encountered. This arrangement of empathy through learning and understanding—even through fictional characters and narratives—is indicated to be a profound cause of change in human nature and behavior (Bigongiari 150). Depending on the extent of the writer’s personal sharing through the veil, that empathy is translated to a real person in real life, thus bridging fiction with reality to produce tangible healing through shared experiences.

A Refutation—with C.S. Lewis

“My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others”
(*An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis 126).

Whether through poetry or literature, from the writer’s perspective or the reader’s response, C.S. Lewis cautioned against reading too much into an author’s personality or personal life through their work. In his book, *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis warns that the reader must “worm [their] way very cautiously” into the minds of writers, noting that the “worst possible guide” is to assume the real or imaginative experiences of the author

(Lewis 31). One of the major contexts of Lewis' *The Personal Heresy* has been summed up in the warning "that literature is about the objects or people or events out there and not about thoughts and feelings inside the writer" (Heck para. 9). According to Markos, "As teacher and critic, Lewis urged his students and readers to suspend their own agendas and personal assumptions and accept a work on its own terms" (para. 2). That being said, Lewis' apprehension of reading into the writer's mind did not disqualify his understanding of literature's powerful impact. In fact, Lewis differentiated the quality of books not on their merit but on that of the "literary and nonliterary reader" (para. 6), noting that, unlike the latter who read to pass the time, the former would read to openly engage the content with an invitation to be changed by it (Markos).

Whether or not Lewis, in any of his works, directly credited even a measure of that evolution to the author is beyond the scope of this paper. However, he does allow for the possibility of such a writer/reader relationship. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis acknowledges literature's far-reaching effect on the reader, which cannot exclude the content's creator and the knowledge of others that opens in the reader's experience. Lewis likens literature to "Logos," a meaning-giving encounter that "admits us to experiences other than our own" (Lewis 126). In this engagement with the content which opens the reader to the happenings of others, Lewis notes that the appropriate response is to "fully realize the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors" (126). One of the extensions of self, he follows, is that a literary experience leads to healing wounds, which the reader "becomes a thousand men and yet remains [himself]" (126). Such an experience is the very definition of empathy, in which one sees others from a

perspective of self, prompting a more profound concern for knowledge and understanding and for the ultimate hope of love—a mirror of the Golden Rule.

This paper does not claim that Lewis' cautions and commentaries concerning the writer/reader experience contradict themselves. However, it does support the idea that both the pragmatism and potential of the writer/reader relationship coexist as equally as the cooperative nature of the shared connection.

Creative Writing as a Path to Healing

While reading fiction also produces similar results toward learning, understanding, empathizing with, and loving others in the writer's narrative work, this paper also explicitly explores the valuable impact of creative writing as a therapeutic activity for healing from trauma. The subject of this discussion is not limited to the professional, experienced, gifted, or published author but to any person desiring to craft their pain into creative stories with an open mind toward exploration and resolution.

Giving Words to Pain

Creative writing allows one to put written words to sorrow and loss when the ability for explicit language is not yet available, providing distance from pain while still acknowledging it (Matthews 132). Kingston states, "Writing is like meditation...Instead of letting thoughts and pictures and feelings go by, you hold on to them. You slow them down. You find the words for them....Writing, you shine light...into a scene of the past, the dark of forgotten, fearful things....Writing, you change" (qtd. in Chen 258). When the subject or circumstance is still too painful to handle directly, writing the events as fiction creates a "context through which trauma might be understood" (Jensen 701), a step toward processing grief.

“The mere expression of trauma is not sufficient to bring about long-term physiological changes,” states Pennebaker and Seagal. “Health gains appear to require translating experiences into language” (1248). The experiences of trauma constitute one’s truth. By expressing that knowledge through a creative medium, fictional or nonfictional, the operation of testimony is necessary for the writer’s health (Webb et al.). Webb et al. describe the testimonial event of creative writing as a “literary bridge” between the disciplines of psychology (science) and writing (art)—connected as a “change to the ways of thinking, seeing, and doing” (4).

Building Bridges

There are assertions that the psychology behind trauma is not sufficiently managed through science alone. Even though “testimony is crucial to healing, traumatic memory cannot fully account for, or witness to, the traumatic experience and its expression; because how can the unspeakable be rendered in language?” (Webb et al. 8). Additionally, according to Caruth, that absence of creative expression can lead to “traumatic repetition” (qtd. in Webb et al. 8), resulting in a prolonged process of attempting to manage and escape cycles of continued trauma.

Angela Matthews began practicing creative writing therapy after losing her son. She found that the fictional elements provided her representation to articulate how she was feeling at the time. By recording the painful events using a third-person point of view and pseudonyms, Matthews could approach the circumstances from an angle that did not require immersion and the overwhelming difficulty of facing “far too much pain...all at once” (142). Transforming her reality into fiction also enabled her to consider the perspective of others involved in the experience, thus expanding her more extensive view of the world of grieving (Matthews 143).

Through creative writing, another kind of bridge emerges, one that leads forward. Matthews contributes fiction writing for serving as a bridge that led her slowly “from the past with [her son] to the present and a future without him” (142). Webb et al. support this theory stating that “memoir or fiction function as testimony, as knowledge formation, and as a way of dealing with and communicating trauma” (15). The outcome is a connected link that guides toward a better understanding of oneself and the world through “increased agency and resilience [leading] to a better present” (15) from the work of “building bridges from trauma into new health” (14).

Understanding Others through Creative Writing

Part of understanding the world better is coming to terms with those who caused or contributed to the traumas experienced in the past. Creative writing allows one to engage with those who have inflicted grief through character formation. Processing through creative written expression allows the writer to “redefine their experiences” (qtd. in Matthews 137) and provide those involved with anonymity (137), the protection afforded to the writer and those who were a part of traumatic events.

Encounters with creative storytelling can invoke significant empathy in readers, impacting their perceptions of others and themselves and altering their real-world understanding of those they would otherwise reject or ignore. According to Ryan, “Fiction [...] has been hailed (and also decried) for its ability to foster understanding and even attachment for people we normally would condemn, despise, ignore, or never meet in the course of our lives. As we project ourselves into these characters, we may be led to envision actions that we would never face or approve of in real life” (111). This envisioning allows for an empathetic approach to those one may not have previously connected with or understood.

When pursuing healing through creative writing, especially when the pain is inflicted by a loved one or close friend, investigating human behavior through dynamic character development aids in understanding. While this paper does not seek to justify the harmful actions of others, it is open to exploring the nuances of actions, decisions, and behaviors influenced by various unseen contributors that could aid in the writer's endeavors toward healing. Bigongiari describes this effort of perspective-seeking in reading as "emotion work" as it aims to "understand someone who initially feels problematically different" (147). However, it can be applied to writing as well. When the writer allows their characters to be multidimensional—not all good and not all bad—they open themselves to a narrative that surveys the totality of those they write about and their relationship with their own past, challenges, and traumas. While this process may not eliminate the entirety of the pain, seeing trauma as a larger world of grieving that includes all of those involved can lighten the burden of resentment since "it is hard to hate someone once you know [their] story" (The Association of American Law Schools 518).

Christian Worldview

"I will speak of Your testimonies also before kings,
And will not be ashamed."
(*The Bible*, New King James Version, Psalm 119:46)

"The writer," according to Berman, "has a sacred obligation to bear witness to tragic events, to record for posterity the injustices of the past. This obligation becomes both a lifeline and a strategy of resilience" (420). The writer has a distinct privilege to provide a lifeline of enlightenment, clarity, and purpose from the stories of the world, where their efforts to record and rectify wrongs provide the power of testimony exemplified in Scripture. Through narrative art, writers create opportunities for their readers to learn about the stories of others, prompting new understanding that allows one to empathize with people in circumstances they may never

otherwise encounter. Empathy draws others together into a shared knowledge to bear one another's burdens, as instructed in Galatians 6:2. It is from this unity that Christ empowers one to act out of a love for others that is created from, through, and by Him. Christ was the ultimate storyteller, utilizing parables to communicate profound truths, emphasize necessary wisdom, and provide creative problem-solving illustrations. By utilizing this method of gentle guidance, writers can approach difficult circumstances and lead their readers to clear and complete resolutions.

“Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”
(The Bible, New International Version, Philippians 2:1-2)

Conclusion

According to Pennebaker and Seagal, “The act of constructing stories is a natural human process that helps individuals to understand their experiences and themselves” (1243), further supported by storytelling's long history threaded throughout humanity. Whether to attempt to understand the past, make sense of the present, or idealize the future, stories have compelled people as forms of education, art, and therapy through shared experiences, challenges, fears, and painful events.

As writers continue to create from their narrative intelligence, they bridge the gap that may otherwise keep their readers at a sterile distance and invite them into a commonality that spans time and distance. Through the story, writers step toward readers, and readers return in the like, forming a unity across the pages that is special to narrative art. This event allows readers to more profoundly understand human behaviors, actions, and relationships that have caused them pain and to help them explore creative resolutions through the story. When writers and readers

engage in this symbiotic, cooperative relationship, they join efforts to continue the legacy of storytelling and its ability to bring healing from trauma.

The writer's experience in discovering healing through narrative creation is also available to their readers. By providing language to the unimaginable events through fiction writing, those who may otherwise repeat trauma cycles can finally move toward understanding. As writers (even amateur ones) create stories that explore the complexity of others and their stories, they can begin to develop their understanding into empathy, and empathy's final result is love.

Creative Manuscript: *When Good Men Run*

A Note to the Reader

This critical paper and creative manuscript do not imply that writing as therapy is an isolated means of processing and healing from trauma or painful experiences. In conjunction with healthy individual habits, seeking professional help to overcome challenges of the past is an encouraged practice. This paper also does not afford justification to those who have caused harm through abuse or neglect, nor does it excuse addiction as a justifiable reason for such behaviors.

This paper aims to provide insight and understanding to those who have endured painful experiences and empower them to take charge of their narrative through creative writing as one path toward healing and wholeness. The prayer for this paper is to provide an expectation for the hurting to know that their story can end in beauty, regardless of how it began.

Chapter One

1983

Scott felt Debra's glare drilling a hole in the back of his head as he walked to the car. Her stares were legendary. With one side glance or twitch of an eyebrow, she shifted the atmosphere of an entire room. In their youth, Scott found the trick wildly attractive. He had since come to hate it.

"Girls, wave bye to Daddy," Debra called out from the porch in a feigned happy tone loud enough for him to hear.

It was loud enough for the neighbors to hear. But, at this point, Scott doubted the neighbors even noticed loud voices coming from their house anymore. In an oddity even Scott didn't understand, his and Debra's fighting and celebrating sounded nearly the same to the untrained ear. Both were fueled by a passion neither of them had learned to tether or restrain. Accelerated heart rate, flooded mind, and rush of adrenaline were present whether they were at each other's throats or in the throes of intimacy.

As Scott hoisted his two small suitcases into the trunk, reality confronted him. *Is this the sum of my life?* His hands paused on the lid of the trunk as the past twelve years rushed through his mind like water from a broken dam. The shards of his marriage bobbed on the surface, but nothing whole could be seen.

Suddenly, a stream of anger simmered to the surface, and Scott's jaw clenched to control it. His shoulder muscle balled into a knot. Scott's chest expanded with a deep inhale, an attempt to keep himself from slamming the trunk lid shut. When he lifted his eyes, Debra searched his face, her contempt and disappointment obvious in her expression. The girls grew restless at her side, but she managed to keep a hand on Melanie while Maggie crawled around chasing acorns. Angry tears stung Scott's eyes at Debra's gall to use Melanie and Maggie to get under his skin.

Typical Deb. Who's worse anyway, me for leaving or her for making them watch?

He had intended to wait until the girls' bedtime to get on the road, but Debra never knew how to leave well enough alone. She had started the morning picking at every slight fray of their marriage as if the whole thing wasn't already on its last thread. He had held off as long as he could before deciding to get an early start that afternoon. He thought it better to leave than fight with Debra all day and risk doing something he would regret. He closed the trunk. Heading back toward the porch, he recalled how their morning together had gone. His simmering anger began to boil.

Earlier that morning, Scott's eyes had opened at the first crack of sunlight through the curtains. He glanced at the clock: 7:12. *It's going to be a long day.* Rolling onto his back, he stared at the ceiling and imagined his first days in Arkansas. *I'll get settled at the hotel, start the new position, locate the neighborhood bar, and take a deep breath of freedom.* The corner of his mouth twitched up.

The job held a promising future for his family, but Scott couldn't decide whether the most significant gain was a better financial position or the possibility of a new start. The whole thing seemed like a big win, and he decided he wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth by overthinking it. Besides, there wasn't a lot that was working here anymore. Something needed to change, and a move always held that promise. His mouth smirked into a half smile, and he noted the growing excitement he had been downplaying the last few days for the sake of the girls.

He eased his legs to the side of the bed, careful not to disturb Debra, who was still in the same position she fell asleep in, her back turned toward him. He gazed at her for a long moment.

His unusual giddiness tempted him to curl behind her and slip his arm around her waist. *She'd just shrug me off. And then what?* He didn't need the hassle.

Even still, in moments of quiet, whether she was sleeping, reading on the porch, standing at the kitchen sink, or folding laundry on the couch while the girls played between them, he caught glimpses of the woman he fell in love with. The angles of her face, the curve of her neck, the way her hands always moved with quick purpose. Debra was rarely still, but when she was, he recognized the nineteen-year-old woman who drove him wild when they spent the day on the river, parked at the overlook, or ran around downtown Cincinnati. *She had been something.* Scott twinged with resentment that she no longer was.

Scott stretched as he made his way to the bathroom, stepping over an open half-packed suitcase. Reaching for the shower nozzle, he caught his reflection in the mirror. What he saw was on par with how he felt—wrung out. *Unacceptable.* His packed toiletry bag sat on the counter. He pulled out the supplies for his morning routine and lined them across the counter in order of use. Performing the habit was a mindless task he had perfected, allowing his thoughts to wander to the day ahead. Even though unfamiliar and uncomfortable, he gave way to the glimmer of hope attempting to take root. A smile stretched across his face. *Hope for what? Starting something new or ending something old?* He chuckled and then immediately frowned, scolding himself for such a flippant attitude.

Stepping into the shower he kicked over two plastic dolls, his face contorted, furrowing his brow from a stabbing strike of guilt as he thought of the girls. Melanie and Maggie were the only things keeping him from thoroughly enjoying his impending departure. He tilted his face up into the water, attempting to wash away the possibility that he was making a horrible decision. His brain clawed at the desire to return to the happy thoughts he had enjoyed just moments ago

before the familiar despair settled in. He hung his head allowing the hot water to pelt his neck and shoulders. *Why can't I even enjoy the good things for one minute?* He decided he would add a little nudge to his morning coffee. And for a moment, that eased the tension enough.

Anticipation drew him out of the shower, and he dressed and performed his grooming routine in record time. He buttoned his polo as he made his way into the kitchen. He turned on the coffee maker and pulled a "World's Best Dad" mug from the cabinet. Reaching into the cabinet above the fridge, he pulled a bottle of whiskey down just long enough to pour a generous amount into his mug before returning the bottle to its hideaway. *Just a little nudge to help the day.* He stared out the kitchen window and locked a mindless focus on the doghouse in the backyard when noise came from one of the bedrooms. Frowning, he turned toward the hallway. The silence had been too short.

Expecting to see Debra or one of the girls, he forced a smile as he leaned against the counter. Out trotted Jilly, their eight-year-old cocker spaniel mix. He knew she had made her way from Melanie's bed and hoped the dog hadn't woken the girls on her way out. Jilly moseyed over to the backdoor and stared at it while leaning back for a long stretch, followed by a big yawn. "I get it, girl," Scott murmured into the air as he opened the door so she could do her slow morning routine of inspecting every inch of their fenced yard.

Before the door closed, he heard footsteps coming down the hallway as the coffeemaker beeped that it was ready. Debra shuffled into the living room wearing the robe he was not shy about hating. *My word, is she actively trying to turn me off?* She looked like her mother in the blasted thing. Her hair was piled on her head in the same bun she went to bed in. Throughout the night, yesterday's mascara migrated south and landed under her eyes, giving her an even angrier expression—if that was possible. Without saying a word, she plopped onto the couch and stared

straight ahead. A knot began to tighten in the left side of Scott's neck. He leaned his head to his shoulder to loosen it.

Debra didn't have a poker face. He studied her expression to gauge the prospects for the day. The forecast was dim. She turned toward him, and their eyes connected. Her face held a mix of tired and angry—her worst combination. In a second, all of Scott's straw hopes for a decent day drained away and were replaced with bitter resentment. The coffeemaker beeped again. He turned his back toward her, took a deep breath, and swigged the whiskey from his mug in one gulp. Before he even swallowed, Debra broke the silence.

"So, you'll be leaving us tonight for the new job, huh?"

Debra never did mince words, another trait that had once been seductive but, over the years, turned sour. Luckily, the rainy sky had kept Melanie and Maggie in bed later than usual for a Saturday morning. *One less argument they have to witness.*

"Yes," Scott replied, the knot tightening deeper in his neck.

"You really think this is the best option for our family?" she quipped.

"I do," he responded. His chest constricting with every word.

"Or is this what's best for *you*? You do always manage to lean that way," Debra mumbled just loud enough for him to hear.

Scott's jaw clenched, and he spun around quickly. The taste of liquor still in his mouth.

"We talked about this...a million times. You agreed, for crying out loud." His every word dragged with despair, his tone lifting at the end of each sentence.

"Well, maybe I don't agree anymore. I'm sorry if that's inconvenient for you," she retorted, staring at him; her arms crossed tightly to her chest.

“This is a great opportunity for the company, which means it’s good for us. Maybe you could finally have all those things you’ve always wanted. No more days of living payday to payday,” Scott responded.

Debra cocked her head to the side and eyed him skeptically. Debra was a strong woman and equally resistant to vulnerability. Scott knew that from the moment he met her. She had a fire in her that could either stoke the coals of passion or burn her house to the ground. When they dated, he had fallen in love with the former and ignored warnings of the latter.

“I’m happy, Scott. Don’t confuse me with you. Don’t make me out to be the one who needs praise and promotion. I’m perfectly content right here. The question is...why aren’t you? Am I not enough? Are *the girls* not enough for you?”

Scott felt the heat rise to his face as he slammed his fists on the counter—forgetting the mug in his hand, it shattered sending pieces flying to the floor.

“Woman! Is this really how you wanna spend today? Fine then, let’s do this!”

Debra sprung to her feet as Scott jolted around the counter toward her. He stopped just short of slamming his weight into her. “What is it, Debra? Are you really going to miss me? Or are you going to miss having someone to nag to death? Think you can get by for a few weeks without barking orders at a grown man?” His words came out staccato, like the hammering of nails into a coffin.

She didn’t budge. “Oh, you think I’ve been controlling you, Scott? You think if I had any say, you’d be out at the bar after work doing God knows what with whatever floozy is bouncing around the office that week? You think if I was runnin’ this show, you’d have liquor on your breath at eight in the morning?” Her words flew out fast. “Nooo, Scott, we all know who’s the big, bad boss, don’t we? And it ain’t even you. It’s that ‘lil’ nudge” you pour into your coffee

every morning. Can't go anywhere without it, can ya?" She paused and looked him up and down. "Does it make you into the man you're so desperate to be?" Her last question delivered in a mimicking whine.

Scott lunged forward, grabbed the back of Debra's robe with his left hand, and clenched it. His nose nearly brushed up against hers. Tears stung his eyes, and he tightened his jaw to keep them at bay.

"Can't you, for one second, act like a decent wife?" he pushed through gritted teeth.

Debra broadened her shoulders and pursed her lips. Her eyes narrowed to tiny slits.

"I don't know, Scott. Maybe I will when I have a decent husband."

Anger shocked his brain. His right hand closed and began rising up to his side.

Maggie stumbled into the living room, rubbing her eyes, her chubby two-year-old feet pattering on the brown linoleum floor. She looked even tinier in her sister's kindergarten T-shirt. With her straight brown hair, fair skin, and scattering of freckles, Maggie was nearly identical to Melanie at this age. The only feature distinguishing their baby pictures was that Melanie had Debra's deep brown eyes, and Maggie's were the clear crystal blue that made her undeniably Scott's child. Scott hated that the girls ever heard them arguing, but he never minded when one of them wandered in during one of his and Debra's fights. Sometimes, it was the only way they would stop. And besides, if the girls had to stay in their rooms every time he and Debra fought, he'd never see his kids.

Scott and Debra froze, their chests dramatically rising and falling. They looked at each other and down at Maggie, who had tangled herself around Scott's legs. He released his grip on Debra's robe and scooped Maggie into his arms. He closed his eyes tightly, nuzzled her cheek,

and drew a deep breath. She giggled and curled her body before wrapping her arms around his neck. Scott looked over Maggie's shoulder and glared at Debra.

"I'll be out of your hair real soon," he whispered.

Tears welled up in Debra's eyes, and she rushed out of the room and down the hall. Scott heard their bedroom door slam. A moment later, sobs crept through the thin walls of their small home. Scott placed Maggie in her kiddie chair at the kitchen table. Tears slipped down his red cheeks.

For the rest of the morning, Scott and Debra went out of their way to avoid each other. To keep himself occupied, he spent his time finishing packing. He placed two suitcases on their bed and started gathering more clothes. As his anger dissipated, his excitement for leaving returned. Debra stepped into the bedroom doorway as he placed his toiletry bag among his things. He closed both suitcases.

"I think I should go ahead and get on the road," he said, staring at the luggage.

Debra propped herself against the door frame and folded her arms across her chest. She didn't try to persuade him otherwise. Her silence said it all.

Scott closed the trunk and slowly walked to the porch for the final time. His gaze lingered on Melanie and Maggie as he tried to imprint the moment in his memory. This move was for them, and that thought reignited his hope for the future. *We had good times before. We can have good times again.* He quickly took the steps up the porch, picked up Maggie, interrupting her acorn chase, and swung her around for one more big laugh before bundling her snugly in his arms. He tickled her collarbone with his chin as he kissed her face. She scrunched her nose with glee, revealing one of his favorite things about her. When Maggie smiled, her whole face took

part, causing her eyes to form into little crescent moons. Scott's eyes did the same—a feature Debra used to point out admiringly.

“Daddy loves you, Maggs,” he whispered in her ear.

“Daddy loves you,” she mimicked back as she always did.

As he placed her down, the fact that she didn't know what was happening bittersweetly stung his heart. Perhaps she won't remember him leaving. But, if something happened, she might not remember him at all. He shook the ominous thought from his mind as she returned to her acorn chase.

Squatting in front of Melanie, he lowered his eyeline beneath hers. When he looked up, tears had filled her brown eyes. Her eyes were the only thing she shared with Debra. In all other ways, Scott and Melanie were the same, knitted at heart.

“Mel...” Scott whispered, then cleared his throat.

“Don't go,” she pleaded through quivering lips.

“You will come soon. And you'll love Arkansas. We all will.”

“Take me with you. I won't be any trouble.”

“Oh, girl. Your mom needs help here getting ready for the move. And you know Maggs couldn't do without her big sister.” He tugged at her sleeve. “Besides, you'd get really bored. I've got a lot of work to do to get ready for you to come. It won't be long. I promise.”

Unable to bear another word, Melanie slung her arms around Scott's neck, nearly causing him to fall backward. Her sobs turned into deep groans on his shoulder until his shirt dampened. He looked at Debra and begged for mercy with his eyes. Debra's demeanor softened as she knelt to console the hysterical child.

“Melanie, it won't be long. We'll be in Arkansas before you know it.”

Debra's voice had a sweetness Scott had forgotten; its reminder tempted him to call the whole thing off. He pushed the thought away as quickly as it arrived.

Debra loosened Melanie's grasp on Scott, and his daughter ran into the house, slamming the screen door behind her. Startled by the sound, Maggie stood and curiously followed her.

Rising to his feet, Scott swallowed the knot in his throat, keeping his eyes on the ground. He looked up at Debra. The soft expression she had a moment ago for Melanie was not saved for him. He tried to read her face, but she offered nothing. A reel of quick memories played in his mind. How they met. Their first kiss, short engagement, and simple wedding. Their move from Ohio to blaze their own trail, enraging her mother in the process. In the beginning, it was just about being together and making a life together. And now, in what used to be their slice of heaven, they couldn't bear to be close.

"Well..." he stammered, hoping she would pick up the conversation.

"Well, I guess we'll see you soon," she whispered.

Scott cleared his throat and shifted his weight.

"Yeah, I'll start looking for a place right away. It might be an apartment until we can find a house. Or maybe I'll look for a place to rent; I'm not sure of the options yet."

"I'm sure whatever there is, it will be fine."

Scott stepped toward her slowly. When she didn't back away, he slid his arms beneath hers and around her waist. He kissed her cheek. Scott felt the weight of her arms hanging at her side like a heavy curtain shutting out every possibility of light. She made no movement toward embracing him back, and the familiar heat of rejection rose in him.

"Just go," she whispered in his ear.

Two small words echoed with years of disappointment. No one could blame her, least of all Scott. Marriage hadn't come easy for either of them. All those years ago, they didn't start with a spark; it was an immediate wildfire that threatened to destroy them both. But they managed to keep the flames inbound when things got too heated. Scott knew what Debra wanted to do and didn't in moments of anger and pain. But her lines couldn't be anything compared to his. He had countless boundaries he was always dancing around. His instinct when he was humiliated or rejected often scared him. This was one of those times.

Releasing her, Scott stepped back and stared at her. They stood silently for several minutes as the bitter and ugly reality settled onto them like a dense fog blurring their vision. And when Scott knew he no longer saw the woman he had fallen in love with, he turned and walked down the porch steps in silence.

Scott put the car in reverse and began backing out of the driveway. He looked up to the house one final time and saw Debra as she crumpled onto her knees, her hands in her face, her shoulders violently shaking. He ignored the small voice that told him not to leave and kept the car moving. Backing into the street, he put the car in drive, pounded his fist on the steering wheel, and screamed into the silence with one long breath.

Chapter Two

After a few hours of driving Scott pulled off the next exit and into the closest gas station. It was a rundown little place with three gas pumps. He parked his car at one of them and made his way into the store, passing a man and woman standing beside a motorcycle arguing. The roar of a passing semi muffled their voices.

A bell rang above the door as Scott entered, catching the attention of the attendant, an older gentleman who glanced up and back down to his newspaper. Scott paused only long enough to find the “Cold Beer” sign hanging above the back wall. He took the direct path to the refrigerator and picked out a six-pack. The bottles clanked as he meandered to the counter, surveying the snacks before choosing a bag of chips. He placed his items on the counter and pulled out his wallet.

“Will that do it for ya, young man?” asked the attendant.

“And ten on pump three,” Scott replied, rifling through his cash.

“That’ll be eighteen fifty-five.”

Scott put down a twenty as the attendant placed the items in a brown paper bag.

“Keep the change,” Scott said, picking up the bag and walking out.

The man nodded kindly.

The motorcycle couple were still going at it as Scott crossed the parking lot to the gas pumps. He placed the bag on the passenger seat through the open window before pulling the fuel nozzle and filling the tank. He leaned against the car, holding the lever and doing his best to ignore the increasingly loud feud. He had enough troubles of his own. The wind raised and lowered enough to make some of the yelling indiscernible, but he picked up enough to know that

the fight was about another woman. Scott chuckled to himself. *They'll push ya to that, won't they?* He furrowed his brow at his own thought.

The lever on the gas pump clicked. He hung it up and walked around to the driver's side, doing small neck stretches on the way. He cranked the engine, glanced at the brown paper bag beside him, and smiled. *It's past time for a little nudge.*

As he pulled away from the gas pump and toward the exit, he kept his gaze in front as he rummaged his right hand through the bag for a bottle. He caught one last glimpse of the arguing couple just in time to see the man raise his arm and slap the woman across the face. She stumbled back before falling to the ground.

Scott's whole body jerked.

1953

"Shhh...Scotty, be quiet!" Katherine whispered beneath the blankets.

Half asleep, R.J. squirmed and rolled over against the wall.

"I'm trying," Scott whispered back through giggles, wiggling for more room sandwiched between his brother and sister.

Catching Katherine's face in the moonlight from the open window, Scott made his best impression of her, mockingly scrunching his eyebrows and pursing his lips.

"You look like a mom," he said, placing his chubby hands over his mouth to keep from laughing loudly.

"I wish you'd both shut up! And Scotty, go to sleep!" R.J. hissed over his shoulder before turning sharply back toward the wall, attempting to take a chunk of blanket with him.

Scott turned his pointed expression toward R.J. and stuck out his tongue.

"I can't sleep. I'm too thirsty," he retorted.

“Ugh. Scotty, I told you to get a cup of water before we came to bed,” Katherine scolded over the noise from the next room.

They could hear people in the living room, but the music drowned out distinct voices. There could have been two or a hundred people in there. Occasional laughter, slamming doors, and stomping around dotted the chaotic sounds coming through the thin trailer wall.

“I know. I didn’t think I’d need one,” Scott whined. “It’s okay. I’ll go get a cup from the kitchen,” he said, wiggling out of the top of the covers.

“No, Scotty. I’ll get it,” Katherine mumbled as she slid from under the blankets onto the floor.

Scott watched as she slowly opened the bedroom door and tentatively entered the hall. Instantly, the music stopped and was replaced by a booming voice.

“What the hell’re you doin here, little girl?” a man yelled.

“Come on now, Jack,” Scott heard his mother plead. Her voice sounded like thick syrup.

“Leave her be. She’s just a little girl.”

“Get off me, Margie!” the man hollered.

Suddenly, the room trembled as something slammed into the wall between them, shifting R.J. into Scott. R.J. whimpered, coughed, and yanked the blanket over his head.

“If she wants to barge in here when she oughtta be in bed, she needs to be taught a lesson,” the man growled.

Scott heard a loud slap and a high yelp he knew belonged to Katherine. He pulled his pillow from beneath him and covered his head with it. He curled himself into a ball and pressed the palms of his hands over his ears. Every muscle in his six-year-old body clenched. He froze and waited in dark silence.

A few moments later, he felt a soft touch against his shoulder and jerked. He slowly pulled his head out from under his cocoon. Katherine stood beside the bed with a cup trembling in her hand and a pink mark on her left cheek—a single tear falling through it.

Scott sat up and took the cup from her and consumed the liquid in one drink. She stood beside the bed until he finished and placed the empty cup on the floor. She crawled under the blankets and pulled Scott in close. Her shivering radiated through him.

“Go to sleep now, Scotty,” Katherine whispered behind his ear.

“I’m trying.”

“I know.”

The sounds in the next room picked up again first with raucous laughter, followed by an intermission of breaking glass and more slams against the wall, before shifting to a series of moans and closed with silence. The children finally drifted to sleep.

“What the heck, Scotty!” R.J. yelled. “You peed the bed again! What six-year-old still wets the bed?”

Scott opened his eyes and squinted at the morning sun coming through the window. He felt himself lying in a warm pool. He looked up to see R.J. standing over him in soaked pajamas. Scott would have been embarrassed had it not been a frequent occurrence. Instead, he again found himself rather entertained by R.J.’s usual disgust. Scott gave his brother a cheeky grin, which brightened the red on R.J.’s face, making Scott giggle.

“You do this on purpose, you nasty little brat!” R.J. yelled, his fists clenching.

“Shut up, R.J.,” Katherine hissed as she entered the bedroom.

Katherine shot Scott a disapproving glare, sucking the fun out of the moment.

Katherine had an internal clock that always woke her long before her brothers, especially on school days when she would need the extra time to get them moving. Katherine hated being late to school. She was already dressed and ready.

As Katherine moved toward the bed, Scott saw a giant hand descend upon her shoulder and jerk her toward the bedroom doorway and onto the hallway floor. She whimpered. A man towered beside the bed. Like an ant surveying a large oak tree, Scott's entire view was taken by the man's stature. He was unfamiliar to Scott. His hair was disheveled, and his face looked like leather. He wore a dingy white tank top and underwear that looked like they had not been washed or mended in their long lifetime.

"What're you little brats yellin about so early?" he thundered.

Before Scott could move, the man's giant hand grabbed his upper arm and lifted his small body from the bed. The warmth of urine on Scott's back turned cold in the open air. Scott looked at R.J., who was cowering toward the closest corner; a liquid stream began running down the front of his pajama pants.

Catching the smell of Scott's soiled clothes, the man's expression shifted from anger to disgust, and he began shaking the boy while screaming indiscernible words in Scott's face. The smell of cigarettes, liquor, and morning breath made Scott's throat clench, and he held his breath. As if in slow motion, the man's right hand began to rise. On his forearm was a large green tattoo of a curvy lady with one hand on her hip and the other behind her head. Below the image were the words, *Cindy Jo*. Scott squeezed his eyes shut and braced for the worst.

Scott heard Katherine scream, and he was suddenly dropped back onto the bed. Scott opened his eyes in time to see the back of the man's large hand land across his sister's cheek.

Scott closed his eyes again, curled his body, and waited for the safety of silence. He listened as the man stomped from the room and down the hall.

Scott lurched when Katherine touched his arm.

“It’s okay, Scotty. It’s me.” Her voice was eerily calm, although Scott could hear it trembling.

He looked at her face and saw the delicate skin of her cheek on the verge of breaking open. His expression caused her to gently place her fingers to her injury. She winced at the contact. Noticing Scott’s careful observance, she cleared her throat and straightened her hunched shoulders.

“Let’s get ready for school,” she directed, pulling Scott off the bed. She led him down the hall to the bathroom and instructed him to undress. Scott stripped his wet shirt and underwear off and threw them into the tub. She handed him a cold, damp washcloth that still smelled of urine from the last time he had an overnight accident. “Clean yourself up,” she commanded.

Scott shivered as he wiped his body and watched her dig through a pile of clothes on the bathroom floor until she found underwear, pants, and a T-shirt. She laid the clothes on the toilet lid.

“I’m going to go get R.J. out of the corner. You better be dressed when I get back,” she ordered as she walked out.

Before she could return, Scott had gotten dressed and stepped into the narrow hallway. His mother’s bedroom door was half open. She was sleeping on her stomach on the bed, one arm hanging off the side. Her back was bare, and Scott saw bruises across her shoulders. The giant man lay beside her, face up, snoring loudly with his mouth open. Scott walked softly toward the living room, but the trailer floor betrayed him with every step.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

In the living room, Katherine was picking up empty glass bottles, cigarette butts, and garbage before throwing them into a brown paper bag.

“Scotty, do you know where your shoes are?” she asked without stopping her chore.

“Uhhhh, I think I left them outside yesterday.”

“Scotty,” she moaned, “It rained last night.”

Scott shrugged.

“Let’s go find another pair in the bedroom,” she directed as she turned him around.

As they stepped into the hallway, Katherine’s hands clenched his shoulders as they passed their mother’s room. In their bedroom R.J. was silently putting on his shoes. An occasional noise gurgled from his throat, sounding like a bullfrog trying to escape through his pressed lips. “R.J., once I find Scotty’s shoes, we gotta go, or we’ll be late. Are you ready?” Katherine whispered in a voice barely audible.

“Mmhmm,” R.J. said in a breath before standing up and walking out.

Katherine dug through the clothes, towels, and toys piled on their small closet floor. Finally reaching its bottom, she pulled out a pair of blue Velcro sneakers and handed them to Scott. The black sole of one of them peeled back.

“These were my favorite in daycare,” Scott commented, “You member that, Kathy?”

Katherine smiled and nodded as she pointed for Scott to put on his shoes.

Scott tugged the shoes onto his feet, his toes smashing against the ends. He stepped out of the bedroom, and the broken sole slapped against the linoleum floor of the hallway. He stared at his fee as every step announced his procession.

Fwap! Creak. Fwap! Creak.

R.J. was standing at the end of the hallway at the living room entrance. With his arms extended straight out and his hands spread open, he waved back and forth in a frenzy. His wide eyes locked on Scott, then down to his feet and back to Scott's face. His silent, frantic body begged him to stop.

Scott froze. Peeking into his mother's room, he waited for any sign of movement. The large man began rolling over, his eyes blinking hard and slow, his mouth grumbling.

"Them little..." he growled as he sat up on the side of the bed.

The large man turned toward the hallway. His eyes locked on the petrified child.

"Why, I oughtta..." the man yelled as he stood and stumbled toward the door.

"Run!" Scott screamed as he barreled toward R.J.

Fwap! Creak! Fwap! Creak! Fwap! Creak!

Katherine scooped up her backpack, and all three tumbled in a line out the front door and down the trailer steps. They reached the street, and R.J. leaned over and puked at the bottom of the mailbox. He stood up, swiped the back of his hand across his chin, and down the side of his jeans. As often as Scott peed the bed, R.J. vomited. But Scott didn't laugh at him this time. He was too busy spreading his feet inside his shoes.

"All good?" Katherine asked into the air. "We have to get going if we want to make it in time for breakfast."

R.J. placed his hands on his knees and dry-heaved one good time before standing upright and replying, "Yep, I think that's it."

They walked silently in a single file for the one mile walk to school. Katherine led the way, followed by Scott. R.J. brought up the rear, pausing every once in a while, to gag.

"I'm fine." He called out each time as if anyone had asked.

With every step, Scott flattened his foot to make room.

Katherine, Robert, Jr., and Scott were undeniably siblings. They all had the same light hair with a kiss of red that made them strawberry blondes in the sunlight. Their fair faces were speckled with faint freckles. Their most distinct feature was their eyes. R.J.'s were a deep hazel, and Katherine and Scott's were almost translucent blue, like their mother's. Margaret often joked about not knowing who R.J.'s "real daddy" was, even though he was named after their father.

Scott hadn't remembered ever knowing Robert, Sr. But Katherine and R.J. talked about him as if he were some hero in a far off land. Every once in a while, he would call on the telephone, and if Margaret didn't have a man over, she'd let the kids take turns talking to him. Katherine always spoke to him first, while R.J. nearly panicked himself into a fit, waiting his turn. When R.J. finally got the phone, he never failed to ask their dad when he was coming back. Margaret always rolled her eyes and huffed some comment that included "low-life scum of the earth." When it was finally time for Scott's turn, he never knew what to say, and neither did Robert, Sr.

"Hey, bud, how you doing?" his father would ask.

"Uh, good."

The conversations never lasted more than a minute, and Scott was okay with that. Scott hated it when Robert Sr. called. It always led to the same series of events. After the kids had taken their turns, Margaret would take the receiver and shoo them to their room. Even with the closed door, they could still hear her cursing and yelling about money, needing time to herself, and what a loser Robert, Sr. was. Katherine would hide under the blankets and cry softly while R.J. stomped around the room, huffing and puffing until he finally ran to the bathroom to put his head over the toilet. It was all a terrible fiasco that Scott considered not worth the trouble.

Scott would have been just fine if Robert Sr. never called again. And he definitely didn't want him to come back. But he kept this to himself because any bad word said about their father sent Katherine into hysterics. And it always broke his heart to break hers.

Chapter Three

The landscape had grown dark a while back, but the bright lights pointing out a *Welcome to Alabama* sign joggled Scott out of autopilot. He took his last swig of beer before tossing the bottle onto the passenger floor, where it clanked against the collection of empty bottles rolling around. The radio made a quick static hiss, indicating it was time to find a local channel again. Scott rolled the dial a few times before finally turning it off.

It felt like it had been hours since he was aware of his surroundings, and he wasn't too surprised to find himself in the slow lane, crawling along as cars rushed by. A large red truck appeared on his left, and a massive black dog was hanging nearly halfway out the window. Scott noticed a huge silver chain collar loosely draping his neck like a piece of jewelry. The accessory was comical because no one could wrangle that beast back, collar or not. Scott frowned at the image.

1977

After Melanie was born, Debra had begun suffering frequent migraines that left her in bed or by the toilet for days. The doctors had given her the all-clear for any serious causes. The determination was that the headaches seemed genetic and triggered by the change in hormones that pregnancy and giving birth had caused, but they should eventually wain. There wasn't much that could be done other than help her manage the pain until, eventually, her chemistry shifted back to normal. She was prescribed a heavy narcotic for when things got really bad.

Debra didn't return to work. She and Scott tried to see the good in it, but losing her job had made life harder in more ways than one. Debra could spend more time with Melanie, and they could save some money on childcare. But she had enjoyed her teller job at Southern Ray Bank. She had friends, enjoyed lunches out, and the occasional after-work for drinks with

coworkers. Being “forced,” as she put it, to leave her career and feeling sick so often, she felt isolated and alone. In a particularly low moment, she shared that the arrival of Melanie had “hijacked her life.” Her words crushed Scott, but seeing Debra in agony so often, he tried to understand.

On good days, Scott came home to a cooked dinner, a clean house, and a happy baby and wife. Debra would pour him a glass of wine or open a cold beer as he walked in the door. They would eat dinner together and take evening walks around the block, pushing Melanie in her stroller. Debra insisted on stopping for every dog on the end of some neighbor’s leash so that Melanie could pet the top of each pup’s head. After their stroll, Scott and Debra would sit in the bathroom while Melanie played with her toys in the tub. Scott would lie on the nursery floor during Melanie’s bedtime while Debra rocked her to sleep. After carefully lowering Melanie into her crib, Debra would take Scott’s hand and lead him into their bedroom, where they made love until late into the night. On the good days, Scott and Debra couldn’t get enough of each other.

One of those good days happened to land on a Friday and miraculously stretched itself into the weekend. After a particularly eventful evening of multiple dog pettings and a raucous night of lovemaking, Debra had awoken Saturday morning on a high.

“I have the best idea!” Debra announced as she rolled onto her back. Barely awake, Scott opened one eye. “We should get a dog!” she exclaimed as she rolled to her side and brushed her hand across Scott’s chest. Scott closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Come on, Scotty. It’ll be good for Melanie to have something to play with besides me all day. Besides, you work longer hours every week, and we’re home alone a lot. It will make me feel better to have something make noise when people come to the door. Plus, I’ll take care of it, I promise,” she pleaded with a touch of whine in her voice.

Scott wasn't sure what was worse, having a dog or losing the two-day euphoria he and Debra were on. He pretended to ponder the idea momentarily, even though refusing her was the only option he was open to. However, *no* wasn't a word Debra was fond of hearing, not if Scott wanted to ride this bliss as long as possible. Debra waited for an answer.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to try...depending on what kind of dog it is," he finally responded.

"Of course, of course. Something easy to manage. You won't regret it. This is going to be so much fun!" she assured as she stretched over Scott and began kissing him.

That afternoon, as they pushed Melanie in her stroller up the corridor of Thompson's Animal Rescue Shelter, various breeds barked and clawed for attention behind glass walls. Smaller dogs were cramped by the handfuls, while the large, boisterous ones were lodged individually. Despite the glass, the noise was nearly overwhelming. Debra didn't seem to notice, and with a grin plastered across her face, she dragged along the poor shelter attendant, asking a barrage of questions about each animal. Scott, remaining stoic, silently pushed Melanie's stroller behind them.

Over the noise, Scott leaned in to listen to the attendant talk up the finer points of every dog. When they paused for a moment at a crowded pen of floppy-eared pups tripping over each other, Scott managed a slight smile. He sighed deeply and let his mind drift to the possibility of replacing old memories with new ones. He imagined he and Melanie playing in their backyard with a fuzzy little dog scampering around. *Maybe this won't be so bad after all.*

A booming bark from behind startled Scott out of his daydream. Debra spun around to see a large dog aggressively scratching at the other side of the glass. She stepped toward the glass and put her hand opposite his giant paw. On his hind legs, he was nearly as tall as her.

“Oh, Scotty, I changed my mind. I think we should get a big dog!” Debra blurted. “He would make a wonderful guard dog. Just listen to that bark! He would scare *anyone!*”

Scott’s pulse took a dramatic leap. Chills shot down his back. He clenched his clammy hands around the stroller handle and cleared his throat.

“I don’t know, Deb. I don’t think that’s a good idea. Melanie is still so small. He could hurt her. Besides, we’ve never had a dog, and I don’t think our yard is big enough.”

Debra’s mouth contorted and opened to respond. Before a word came out, she noticed the sweat forming on his brow and cocked her head to the side. From her expression, Scott knew she was piecing it together, and he worried what would come next.

Debra’s eyes shifted to a mischievous squint, “Scotteeeee? Are you...afraid of dogs?” she teased.

The chill on Scott’s back turned to fire in an instant. He took a quiet step toward her, placing his mouth close enough that his lips grazed her ear. “Not now,” he growled, grabbing her hand and squeezing hard.

“Ouch! Scott! Let go!” she yelled as she jerked her hand and stumbled backward.

Scott’s eyes darted and the shelter employee stared blankly with his mouth hanging open. Scott glared at him until he turned on his heels and walked away.

“My word, Scott Abner! What is the matter with you?” she demanded loudly.

Customers started glancing in their direction and whispering to one another. Tears stung Scott’s eyes. “Get whatever kind of dog you want, Debra,” he grumbled before releasing the stroller and storming out of the corridor.

Scott was leaning against the car when Debra walked out, pushing Melanie’s stroller in front of her. No dog in sight. *Dodged that bullet.* As they got closer, he spotted the attendant

following behind her carrying one of the floppy-eared dogs he had smiled at. *Well, I'll be.* Scott stood straight, softened his face, and walked toward them. As he approached Debra, he saw Melanie asleep in the stroller. He stopped and held out his hand to help. Without slowing her pace, Debra passed him.

“Get the dumb dog, Scott. I hope you’re happy now.”

Chapter Four

1983

Approaching the *Welcome to Mississippi* sign, Scott was suddenly aware of how exhausted he had become. The dark abyss before him drained the little left in him, and he scolded himself for ignoring the last exit he passed that had any sign of life. In what felt like a hundred miles later, just before Scott was about to pull onto the shoulder of the highway and pass out, a single sign announced an upcoming exit.

Scott pulled into the dirt parking lot of the first motel he came to and parked beneath a sign that read *The Beaumontel*. The office was in the center, with a one-level row of exterior doors extending from both sides. Even though it was pitch-black outside, chips in the old cream paint were clearly visible from the sun-bright lights emanating from the office. Made entirely of glass walls, the office lit up the parking lot like a landing strip surrounded by the sea of night. He winced at the glare as he pulled up and parked in front of the entrance.

Scott climbed out of the car and stood upright for the first time in hours. Placing his hands on his lower back, he stretched in every direction. The sudden change in equilibrium sent the booze coursing through his body, and a heavy sluggishness turned his mind to sludge and his body into a weighted blob. Beginning to sway, he steadied himself against the car as he slowly walked toward the office.

A kid no more than seventeen was propped on a stool behind the counter. He looked up from his magazine when the bell above the door announced Scott's entrance. Scott shuffled across the linoleum floor and slurred a need for a room, managing to think clearly enough to request one on the end. The kid slid a metal key on a plastic ring across the counter and said something about money, and Scott pulled cash from his wallet and dropped it on the counter. If

the attendant added any other information, it was a muddled mess of sounds as Scott turned and meandered back to the door.

Moving in slow motion, Scott eventually backed out from his spot and pulled his car to the end of the right-side set of rooms in front of door nine, stopping just before his front bumper touched the building. He reached over to the passenger seat, rummaged through the brown paper bag, and grabbed the last bottle of beer. On the fourth try, he unlocked the motel door and stumbled inside. The room was dark and musty, but the office lights coming through the thin curtains were enough to lead Scott to the closest bed, where he dropped his keys on the floor, plopped down, popped the cap, emptied the bottle in one guzzle, and fell back onto the bed. Scott was out cold.

The engine of a semi roared by and shocked Scott into consciousness. The sudden attack on his senses sent him reeling as he rolled over on the bed and hung his face off the side in case he lost control of his stomach. He held his breath as a plea to his body to not lose it. Scott's hatred and fear of vomiting was an unreasonable commitment he held to if at all possible. The swirling in his head and stomach slowed, and he peeked through the swollen slits of his eyelids. The nightstand was close enough to him that he was surprised he hadn't whacked his forehead on it. The alarm clock read 4:09 P.M.

"Son of a..."

He stood too suddenly, and a wave of nausea crashed into him. He swayed on his feet while straining his fingertips on the nightstand with his full weight. He closed his eyes and held his breath, but this time, the trick didn't work, and he rushed to the bathroom, hunched over the toilet, and emptied the entire contents of his stomach. *Dang you, R.J.*

He slowly shuffled toward the motel door and shielded his eyes as he opened it. The murderous afternoon sun bathed him in light, and he stumbled backward to get away from it. He crossed his forearm over his eyes and shuffled his way to the trunk of his car. To keep his eyes shielded with his arm, he made two trips to unload his luggage and threw his suitcases on the extra bed. He unpacked his toiletry bag, a pair of khaki pants and a polo. In the bathroom, the lingering stench of vomit nearly demanded a round two visit to the commode. His throat burned as he swallowed hard to keep everything in its place. He turned on the shower before he unpacked his toiletry bag, lining the items across the counter. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror and was thankful that his blurred vision hid the worst of it.

Scott stood in the shower until the water turned cold. After slowly performing his grooming routine and dressing, he felt more himself but knew it wouldn't last long without eating. He made his bed, closed his eyes, and opened the door. Once the spots behind his eyelids settled, he walked toward the motel office.

When he opened the door, a bell rang above his head—something he didn't recall from the night before, and he looked up toward the sound.

“Are ya lost, hon?” a thick southern accent drew the words out like syrup.

Scott turned toward the voice. An older lady with fire-red hair sat on a barstool behind the counter. As Scott walked closer, he noticed her heavy makeup sunk into the numerous deep lines and wrinkles on her face. Her bright rouge and eyeshadow beamed off her brown leather skin. Her hair matched her lipstick and her long fingernails. The buttons on her blouse threatened to give up from the strain of the tight fit.

“Ummm, no. I'm staying in room nine,” Scott stammered while pointing toward the direction of the room. He instantly felt dumb.

She started to laugh, and what began as a chuckle ended in a cough, violently shaking her chest before abruptly stopping. She took a long drag of her cigarette.

“Well, I was beginning to wonder if I needed to see after ya. The way Davey said you stumbled outta here last night, I thought you’un might needed a well-check,” she responded as she exhaled a puff of smoke from the corner of her mouth.

Scott smiled politely before he caught the stench of nicotine. He held in a gag, but she noticed and laughed, sending her into another coughing fit.

“Yeah, you might do good with an aspirin or two,” she noted.

Scott placed thirty dollars on the counter, “I’ll take another night.”

“You got it, sweetie. You need a turndown service?” she offered as she scooped up the cash. Her long fingernails scraped against the counter, sending a shiver down Scott’s spine, and for a moment, he thought he might faint right there.

“No thanks. But I could use some food. Anything around?”

“Well, you’re just in luck. *The Drink & Eat* is just across the lot. Won’t find anything else around here,” she said, pointing a long red fingernail toward the parking lot while taking another drag on her cigarette. “Good thing it’s good,” she added.

Scott smiled faintly and exited. He took a few steps in the parking lot and glanced back toward the office as the lady dialed a number on the office phone. He walked across the dusty lot toward what looked like a giant wooden shack. A few cars and a handful of motorcycles dotted the parking lot. As he entered, his eyes ached, trying to adjust to the dusky room. When he could finally see, he spanned across the restaurant and noticed a few people in booths glance his way before returning to their conversations. A large horseshoe bar stood as the focal point of the room. A couple of men perched on stools hunched over their drinks. He made his way to a

barstool furthest from anyone. A male server looked up at Scott, placed the glass he was drying on the counter, and exited through a swinging door to the kitchen. A moment later, a young female bartender approached.

“Hey, hon, what can I get ya?” she asked.

Her voice was kind and subtle; it had a southern twang but nothing like the character he had just met at the motel. She was petite with long, straight, light brown hair, fair skin, and big blue eyes that reminded him of Maggie. His heart ached at the thought of his girls.

“I’ll take a bloody Mary and a menu.”

“Sure thing.” She reached under the counter, pulled out a menu, placed it on the bar, and stepped away.

While Scott perused the options, he saw a busboy whispering in her ear while she mixed the drink. She looked at him disapprovingly but nodded before he disappeared to the back. Scott looked away when he glanced in his direction.

“Know what we’re having?” she asked while placing his drink on the napkin in front of him.

“Yeah. I’ll take a cheeseburger, fries, and water,” he said, sliding the menu toward her.

“Sounds good,” she replied, tucking the menu away and walking toward other bar patrons.

Scott took a sip of his drink and looked around the room. The TV sitting on the bar opposite him caught his eye. An old baseball game was playing off a VHS.

“Scotty, stand still and keep an eye on the ball!” R.J. hollered from across the yard.

Scott tried to remember the position R.J. had manipulated his body into a hundred times before. Scott lifted the plastic bat above his head.

“Bend your knees, Scotty!” Katherine called out from behind R.J.

She bobbed back and forth, punching her left fist into the palm of an old ball mitt they had found at the park. Katherine was most definitely right-handed, but it didn’t matter much in a game they were all laughably horrible at.

Scott looked down at his straight, pale, bony legs and hunched his knees into an awkward bend. This satisfied R.J., and after a wildly elaborate pitch, he sent the plastic ball toward Scott. Scott swung so hard that he whipped into a spin and plopped onto his rear—the ball flew past him.

“Strike three! That’s the game!” R.J. yelled and pumped his fist in the air.

With his butt still in the dirt, Scott repeatedly slammed the end of the bat into the ground, tears welling up in his scrunched eyes.

“Scott, cool it before you break it,” Katherine scolded as she trotted toward him.

R.J. continued his celebration with victory laps.

As Katherine reached Scott, Margaret stepped out the front door and shouted, “Dinner’s ready, kids! Come on in!”

R.J. stopped circling, ran to Scott, and reached out his hand.

“Come on, bud,” he coaxed. “Mom’s made mac and cheese.”

Scott took R.J.’s hand and let R.J. do all the work of hoisting Scott to his feet. R.J. didn’t let go as they crossed the yard toward the trailer. Katherine sighed and picked up the plastic bat and dragged it behind her.

The kids each took a deep inhale as they entered the living room. R.J.’s expression shifted from aromatic ecstasy to strained confusion. The smell of macaroni and cheese, hamburgers, and

baked tater tots wafted through the small home, competing with their mother's beloved incense. Scott loved to sit beside the table and watch the dancing string of smoke rise from its end. Granted, the smell of cedar never did mix well with anything their mother cooked, but it was an odd concoction that Scott had come to love.

The children kicked their shoes off by the front door and ran into the kitchen. Margaret stood at the stove stirring a pot of boiling water with one hand, a cigarette perched between two fingers on the other. She swayed to the music coming from the radio on the kitchen counter. The kids collectively paused and admired her. She spun around in a grand gesture and smiled at them.

"Go wash up, you filthy animals," she teased, wildly waving a steaming wooden spoon in their direction.

Stumbling backward, the children collided in a frenzy of laughter and shoves. Katherine and R.J. turned and raced down the hallway toward the bathroom. Scott's focus on his mother's shenanigans had him locked in place. Catching Scott gazing, she paused and smiled.

"You're not going to beat them standing here, Scotty," she cooed.

Realizing he had been left behind, Scott bolted after Katherine and R.J., who were playfully pushing and pulling at each other. The tussle had the two banging into the walls of the narrow hall. Katherine arrived triumphantly at the bathroom doorway; R.J.'s momentum pushing her in the rest of the way. Scott brought up the rear, and in frustration, he kicked the wall, crunching his toes. He slumped to the floor and burst into loud wails.

Margaret had already begun following the chaos.

"Oh, Scotty," she soothed, crouching down beside him.

She slipped his dirty sock from the foot he held in the air with a soft hand. Scott quieted and watched her slow, careful movement. She carefully examined every inch of his foot.

“I don’t think they’re broken,” she assured him. “You’ll be back to racing in no time.”

Her hand gently cradled the back of his foot. She lifted it to her lips and kissed the tips of each toe. Katherine, who had been quietly watching, turned to the sink.

R.J.’s mouth dropped open in horror. “You kissed his foot?!” he blurted in disgust before pretending to spit on the floor.

Still holding Scott’s foot in the air, Margaret playfully swung her free hand around, trying to make contact. R.J. laughed and jumped back to avoid her swat. In his jostling, he bumped into Katherine as she rinsed her hands.

“Stop it, R.J.!” she yelled while turning and pushing him back.

Her face was flush, her cheeks wet with tears. Margaret, R.J., and Scott froze at the sight.

“Kathy,” Margaret whispered with compassion.

Katherine shoved past R.J., stepped over Scott, and ran to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Her weeping could be heard through the wall. Katherine didn’t leave her bedroom the rest of the evening.

While they sat around the dinner table, Margaret unsuccessfully attempted to coax Katherine out by loudly and melodramatically exclaiming how delicious the macaroni and cheese was. Scott and R.J. were convinced and giggled at their mother’s antics while adoringly gazing at her. She made Scott forget how hungry he was.

She was a sight. Crystal blue eyes set into a fair face with soft slants. Her light auburn hair rested on her slim shoulders and brushed against the angles of her collarbone. Sometimes, she’d put rollers all over her head, which Scott thought was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever seen. He’d point and laugh, and she’d chase him around and attack him with tickles when she caught him. And while she was still beautiful when she was all made up with big hair and heavy

make-up, Scott preferred her how she was at that moment at the dinner table. Her air-dried hair in natural waves, her face bare, showing her substantial scattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks.

Scott watched as she bounced her attention between the boys, calling for Katherine, and taking sizable bites from her plate. Scott couldn't figure where a such a small woman put that much food. She wasn't short by any means. In fact, she was taller than average, making her thin figure borderline frail at times. And when she was more frail than thin, the corners of her body were sharp, and her touch was rigid—if she touched the children at all. But today, she was soft and tender and curvy. And Scott was mesmerized by her.

She scraped the last bite from her plate before clearing the dishes from the table. Realizing how little he had eaten, Scott shoveled three big spoonful's of macaroni into his mouth.

"R.J., go get ready for bed," Margaret directed. "And Scotty, I'll draw you a bath to soak your foot in."

Seeing R.J. rolling his eyes toward Scott, Margaret added, "And also to help with those stinky toes, 'cause R.J. was right!" She winked at R.J., who erupted into giggles and ran off.

Scott got up from the table and stomped off in a huff down the hallway. Scott was sitting on the toilet lid with his arms crossed at his chest and his head hanging low when Margaret walked in and turned on the bathwater. Scott watched her from the corner of his eye to see if she noticed his sulking. She kept her hand under the stream of water until it was a satisfactory temperature. She turned toward him and held up a bottle of bubble bath with an inquisitive look. Scott nodded, keeping his chin low. She poured a generous amount of bubble bath into the tub, and Scott watched the white foamy clouds begin to form.

“I can’t find pajamas!” R.J. yelled from the bedroom.

Margaret kept the water running, smiled at Scott, and walked out.

Disappointed, Scott, stood up and undressed.

Scott lowered himself into the tub and turned off the water when it reached the top. R.J. walked in and began brushing his teeth over the sink. He turned toward Scott, who responded by rubbing his foot and whimpering.

“Oh, give it up, you big baby. Mom’s not even in here,” R.J. blurted, toothpaste spitting out of his mouth.

“Robert Jr.,” Margaret said, pursing her lips as she entered the bathroom. “Go crawl into bed.”

R.J. slouched his shoulders, rinsed his mouth, and dropped his head as he shuffled out. Margaret exhaled a deep and tired breath as she knelt beside the bathtub.

“Alright, bud, it’s time to wash up.”

She grabbed the large plastic cup always sitting on the tub's edge and poured it over Scott’s head with abandon. Water gushed over his face, and he blew his lips to keep it from going in his mouth. Margaret chuckled.

As she gently scrubbed his head with shampoo, Scott noticed her necklace as it dangled back and forth in front of him. He reached out and delicately placed the small charm in his wet hand. It was oval with a dark aged gold trim, a cream background, and what looked like a tiny blue dragonfly pressed inside.

“Your grandmother gave that to me when I was a young girl,” Margaret commented without pausing her task. “I guess I was around Katherine’s age. I want to say it was for a birthday, but I don’t quite remember.”

Scott looked into his mother's eyes and noticed they were nearly the same color as the dragonfly.

Margaret poured a few more cupful's of water over Scott's head until the shampoo was thoroughly rinsed. And then one more for good measure. He blew his lips again. She reached for a nearby towel and began drying Scott's face and hair. Blinded by the towel, Scott felt her hands suddenly clench, and her body jump at the sound of a slamming door in another room.

"Margie! Where are you?" a deep voice boomed from the living room.

"You look lost in there," the waitress said, tracking Scott's gaze as she sat down a plate with a sizable burger and a pile of fries.

Scott blinked hard and gave his head a subtle shake.

"Just tired, I guess. It's been a long trip."

"Yeah, I figured you weren't from around here," she remarked, looking down at his polo and back up.

"That obvious, huh?" Scott shrugged.

"Where ya headed that would bring you through these parts? We're not exactly on a path to or from anywhere exciting."

"I wouldn't say it's exciting. I mean, it's just work," he shrugged and popped a fry in his mouth. "Besides, I wouldn't guess Little Rock will be much worth writing home about."

The taste of food made him immediately aware of how starved he was and started pushing fries into his mouth one at a time in quick succession without chewing. The girl gave him an impressed look and put her hand on the bar in front of him.

"Well, I'll leave you to it and check back on you in a bit. Oh, still need that water?"

“Nah, but I’ll take another of these,” he replied with a mouth full of fries as he lifted and shook his empty glass.

“You got it.”

Scott mindlessly watched the baseball game as he ate, always keeping a solid stride in his consumption. At the end of his meal, he leaned back and stretched. Four empty drinking glasses surrounded his bare plate. Looking around for the first time, he noticed the waitress glancing over to see if he needed anything. He held up one of the empty glasses and gave it a gentle shake, prompting her to walk over.

“Before I ring in another, you don’t have to drive anywhere, do ya?” she asked with a concerned look.

“Oh, nah,” he quipped. “I’m staying another night. Right over there at The Beaumontel,” he answered, looking oddly at the sound of his slightly slurring words. “Room nine,” if you don’t believe me.”

“Alrighty then, I’ll get that drink,” she said, before picking up a few dishes and exiting through the swinging doors to the back.

She returned a few moments later and mixed his drink. She brought it over and placed it in front of him. Scott leaned back again, attempting to make room in his suddenly full stomach.

“I’d say that was a success,” she chimed.

“I’d say so,” Scott responded, feeling very at ease. “I don’t think I’ve had a burger that good in, I don’t know, years.”

“Glad to hear it. I’ll be sure to tell the boys in the back,” she commented before leaving to check on a bar patron who had just sat down.

Scott gulped his drink, becoming aware that the combination of a full stomach and a few drinks was beginning to settle in. His mind slowed, his body felt heavy, and he knew it was time to meander back to his room. He took a fifty from his wallet, placed it on the bar, and turned toward the exit. The waitress looked up from taking another customer's order when Scott lifted his hand in a casual wave as he pushed the door open and stepped out into the evening.

Scott glanced at his watch: 9:26 P.M. The sun was well gone, and the clear black sky revealed an impressive spread of stars. Standing in the middle of the parking lot, looking at the night sky, Scott realized he hadn't noticed the stars in a long time. His gazing was shortened by the sensation of the effects of liquor sinking to the back of his skull. He lifted his head upright and swayed enough to require a few steps to keep from falling. *That's enough of that.* He walked as directly as he could to door number nine.

It took five tries to land the key in the doorknob. Scott let the door close behind him as he dropped his key on the table and belly-flopped onto the bed. Everything went dark.

"Margie! Where are you, woman?" the loud voice boomed through the walls. Searching stomps shook the trailer.

Margaret froze, her hands stuck on Scott's head as if she had petrified mid-drying. Scott opened his eyes and moved the towel from his face. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth hung open. For a moment, Scott wondered if she had died from surprise.

"Margie," the voice called again in a slow slur.

Scott breathed a sigh of relief when Margaret finally moved. She placed her finger over her closed lips to direct Scott to keep quiet. She slowly rose from her knees and left the bathroom. Scott squeezed his knees to his chest and stilled himself.

“J, what are you doing here? I thought you were out with the guys tonight?” Margaret asked as she walked down the hallway.

“Don’t question me!” Scott heard the voice growl before a loud slap rang through the house, followed by shattering glass. Margaret screamed.

Scott jolted out of the tub and wrapped the towel around him. He stepped toward the bathroom door and pressed his back against it. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply to muster his courage to move. Holding his breath, he peeked around the doorway and down the hall. He saw the back of the large man standing over his mother, who was curled up on the floor, her hands covering her face. Scott darted into the kids’ dark bedroom. He squinted his eyes, trying to adjust them.

“Katherine? R.J.?” he whispered. “Where are you?”

“We’re back here, Scotty,” Katherine replied, her head sticking out of the closet. Scott moved toward her and saw Katherine and R.J. huddled in their closet, hiding behind a pile of stuffed animals and clothes. Katherine’s arms wrapped around R.J. as he hugged his knees under his chin, occasionally separating them to dry-heave between his legs.

“Let me in, guys,” Scott whined as he crawled into the closet, clenching his towel with one hand, attempting to at least keep his bottom half covered.

“Good grief, Scott, you’re soaking wet!” Katherine exclaimed in a forced whisper.

Scott ignored her complaint. R.J. silently slid over and made room. Katherine leaned forward and rifled through the pile of clothes until she found pants and a T-shirt. She tossed them in Scott’s lap and pointed for him to put them on. Scott wriggled into the clothes, tugging and pulling them over his damp body. Even though Scott’s elbows and knees poked at him, R.J. never complained, he only frequently cleared his throat.

Scott threw the wet towel on top of the pile and nestled between Katherine and R.J. He instantly felt safe and warm until the voices from the living room pushed through the wall.

“You keep lying to me, woman!” the man’s voice yelled.

“J, I haven’t lied about anything,” Margaret responded through angry whimpers. “You’re just drunk and paranoid.”

Slap.

R.J. gagged. Katherine jumped up and ran out of the closet. Scott peeked out and saw her slowly and silently closing the bedroom door, turning the lock before tiptoeing across the floor and crawling back into the closet. She scooted between the boys and wrapped an arm around each of them, pulling them close. Scott nestled into her side.

“And you’re just a cheap hussy who gets around, and all the guys know it,” he snapped. “Well, now they know not to touch what I own!”

“What did you do, J?” Margaret pleaded.

“That’s none of your business. But make this your business: the same’ll happen to you if you keep getting around.”

“I’m not getting anywhere! I’ve been here all evening with my kids,” Margaret yelled.

“Let me ask them myself then,” the man replied.

“NO, J! Leave them be!” Margaret screamed.

Heavy stomps plodded down the hallway, quaking the trailer floor. Scott heard small, quick steps following behind them before another loud thud shook the floor again.

The bedroom doorknob lurched, making the children jump and squeeze each other tightly. Realizing the door was locked, the man twisted the handle violently before banging on

the thin door. The combination of his banging and shouting sounded like bombs dropping into their bedroom. Scott clenched his eyes shut, flattened his small hands over his ears, and cried.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Scott's eyes shot open. Still stretched across the bed on his stomach, his feet hung off the side and his head throbbed. The alarm clock on the nightstand glared at him: 2:17 a.m. The red light stung his eyes, making his head hurt even more. He thought about lifting his head, but the idea seemed impossible.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

His body jerked, and his head snapped up, causing him to wince and cuss. Cool air hit his cheek, and he realized his face was covered in drool. Groaning, he rolled onto his back.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

"WHAT?!" he yelled into the empty air, unsure if the sound was real.

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't mean to bother you. I just need some help," a female voice called through the motel room door.

Scott hoisted himself from the bed and stood. His head swayed back and forth, and his eyes clamored to focus to keep from falling. He inched toward the window and pulled the curtain back just enough to see the bartender standing outside.

Scott steadied himself again and went to the door. He cleared his throat to make sure his voice still worked because, in this condition, he wasn't sure he wasn't dead. He turned the handle and started to speak.

"I'm not sure I can be of any..."

When the door cracked open, something on the other side pushed through the door, slamming Scott into the wall. He slid to the floor and clutched the back of his pounding head. He looked up to see a man standing over him and the bartender stepping in and closing the door behind her.

The man started clawing at Scott, feeling his pants pockets, before yanking Scott's wallet out of his back pocket. He opened the wallet, pulled out a wad of cash, and dropped the wallet onto Scott's face. The man moved from Scott and turned toward the rest of the room, shoving the cash into his pocket.

"If he's carrying this much on him, I'm sure there's more in his suitcase or car. Find the keys," the man directed at the bartender, who turned on a lamp.

While the two were rummaging through the room, Scott pulled himself to his feet, pressed his back to the wall, and took a deep breath. A bolt of anger shot through him, and he ran across the room and tackled the man from behind. They both crashed into the nightstand, sending the clock and phone to the floor. The bartender came out from the bathroom and squealed. Unsure what to do, she pranced around screaming while the men wrestled between the beds.

The intruder was larger than Scott, but even in Scott's inebriated state, Scott was faster. They rolled around exchanging punches when they each had the leverage until Scott found himself on his back, the man straddling him, plowing his fists into Scott's face.

Hysterical shrieks from the bartender were frequent and high-pitched, causing Scott's head as much pain as the blows his face was taking. Unable to push the man off, Scott's arms flailed around the floor until he grabbed the brick-shaped alarm clock. He landed the clock squarely on the man's left temple in one quick swing.

The man immediately became still and then crumpled onto Scott, knocking the remaining wind out of Scott's body. The bartender let out a long and loud scream. Scott froze for a moment while a thick liquid ran down the side of his face. The sensation struck fear in him, and Scott shoved the man off and jumped to his feet. The bartender inhaled, offering a long moment of silence before screaming again.

"For the love, shut up!" Scott yelled at her.

She immediately went silent.

Scott looked down where the man lay on his side, eyes wide open, a pool of blood spreading through the carpet around his head. Scott put his hands on his knees to keep from passing out, almost forgetting the girl standing there.

"What have *you* done?" the bartender shrieked.

Scott stood upright and shouted, "What have *I* done? What was that? Who is that?" He asked, pointing at the man.

The bartender put her hands on her head and started pacing, keeping her eyes on the ceiling.

"That's my uncle. We were just supposed to rob you a little."

She stopped and looked down at the body. "Oh my god! He's dead! *You're* dead! *We* are dead! My dad'll kill us both!"

She turned and fell to her knees.

Scott looked around the room. Panic began to seize him. He stepped over the man, grabbed his suitcases, and threw them on the bed.

"I've gotta get out of here," he said, picking up his clothes scattered throughout the room and throwing them in his luggage.

“You’ve got to leave,” he said to the bartender.

She jumped to her feet and stood in Scott’s path as he frantically collected his things. Her face shifted from despair to horror.

“What? No! I have nowhere to go! You can’t just leave me here! I’m dead if I stay,” she pleaded hysterically, grabbing the front of Scott’s shirt.

She began sinking to the floor again, pulling him down with her. Scott grabbed the back of her arms and yanked her to her feet.

“This isn’t *my* problem. This is *your* problem. *You did this. You did that,*” he said, pointing at the body. “This is on your hands, not mine,” he said, releasing her after he realized he had begun shaking her.

The bartender straightened her body, pushed Scott’s hands off of her, and shoved Scott’s chest hard. He stumbled and fell backward over the man’s body and landed on his back on the floor. The girl stepped over the body, leaned over Scott, and put her finger in his face.

“You take me with you, or so help me, I’ll sic my dad and all his dogs on you, *Mr. Little Rock,*” she threatened through her clenched jaw.

Chapter Five

“Okay, okay,” Scott conceded, raising his hands up in surrender.

The girl backed up and stepped over the body before turning toward the door.

“Wait. What are we going to do with the body?” Scott asked.

“Are you serious?” she quipped and spun around to face him. “We don’t have time for that! People know where Mikey and I were going,” she pointed to the dead man. “We have to leave now! So, get your stuff, and don’t leave anything behind.”

She walked to the window and peeked through the curtain. Scott threw all of his things into his suitcases. He patted his empty pockets and remembered the wallet and money the man had taken. Scott leaned over the body and felt the pockets for any sign of the cash. Coming up empty, he started rolling the body onto his back to check the other pockets. As gravity took over and the man thudded into place, the last air in his lungs was expelled, and blood from his mouth sprayed onto Scott’s face.

“Oh, my word!” Scott shrieked, spreading his hands over his face and instinctively rubbing and spitting.

The girl turned her attention from the window and stepped toward him with her arms out as Scott jumped up and down to the rhythm of his frantically rubbing hands.

“You’ve got to shut up!” she said in a hushed scolding.

Scott froze, put his hands down to his side, and stared at her in disbelief. Her eyes widened, and her mouth curved into a smile that opened large enough to consume her face. She let out the loudest and stupidest laugh Scott had ever heard. Slapping her leg and raising her hands in the air, she went on for what felt like forever before placing her hands on her knees to catch her breath. Scott stared motionless and unenthusiastic.

When she had caught her breath, she stood upright and looked him in the face. Expecting her to say something, Scott became unnerved when she laughed hysterically again. Annoyed, Scott stepped over the dead body and went into the bathroom. He stood in front of the mirror and summoned the courage to look up. What he saw was like a scene from a horror movie. There wasn't one spot that wasn't smeared in red. He rolled his eyes and knew he would have chuckled had it been anyone else's face.

He turned on the faucet and scrubbed his face and hands with the cold water. He grabbed the nearest towel and attempted to rub away any remaining blood. He hung the towel on the bar over the toilet out of habit and noted its disgusting pink hue. *Why white?* He stepped out of the bathroom before his sense kicked in, and he spun around and reached for the pink towel, throwing it in his open suitcase on the bed.

The girl was standing in the middle of the room wiping tears from her cheeks, a dumb grin plastered across her face.

"Be useful and find the car keys," Scott said dryly.

She immediately started searching the floor. Realizing he still hadn't secured his money, Scott cautiously leaned over the man again and rummaged through his pockets. He heard the girl occasionally snicker as he did. Scott pulled the wad of bills from the man's front pant pocket. Hunched over, Scott meandered around the room in search of his wallet. When he found it, he stuffed the money into it and shoved it in his back pocket.

Quite pleased with herself, the girl sprung up beside one of the beds, car keys in hand.

"We really have to go!" she demanded, her tone stiffening.

Scott closed his suitcases, grabbed one of the handles, and hoisted the other under his arm. He held out his empty hand toward the girl.

“Let me have the keys,” he said.

“Ummm, that’s not happening,” she quipped. “I’m not going to be the victim of whatever stupid plan you’ve thought up.”

“I have no plan!” Scott retorted.

“Even better then,” she chimed. “Because I do.”

Scott didn’t budge.

“Either go or get left,” she threatened and walked toward the door and opened it. She looked back and gave Scott an expression that asked if he was joining her.

Scott resituated his luggage and reluctantly moved toward the doorway. The girl stepped out ahead of him. Before closing the door, Scott turned and looked at the room. It was a scene he had never in his wildest imagination thought he could be a part of. *Dear God, forgive me.* He shook his head and let the door close behind him.

The girl stood at the driver’s side of the car, her hands on her hips.

“Are we going already, or do we want to hang out and become like him?” she asked, gesturing toward room number nine.

Scott ignored her and threw his suitcases in the backseat. He looked at her over the car roof as he stepped into the car.

“What’s your name, anyway?” he asked, returning a snide tone.

“Tabitha. Yours?”

“Scott.”

They climbed into the car, and Tabitha turned the engine. Scott buckled his seat belt as they pulled onto the highway heading west.

They spent the first hour in silence, during which Scott's adrenaline slowed to a normal rate, and as it did, he became aware of his injuries and began a body check from the top down. The pounding coming from the back of his head was the first to awaken. He gently reached back and winced as he felt a slimy goo. He pulled his hand in front of him and saw dark red blood on his fingertips. He stretched his neck, slowly shifting his head from shoulder to shoulder. The heaviness in his head sent his eyes rolling to the back as he summoned the strength to not vomit in his lap. He inhaled and held it until the nausea passed.

He wanted to ask her where she was taking them and then follow that with an argument that would get him to Little Rock. He wanted to take control of the situation and get his life back on track. But his body and mind wouldn't let him. With his adrenaline slowed, every part of his body throbbed, and he could barely keep his eyes open. He tried leaning back against the headrest, but the pain was too much. He propped his elbow on the door and laid his forehead into his palm. He was out with the first blink.

The banging on the door eventually stopped, but the kids still slept in the closet. Katherine woke the boys early the next morning, and they ran through their regular school morning routine of digging for clothes, tiptoeing down the hallway, and walking to school. That morning's walk was notably silent and noticeably slower than most.

Scott could barely keep his eyes open at school, and at one point, Mrs. Murphy got so tired of waking him up that she finally let him sleep the last hour of the day. He woke up to the bustle of his classmates gathering their things and leaving to catch the bus, find their parents in the car line, or begin their trek home on foot. Mrs. Murphy erased the chalkboard as Scott raised his head from a puddle of drool on the desk.

When the last kid left, she turned and asked, “Scott, you feeling alright? You’ve had a hard time staying with us today?”

Scott shook his head and stood. It was the first he had noticed that his legs were completely asleep from hanging motionless off the plastic chair for the past hour. He crumpled to the ground, catching himself just short of smacking his face on the floor. Mrs. Murphy rushed to his side.

“Oh, Scott. Are you sick?” she asked, lifting his chin tenderly.

“Maybe,” he answered, hopeful that would satisfy her inquiry.

As Mrs. Murphy helped him up, Katherine appeared in the doorway. Seeing Scott’s struggle, she rushed and lifted him to his feet. She threw his arm around her shoulder, smiled at the teacher, and plodded toward the door with Scott only holding up a small portion of his weight.

“Katherine,” Mrs. Murphy said delicately behind them. “You and your brothers walk to school, correct?”

Katherine turned over her shoulder and nodded silently.

“Let me give you all a ride home today. I think it wi—”

Nearly dropping Scott, Katherine spun them around and shouted, “No!”

Realizing the severity of her response from the shocked look on Mrs. Murphy’s face, Katherine cleared her throat and darted her eyes to the floor.

“I mean, um, it’s okay. Thank you anyway. I think Scotty’s just tired. Right, Scotty?” Katherine replied, nudging Scott to respond.

“Yeah, uh, sure. I’m just sleepy,” Scott mumbled, lifting his head and offering Mrs. Murphy a large grin.

The teacher didn't look convinced. Katherine added, "It's just that...well, the walk home is Scotty's favorite time. And we don't wanna take that from him."

Mrs. Murphy looked from Katherine to Scott and back to Katherine. Before she could rebuttal, R.J. poked his head in the doorway.

"Are we going or what?" R.J. quipped impatiently.

Katherine immediately spun her and Scott back toward the door and left before Mrs. Murphy could say another word on the matter.

"I really would have liked a ride home," Scott whispered in Katherine's ear as they stepped out of the classroom.

"I know, Scotty," she replied. "And you know why that can't ever happen."

The car swerved suddenly, and Scott's head smacked against the window.

"What the—?" he grumbled.

"Yeah, sorry about that. That semi got too close," Tabitha replied flatly.

Scott glanced at the clock—it had only been forty-five minutes. *Good grief.*

The sun had begun to rise behind them, and its light reflected off the green exit sign: Little Rock Exit, 1/2 Mile Ahead. *Perfect timing!* Scott sat up and cleared his throat.

"This is the exit we take toward—," he said in an overtly kind tone.

"We're not going to Little Rock, Scott. I thought you'd figured that out by now," Tabitha retorted. "Unless you want to be dead before the day is over."

She passed him a side glance that implied he was stupid enough to take the option.

"It's just that..." he trailed off, not knowing how he had planned to finish the sentence. The only thing in Little Rock was the job, but in light of all he had just experienced, that didn't

seem quite like the priority it once had. He didn't know his priorities anymore, and while he wasn't thrilled to be at this strange girl's mercy, he didn't see any other option. Besides, there was something comforting about passing the exit and getting as far from the fiasco they left behind as possible.

"...well, where are we going then?" he continued.

She looked at him skeptically, and he could tell she was contemplating whether to trust him.

"Listen, if this is what we're doing, fine. But, I have even more at stake than you do, and I'd like to get back to my life," Scott's words hanging in the tense air.

"*You* have more at stake?! Did you not hear me when I said I had to run or die?" Tabitha exclaimed, the pitch of her voice rising. "And because of my own father, no less! Don't tell me what's at stake here! I'm sorry your little business trip has been disrupted by your own stupidity!" she huffed.

"My stupidity?" Scott snapped back. "I was minding my own business when you and what's-his-name barged in and attacked me!"

"You killed a man!" Tabitha yelled.

The words slammed into Scott, and he froze.

I killed a man. Oh, my word, I killed a man. Self-defense isn't a guaranteed defense, especially with the likes of her in on it. I can't go to Little Rock. I can't go back to my life. I have to run.

Tabitha shifted uncomfortably in her seat and attempted to say something a couple of times before finding her words.

“Listen, I didn’t mean it like that,” she said, her voice soft and quiet. “It wasn’t supposed to go like that. It’s never happened like that before.”

Scott’s brow furrowed, and he shot her an expression that demanded more information.

“It’s this thing they do. The guys. My dad, Mikey, their friends,” she revealed slowly. “They target people passing through town—y’all aren’t hard to spot—and they rob them. They’re never armed. And usually, the men pony up without a fight. You, on the other hand...” she trailed off.

“And what about you?” Scott shot back.

“It was an ‘or else’ kind of proposition, and I didn’t want to know what was behind door number two. I’ve seen those guys do far worse than what sweet ol’ Mikey attempted to do back there,” she motioned over her shoulder. “He really was a harmless guy. He just wanted to be a part of anything my dad was up to, which always put Mikey in a bad spot,” she said solemnly, her voice trailing off to a moment in the past.

“I didn’t mean to—” Scott started.

“Oh, I know,” she inserted. “Mikey’s dumb luck was bound to run out sooner than later. With all the terrible positions my father has him in, I’m surprised he lived this long.”

“Your dad sounds like a real winner,” Scott replied.

“The world’s best,” Tabitha said sadly and shrugged.

“Daddy, wake up! Wake up!” Melanie shrieked as she climbed onto their bed and crawled over Jilly, who had been startled awake.

Melanie paused beside the pup and rubbed her hand through the dog’s smooth fur. Scott opened his eyes and looked at Debra as she stretched her arms above her head and yawned. She

turned toward Scott, and a content smile spread across her face. He reached out and gently ran his hand across her smooth cheek. She playfully motioned as if she were going to bite it, causing Scott to jerk. She laughed, and he rolled over and snuggled her, Melanie and Jilly lingering at their feet. Scott glanced at the clock: 7:14 a.m.

“Guess we should get up now,” Scott whispered in her ear.

“I mean, it is Christmas morning. She could have woken us up at a worse time,” Debra replied in the middle of another big yawn.

Suddenly, panic struck Debra, and she jerked out from Scott’s embrace and ran to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Melanie and Jilly jumped from the sound, and the dog hopped off the bed and ran out of the bedroom. Bewildered, Melanie looked at Scott, her concern lasting only momentarily before she remembered the day.

She climbed onto Scott’s back and trumpeted, “Get up! Get up! It’s time for presents!”

“Oh, is it?” Scott chimed, rolling over, causing her to land on the pillows. “Well, I guess we better go see!” Scott cheered as he jumped out of bed and hoisted Melanie onto his shoulders.

She erupted in giggles and squeezed her arms around his head.

He stepped toward the bathroom and asked through the closed door, “Can I get you anything, hon?”

After the retching stopped, Debra replied, “Ummm, no. I think I’m okay. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Scott hoisted Melanie higher and tickled her sides in the process. She laughed and wiggled on his shoulders. He carried her to the living room and plopped her onto the couch. She rolled around until she was upright, pushing her long brown hair out of her face. Scott knelt

beside the Christmas tree and reached behind it to plug it in. Melanie's eyes glowed in amazement as the lights twinkled.

"Wow, Mel, it looks like you've been a good girl this year," Scott mused.

Melanie slid off the couch, crawled over to the tree, and stretched beside the pile of presents.

"How about you count how many there are, and I'll make mommy and daddy some coffee?" Scott suggested as he headed toward the kitchen.

Scott prepped the coffeemaker and turned it on before letting Jilly out the back door. When Melanie had finished counting, Scott suggested she do it again to buy time for Debra, who appeared just as the coffeemaker signaled it was ready. Scott reached for one of the brown mugs from the cabinet.

"Not so fast, Scotty," Debra said softly as she stood behind him. "I think that ol' mug isn't going to do anymore."

Debra rarely called him Scotty; in fact, it had been years since he heard that name. *Come to think of it, the last time she called me that...*

Scott spun around to find Debra holding a "World's Best Dad" mug in one hand and a positive pregnancy test in the other. Scott's eyes grew wide, and his mouth dropped open. Debra smiled with satisfaction. Shocked and silent, Scott pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her.

"Are you happy?" Debra inquired, still holding the items in her hand, her chin hovering over his shoulder.

Scott nodded excitedly.

Still embracing, Debra shared, “I’ve been waiting, hoping I could hide the morning sickness until Christmas.”

Scott hugged her tighter.

“It’s a good thing you’ve been going to work early a lot lately,” she chuckled.

Scott’s expression fell flat, and he pulled her closer, grateful she couldn’t see it.

“We need gas,” Tabitha said, breaking the hours-long silence. “And something to eat wouldn’t hurt.”

Scott nodded, realizing how badly he needed to move his stiff body.

Tabitha looked him up and down before adding, “You can’t go anywhere looking like that.”

Scott remembered his reflection in the motel bathroom mirror and studied the red and pink splotches on his polo. *I wonder if they’ve found the body yet.* The car swerved hard to the right, and Scott smacked his head on the window again. *Seriously.*

Tabitha parked in a distant spot at the back of the reststop restroom.

“Change,” she directed, pointing at his suitcases in the backseat.

Scott rummaged through his luggage and found a clean polo and a pair of jeans. He stepped out of the car, hunched beside it, and changed his clothing. Keeping his head down, he hustled across the parking lot to the bathroom. Luckily, the restroom was empty, and he could quickly scrub his hands and face with soap from the pump on the wall. Scott placed his fingers on the back of his head and felt crusts of blood stuck in his hair. Deciding no other way, he stuck his head in the sink and gently washed his hair with the bathroom soap. Red and pink water poured off his scalp, and he worked his best around the wound, wincing in pain when he touched a

tender spot. He held his head under the hand dryer and watched as red drops dotted the floor. He combed his fingers through his hair, grabbed a wad of toilet paper, and dabbed the back of his head.

He left the bathroom and turned toward the parking lot when he noticed a payphone among a row of vending machines. He pulled a dollar from his wallet and inserted it into the change machine. It spit out ten dimes. He dropped a coin into the payphone and dialed.

“Hello?” Debra answered.

“Hey, Deb,” Scott replied.

“Did you make it to Little Rock okay?” she asked, a hint of hope in her words.

“Well...not yet,” he stammered.

“What do you mean? You were supposed to be there hours ago,” she inquired.

“I ran into some trouble, Deb,” he continued. It’s hard to explain.”

“What, like car trouble?” she asked.

Scott thought about telling her the truth, but he didn’t have the energy to fight. And he knew she wouldn’t believe that it wasn’t somehow all his fault or that Tabitha wasn’t part of some scheme he had planned from the beginning.

“Yeah, something like that,” he replied.

“I’m sorry to hear that. How long do you—”

“Is that Daddy?” a voice traveled through the phone.

“Yes, Mel, it’s Daddy,” Debra answered her.

“I want to talk to him!”

Scott heard the receiver jostle on the other end of the line.

“Hi, Daddy! Did you make it? To Little Rock? Is it time for us to come now?” Melanie asked excitedly.

“Umm, not yet Mel. I’ve run into a little hiccup with my travels. I’ll be there soon, though, and then—” Scott answered, a knot rising in his throat.

“When?” Melanie asked, beginning to cry.

Scott had no answer to give. Tears stung his eyes as he remembered call after call, year after year of R.J. pleading for Robert Sr. to return or send for him. *What have I become?*

“Scott,” Debra sighed as Melanie’s cry faded into the background. “I need to go now.”

“I know, Deb...and Deb, I really am trying,” Scott replied.

“Are you, though, Scott?” she asked with a tone of sadness. “I have to go.”

The line went dead. Scott paused, the receiver still to his ear. He imagined Debra murmuring horrible things about him within earshot of Melanie. He smashed the receiver against the payphone until it splintered. He screamed into the empty corridor.

The physical strain sent a beating pulse to the back of his head, and he felt a trickle of blood through his hair and down his neck. Using the toilet paper, he dabbed the wound as he walked back to the car.

“Well, that took you long enough,” Tabitha snorted as Scott climbed into the passenger seat.

“Let’s find a drink,” Scott murmured, a flicker of happiness sparked inside him at the idea. “I saw a sign for a place not far back.”

Luckily, the little pub was dark inside, easing Scott’s mind that his weeping head wound could go unnoticed. He flipped up the collar on his polo as he sat on a barstool. Tabitha took a

seat beside him. The place was reasonably empty for a weekday mid-afternoon. Thankfully, the bartender wasted no time greeting them.

“What’ll ya have?” he asked.

“I’ll take a vodka tonic. Actually, make that two,” Scott answered, reaching for two menus and handing one to Tabitha.

“I’ll have a coke,” Tabitha replied.

The bartender walked away, and Scott turned inquisitively toward Tabitha.

“How old are you?” he asked, realizing he had not yet assumed anything about her.

“Nineteen,” she responded.

“Wow,” Scott said and sat back. “You’re just a baby.”

Tabitha rolled her eyes and shrugged, “Yet here I am, getting a grown man out of a jam.”

“That you put me in!” Scott retorted louder than he meant to.

They sat silently until the bartender returned with their drinks and took their order.

Scott took a long sip of his drink and swallowed slowly. *Aaah, that little nudge.*

Tabitha stared at the television sitting in the corner of the bar while Scott sipped and coddled another three drinks. They ate most of their meal in silence until the satisfaction of full bellies—and a liquor refreshing for Scott—reawakened their senses.

“At nineteen, Tabitha, you have to have some big dreams for your life still,” Scott asked, trying to make conversation that wouldn’t turn awkward or offensive.

Tabitha stirred her drink with her straw. “Yeah, I guess I do,” she said, looking off into the distance. “I had always wanted to be a teacher. On Saturday mornings, I set my stuffed animals along the bar and taught them lessons. I dreamt about graduating high school, going off to college, meeting a really smart guy, and settling down somewhere far away. But obviously...”

she shrugged. "I just can't seem to get away from bars," she gestured toward the center of the room.

"Same," Scott murmured, taking another long sip of his drink.

"So, what about you, Mr. Business?" Tabitha asked, turning her barstool toward him.

"No wife? No kids? Just jaunting about the South finding trouble along the way?"

Scott gave a snide side glance, but the alcohol kept him too relaxed to follow through or really even care to. *Might as well get to know each other.*

"There's a wife. There are kids. Two girls, seven and three," he answered while staring straight ahead across the bar. A pit dropped into his stomach.

"Well," Tabitha replied. "I wasn't expecting that. You just...just don't seem the family man type. All business? Yes. All family? Eh," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

It wasn't what she said that pricked Scott's side. It was how she said it.

"*All?* I'm not all anything," Scott mumbled, shame lowering his voice. "I'm just a whole lot of partial somethings."

When she didn't respond, Scott turned toward her, noticing her expression softened, and she looked sad for him. He appreciated the gesture, even if it felt a little pitiful. When the pity silence was about to become too much, the bartender walked up and placed the check on the counter between them. They both looked down at it. *One bill. Figures.*

"We can get him to split—" Scott started, looking up to see Tabitha walking toward the exit.

"Well, that checks out," Scott said aloud as he stood, pulled the cash from his wallet, and laid down enough to cover the check and a meager tip before hurrying behind her. *If that little wench leaves me...*

Scott burst out of the door and looked toward where they had parked. The spot was empty. *Son of a—* Suddenly, screeching tires squealed from behind him, and he turned to see his blue Ford Cortina come to a quick stop, Tabitha smiling in the driver seat. He looked at her unamused.

“Oh, come on, Scotty,” Tabitha teased.

Scotty. She might as well have run him over.

“Scotty, keep up!” Katherine shouted from the front of their three-man single-file line.

R.J. looked back impatiently and raised his hands as if to charade Katherine’s sentiment.

“I’m trying,” Scott attempted to yell back, his voice cracking.

The longer the walk home, the slower Scott became. As if being pulled to the earth, his feet and eyelids threatened to not come back up with every step and blink. *I could lie down in this dirt and be happy about it.* R.J. glanced back again and growled, something Scott didn’t catch.

They turned onto the street, and Scott saw their cream-colored trailer two trailers down. The first corner house belonged to a huge black and brown dog that lived outside in a dirt yard. His barks boomed at the kids every morning and afternoon on their treks to and from school. If it wasn’t for the chain-link fence surrounding the entire property, Scott was sure he would have been that dog’s breakfast long ago.

Scott wasn’t sure how the dog was taken care of because the only people he ever saw come out of the trailer were the ones that went in just moments before. No one ever stayed long, and there were too many visitors to figure out who lived there. And if anyone did, Scott couldn’t figure out how they could stand the smell. The whole place reeked of rotten eggs, like when he

had forgotten to take the half-eaten egg salad sandwich out of his lunchbox on the last day of school. They found it in July. His mom threw the whole lunchbox away.

The thought of that sandwich and the smell of the house brought Scott's meager lunch back up. He placed his hands on his knees and threw up until his throat burned. The dog had heard the retching and came running from behind the trailer. The beast hit the fence so hard that Scott jumped, jerking his throat into another round of convulsions. Thin translucent fluid shot out of his mouth and nostrils. The impact on his small body pushed him to his knees, and he caught himself with his hands on the hot ground.

The commotion caught Katherine's attention, and she turned. "Scotty!" she yelled.

Scott, on his hands and knees, drool pouring from his mouth, looked up to see her running toward him. She passed R.J., who was hunched over dry heaving. Scott's arms gave out, and his face landed in the wet dirt.

Scott came to as Katherine and R.J. were hoisting him up the wooden steps of their trailer. A stale stench caused him and R.J. to gag as they stepped into the house. Scott was thankful his stomach was empty. They laid him down on the couch, and R.J. spread out on the floor, panting from doing his part to carry Scott's weight. Katherine went down the hallway, looking in the bedrooms and bathroom. Her search found no one.

"Scotty," Katherine whispered, crouching to his eye level and placing her hand on his forehead. "I'm going to make you a cool bath. Won't that feel good?"

Scott nodded slightly and closed his eyes.

"No, no, Scotty! You have to stay awake, okay?" she said, roughly taking off his shoes and socks to awaken him.

Scott opened his eyes wide to satisfy her demand. She disappeared down the hall, and Scott fell asleep.

“Come on,” Katherine directed, pulling Scott to his feet to wake him up. “Your bath is ready.”

Katherine propped Scott against her and motioned him to step around R.J., who had fallen asleep on the living room floor; all four limbs spread like an “X.” They entered the bathroom, and Katherine sat Scott onto the toilet lid and began undressing him. Every movement of his body caused him to wince in hot aches and pains. She instructed him to step into the tub. As his foot submerged, his whole body shuddered from the temperature. His face contorted.

“I know, Scotty,” she empathized, “but you need to.”

With Katherine’s help, Scott slowly lowered himself into the cool water, whimpering more with each movement until he fully wept as he settled onto the bottom of the tub. Tears welled up in Katherine’s eyes. She pulled her shoulders back and steeled her resolve. She took the cup off the tub rim and slowly poured the cool water down Scott’s back. He began to wail. Katherine cried as she poured.

After an hour of hell, Katherine motioned for Scott to get out of the tub. He stood on an old towel, shivering while Katherine dried him off. Through his chattering teeth, he could hear her sniffles. She directed him to lift his arms and placed one of her nightgowns over his head. Scott lowered his arms and spread his palms over the thin, soft fabric. He understood why she liked these “dresses” so much.

Holding his hand, Katherine led Scott into their bedroom. She repositioned the pillows and pulled the blanket back, gesturing for him to climb in. He gladly complied. She snuggled the blankets around him as he nestled his face underneath. His eyes were already closing when she

kissed him on the head. Just before Scott fell asleep, he heard the front door swing open and a man's voice yell.

“You're lucky I don't kill you myself!”

A loud thud resonated through the floor of the trailer. The front door slammed shut.

Chapter Six

They rode silently for a long time, Tabitha still at the wheel, Scott staring out the window. In his mind, he replayed the phone conversation with Debra, trying to figure out if there was a better way to say anything. Talking to her felt like a lose-lose game, and he decided he wouldn't call back. He tried to push down the relief that came with knowing it was a convenient way to avoid being confronted by Melanie again. Debra, he could lie to—easily—but Melanie...

"Alright, that's enough of that," Tabitha said abruptly, snapping Scott out of his thoughts.

"Enough of what?" he retorted.

"If we're stuck in this together, we might as well get to know each other," she chimed.

He half-heartedly appreciated her effort to make the awkward situation bearable, but he had also been content with the silence.

"Before we do that, where exactly are we going?" Scott asked with a fresh realization that he was at her mercy—a position he was suddenly not okay with.

"I have an aunt in Wyoming," Tabitha responded. "She's my mom's sister...or was my mom's sister...is...was. Either way, that's where we're headed."

"Was?" Scott inquired.

"My mom died while in labor with me. The doctors said her heart couldn't take the stress of it. Aunt Max is the only family Mom had left besides Dad," she continued. "She's sent me letters throughout the years and always invited me to her and her husband's farm. Of course, my dad would never let me go. He always hated Maxine. Said she was always giving Mom a hard time."

Tabitha glanced toward Scott. He figured it was to make sure he was listening. When he nodded that he was, she continued.

“Dad said Mom was too worried about making Aunt Max proud, but she never could. I guess Mom felt like she wasn’t good enough for Maxine’s approval. And Dad has always hated Max for that.”

“So, why do you want to visit her?” Scott asked.

“I don’t know,” Tabitha pondered. “Her letters...there just always seemed to be love in them. She hinted that my mother would have wanted a certain life for me without outright saying so. As I grew up and realized the things my dad was up to, I noticed more and more that my life was nothing like the one Aunt Max wrote about. I kind of stopped doubting that she was wrong,” Tabitha finished, with an expression that implied she had just realized something for the first time. After a long pause, Tabitha shrugged. “I dunno. I guess we’ll see what happens,” she chuckled awkwardly. “I haven’t heard from her in a few years. I hope she still has the same address. Or we’re going all this way for nothing.”

Typically, Scott would have been furious at the idea of such a gamble at the expense of his time and money. But something about how she spoke of her mother and aunt softened his heart. After witnessing the god-awful results of her father’s demands and the danger the man was willing to put her in, he didn’t blame her for running. *Sometimes, running’s all you’ve got.*

“Scott, where are you?” Katherine demanded, her voice trumpeting through the payphone receiver loud enough he had to pull it from his ear. “They called me looking for you. You can’t keep taking off from the home like this.”

“Kathy, I can’t stay there another minute. You have to do something!” Scott pleaded, on the verge of hysteria.

“I’m trying. I’ve talked to the social worker. They won’t let me be the guardian yet,” she replied, her voice softening.

“Why not? You’re an adult!” Scott shouted as tears filled his eyes.

Katherine sighed deeply through the phone.

“Yes, well, technically, but barely,” she responded. “I’ve been eighteen for only a few months, and—”

“And if you’re too old to stay at the home with us, you’re old enough to take me with you!” Scott interrupted; his words broken by his cries. “You’re my only family, for crying out loud!”

He barely got the last burst out before his sobs overtook his throat. He crumpled onto the ground beneath the payphone.

“Scott...Scotty,” Katherine said.

Her voice was like a warm balm on Scott’s soul, but it made him want to be with her even more. He shook from weeping.

“I’m not your only family. R.J.’s still there,” she attempted to comfort.

Scott took a deep breath, trying to calm himself enough to speak.

“R.J. started getting sick when you left, Kathy,” Scott mustered between the spasms in his throat. “He kept throwing up and wouldn’t eat. They took him somewhere else. I’m by myself!” his voice, losing control again.

Suddenly, a car pulled up in front of the gas station payphone. Scott covered his face from the blinding headlights.

“Come on, Scott,” a woman’s voice said as a man lifted Scott to his feet. “We can’t keep doing this.”

Scott gripped the receiver and yanked it toward his mouth, "Come get me, Kathy!" he shrieked into it before the man pulled it from his grasp.

Kicking his legs and flailing his arms, Scott screamed obscenities and threats as the man dragged Scott to the car and pushed him into the backseat. Scott beat his fists on the hard plastic divider between him and the front. The woman climbed into the driver's seat. The man settled into the passenger side. He inhaled, trying to catch his breath, and stretched his back while reaching for his seat belt.

"I can't keep fighting with these thirteen-year-olds," the man said dryly as they pulled onto the road toward the home. "Are they getting bigger or am I getting older?" he asked the woman beside him.

"I imagine it's a bit of both," she replied with a slight chuckle.

Scott pressed his back into the seat and kicked at the plastic partition.

"Did you hear me, Scott?" Tabitha asked, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Umm, no, sorry. What was that?" Scott responded, swallowing the knot in his throat formed by the memory.

"I think we should stop for the night. We've been on the road all day," she replied

"Yeah, sure. Let's do that," Scott stumbled over his words, his mind still catching up to the present.

They pulled off the next exit, which only had a gas station.

"Let's fill up here and then find the next exit with a motel," Scott suggested. "Be ready to fill the tank, and I'll go in and pay."

Scott entered the station, and an older man behind the counter greeted him with a nod. The familiarity of the first stop on his way to Arkansas ran a shiver up his spine. Out of habit, he looked for the “Cold Beer” sign on the back wall. And there it was, faithful as always. He took a couple of steps toward the wall of refrigerators and then decided against it for a reason he wasn’t sure of. He turned back around and approached the counter.

“I’ll take ten on pump...” Scott craned his neck to see what pump Tabitha had parked them beside.

Tabitha had turned up the car radio loud enough that Scott could hear its melody muffled through the store’s glass windows. Tabitha stood with one hand on the pump, waiting to begin her task, while the rest of her swayed to the music from the radio. Scott blinked hard, and the shrinking knot in his throat swelled again.

“That’s pump four, my guy,” the man provided while stretching toward the window to see. “If you’re talking about the pump where that little hottie is dancing,” the man finished without looking away from Tabitha.

“You watch your mouth!” Scott shouted, slamming a fist onto the counter.

The man jumped and stumbled back against the cigarette display behind him, hitting his head on the bottom of the box television hanging off the wall above.

“Easy, easy,” the attendant conceded, rubbing the top of his head. “Didn’t mean nothing by it. No offense to your daughter or whatever.”

Just as Scott was about to reach across the counter, he noticed the news clip playing on the muted T.V. The closed captions read:

Dead body found in Mississippi hotel room. Investigation underway to identify foul play and possible suspect.

Scott slapped a ten-dollar bill on the counter and rushed out. When Tabitha noticed, she started filling the gas tank, still moving to the music. As Scott came closer, her expression shifted from enjoyment to concern.

“Hurry up! We have to go. Now!” Scott growled as he jumped into the driver’s seat.

After the pump handle clicked, Tabitha hopped into the passenger seat. Scott stomped on the accelerator as she pulled the door closed.

“What is going on?” Tabitha burst out as Scott peeled onto the street toward the highway.

“It’s on the news,” Scott replied, trying to keep his voice steady.

“What is?”

“The man...the body...the dead man...Michael...Mickey...whatever his name is!” Scott blurted, picking up speed with every word. “They’re looking for a suspect!”

“What?!” Tabitha shouted. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to get off the road for a bit and lay low,” he answered, his voice tempered with strained control.

They sped past a sign, but not before Scott made out the words: “Dumas Quarries Next Right.” The turn came quicker than expected, and the car nearly careened into the street sign as Scott took the corner. The road changed from asphalt to gravel within minutes, and Scott slowed down.

“We’re just going to find a quiet spot to sleep for the night, and we’ll make a plan in the morning,” Scott reassured Tabitha, who was beginning to cry. “It’s going to be okay. They don’t have any leads yet.”

“Yet,” she whispered, tucking her knees under her chin.

After about two miles, Scott noticed a small clearing, and he backed the car into it as far from the road as possible. After turning off the engine and the headlights, he surveyed their surroundings and noticed the lights and dull hum of the nearby quarry. Reaching the back seat, he rifled through a suitcase until he found his jacket. He offered it to Tabitha and put it on after she declined. He settled into his seat, mindful of the dull ache from the back of his head. He put two fingers gently to the wound and was relieved no blood was evident when he pulled them back.

“Need anything?” he asked, staring forward as if there was something he could do.

Could I be any more useless?

“No, I’m fine,” Tabitha replied, whimpering and hugging her knees.

“Get some rest,” Scott mumbled. “We’re both going to need it.”

He leaned back and fell asleep quicker than he expected.

Scott woke up in a puddle of sweat. Every inch of Katherine’s soft nightgown clinging to him. He pulled his head out from under the blanket and gasped for air. Looking around, he noticed he was sprawled in the middle of the empty bed. He put his hand to his forehead—because that’s what Katherine always did—but he had no idea what he felt for.

Attempting to swallow, his throat clenched and burned. Scott somehow felt better and worse. He rolled himself off the bed, the night air hitting his damp body. He shivered and considered climbing back under the covers, but his intense thirst and the waves of dull whimpers from another part of the house summoned him to venture out of his bedroom.

Scott stepped out into the hallway and listened for the sound. Silence. As he passed through the living room to the kitchen, the streetlights through the thin window curtains revealed

R.J. on the floor in the same “X” position Scott vaguely remembered him in from the previous afternoon. Startled by the sight, Scott knelt beside him and placed his hand above R.J.’s open mouth. *Hot air. Like Mom says, he always has been full of it.* Scott chuckled.

In the kitchen, Scott grabbed a cup from the counter and filled it with water from the sink. He gulped down two cupfuls before remembering the fragile state of his stomach. The liquid threatened to return, but Scott clenched his jaw and breathed slowly until the nausea subsided. As he sat the cup on the counter, the whimpers returned, and he followed the sound.

He passed R.J. in the living room and smiled in pride at the joke he had just made. *Wish he was awake so I could tell him. His face would go real red then.* Scott turned down the hallway and slowly approached the light under the closed bathroom door. The muffled whimpers grew louder. Scott loitered at the closed door for a moment before turning the knob. He pushed the door open just enough to peek inside.

Katherine was kneeling beside the tub, her back to the door. Her movement was familiar to Scott as she dipped the cup in and out of the water, streaming the liquid down their mother’s back, who sat hunched in the tub hugging her knees, her hands over her mouth, holding in sobs.

Scott couldn’t decipher the scene but knew he didn’t want to see it anymore. He backed up to close the door, tripping over his feet before his bottom smacked the floor. Katherine yanked open the door.

“Scott Marcus Abner! What are you doing out of bed?” Katherine scolded in a voice that sent Scott straight to tears.

Upon hearing Katherine, Margaret lost control of her weeping and began to wail.
“No! No! Not Scott, not my baby! Not Scotty! Scotty, I’m so sorry! Scotty! Scott...”

“Scott! Scott!”

Scott lurched upright, and the dull ache in the back of his skull slammed into his forehead. He lifted his hands to his head and moaned.

“Scott!” a voice yelled.

Scott jerked his head toward the passenger seat. It was empty, and the door was open.

“Tabitha!” Scott yelled as he opened his door and jumped out. “Tabitha! Tabitha!”

He froze so he could listen for the direction her voice came.

“Scott, come quick!” Tabitha screamed back before a loud groan shot through the darkness.

Scott ran toward the direction of the noise and found a man on his knees at Tabitha’s feet, his arm raised. Tabitha was coiled into a ball, her hands shielding her head—the waist of her pants at her knees. In a moment, Scott took in the scene, sped up, and barreled into the man before he knew Scott was there.

Scott’s momentum rocketed the men five yards before they slid to a stop. They rolled in the dirt, and Scott pounded on any part of the man he could contact. Scott took blows to his head and sides as they switched leverage positions with every turnover. It was a frantic, chaotic rolling tangle of flying limbs before Scott found himself straddling the man, his hands around his throat. In the upper position, Scott quickly surveyed him and realized he wasn’t as large in stature as he first seemed but somewhat wiry and frail. Scott’s hands could easily close almost all the way around his neck, and they nearly did when their eyes connected. Scott saw something familiar and pathetic.

As if haunted, Scott jumped up off the man and stumbled backward. The man grabbed his throat and violently coughed as he rolled over onto his hands and knees.

“Take it easy, buddy,” Scott said, thrusting his arms out in front of him and inching back, ready to attack again.

The man crawled forward away from Scott before jumping to his feet and darting into the dark.

Scott turned and rushed to Tabitha, still curled in a ball.

“Tabitha, it’s me,” Scott whispered as he took off his jacket and draped it over her bottom half.

He picked her up like he had his daughters countless times when they fell asleep in his and Debra’s bed. He carried Tabitha to the car, gently placed her in the passenger seat, reclined the seatback, closed the door, and turned away as she adjusted her jeans before bringing her knees to her chest.

Scott climbed into the driver’s seat and drove back toward the highway. Glancing at her every few minutes, he felt desperately powerless. His head began to throb. He reached around and felt the wound on his head. His fingers were smeared with blood. *Dang it.*

Tabitha pulled Scott’s jacket around her and fell asleep.

Scott drove until he couldn’t keep his eyes open. He hadn’t really slept since he passed out at The Beaumontel. He pulled into a rest stop and parked under a light in the far back corner of the lot. Scott reclined his seat and was out within a minute.

Chapter Seven

Katherine pulled the damp nightgown off Scott's body and threw it into the closet as Scott shivered naked in the middle of the bedroom. She pulled onto him a pair of cotton pants and one of R.J.'s T-shirts. Pulling the blanket back, she motioned for Scott to climb into bed. Scott locked his eyes on her as he curled under the blanket.

"Where'd you learn to do that, Kathy?" Scott asked through his jittering teeth.

"Do what?" she responded, busily tucking the blankets under his trembling body.

"Take care of us," Scott answered, gazing up at her.

She paused her task and locked her eyes on his. Scott noticed tears welling up in her beautiful blue eyes. She looked away and smeared a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand. Scott, undeterred, waited for an answer.

"Uhhh...do you remember Mrs. Samuel?" she asked, sniffing and shifting her focus to picking up clothes on the floor and adding them to the pile in the closet.

"I think," Scott replied. "The old lady next door?"

"Yes," Katherine answered, shoving the pile further into the closet with her foot. "Before she died, she used to take care of us when Mom left. You were too little to remember, but Mom would drop us off at Mrs. Samuel's house, and no matter what time it was, the first thing she always did was give us a bubble bath. R.J. usually whined until she fed us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches right there in the tub."

Katherine stopped tucking and looked toward the ceiling as if a movie of memories were playing invisibly in the air. Her mouth spread into a smile. Scott looked toward the space she was staring at, straining to see whatever she was admiring in the air. He closed his eyes and

willed himself to remember, to pick up on even the slightest fragment of the moment his sister was recalling so fondly. *Maybe I'll see my memories when I'm eleven, too.*

Still looking up, she reminisced, "I remember one time when—"

"Katherine!" Margaret shouted in a slur from the other room. "Kathy! Girl! I need you!"

Scott looked at Katherine as her mouth tightened in a line.

"Go to sleep, Scotty. I'll check on you in the morning," she said flatly as she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Scott's eyes opened as the rising sunline approached his face. He leaned back and stretched his arms and legs. Still reclined, he gazed up at the blue sky as gratitude for daylight stirred inside him. The sentiment reminded him of the horror of the night before. He looked to the passenger seat where Tabitha was sleeping, her back no longer toward him. She had uncurled herself through the night and tucked his jacket under her head for a pillow. Her long sleeves were pushed up to her elbows, and he noticed they were covered in fair freckles and the scattering of a handful of tattoos. Scott could only fully make out the one on the back of her forearm, a dragonfly drawn in delicate lines.

The image of the man kneeling over her sent a wave of nausea and shame over him. *How could I not protect her? Why can't I protect anyone?*

She stirred and slowly opened her eyes. Scott glanced away and returned his seat upright to avoid getting caught staring.

"Morning," he greeted.

"Morning," she responded mid-yawn. "Where are we?"

"We're about an hour from...um...where we had been..." he stammered.

“From the quarry,” she interjected kindly.

“Yes. I drove as long as I could and figured we both could use some solid sleep,” Scott replied. “How’d you sleep?”

“Better than I expected. I think after everything, I was just exhausted.”

Scott looked out the driver’s side window to find the right words.

“Um, listen, Tabitha, I am so sorry, I should have—”

“No, Scott, it’s not your fault. I shouldn’t have been that dumb, I guess,” she interrupted.

He turned his head toward her sharply and looked at her, puzzled.

“You did nothing wrong!” he exclaimed, louder than he meant to.

Her eyes widened at his forcefulness.

“Well, I should have woken you when I needed to go to the bathroom, but you hadn’t slept in so long, and I had to go really bad. So, I thought I would just go behind a bush, and then that guy showed up out of nowhere,” she explained in one breath.

Scott opened his mouth to speak but realized he had no idea what to say. He stared at Tabitha for a long moment.

“So, wait...did he, um...” Scott stuttered, then paused, not sure how to say it.

Tabitha’s eyes widened, “Oh, no! No, Scott, he didn’t do anything! Except startle me while I was peeing...well, for a second, I thought he might, but he was too focused on getting a hit.”

“What?” Scott said, his body slouching as all the air left him.

“Well, I think he was on night security for the quarry or something,” Tabitha replied. “He was wearing what looked like a work shirt. I guess he was taking a break to get high, and we stumbled into each other.” She paused a moment as if trying to recall. “At least that’s what I

think he said before I kicked him hard in the groin.” She smirked at the recollection and continued, “Ya know, I had a cousin who worked nights at the sawmill, and he said the only way they could stay awake to do their jobs was to take turns taking breaks. They called it ‘kicking the tires’ or something stupid like that.”

When she finally finished, she looked at Scott’s wide open and dropped jaw.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Scott shouted after a long pause.

“What?” Tabitha asked, confused.

“I thought he had...I mean, I almost...well, I could’ve...” Scott stammered.

“What?” she asked louder.

“I thought he had hurt you. I almost killed the man!” Scott bellowed.

“Oh, well, I can see how you’d think that. The whole thing really shook me after it was over,” she murmured, looking down at her hands.

Scott stared ahead for a moment, his chest rising with a deep breath. He let out a long, slow sigh. His mind swirled with the possibilities of what could have been. The relief of it all triggered a chuckle that grew into laughter. Tears spilled from the corners of his eyes as he tilted his head back and laughed harder than he had in years.

But...

The pain that ravaged the women around him—that he was either causing or helpless to stop—the way they were always vulnerable to harm, twisted like a dingy towel rung in his brain, and all the muck came pouring out. He crossed his arm over the steering wheel, pressed his forehead into it, and sobbed.

Debra sat on the toilet lid and rocked back and forth. Tilting her face to the ceiling, tears streamed from her eyes until they landed on her shoulders. She rubbed her pregnant belly as if to soothe herself. She had paused long enough to breathe and blow her nose in a wad of toilet paper before resuming. This went on for hours.

“I just can’t believe you would do this. I just can’t believe you would do this,” she had muffled through her cries.

Scott sat on the floor at the end of their bed, watching her. A heavy fog of shame pressed down on him. He felt like he could have sunk straight through the floor and splattered on the ground in hell. A one-way ticket.

Scott didn’t know how he could have done it either. And he hadn’t meant to do it as often as he had and for as long as it had lasted. The woman meant nothing to him when it started, and she meant nothing when it ended. *It was just a thing.* A thing he hated himself for now. *Why couldn’t I have hated myself enough then?* Scott began slamming his fists on the carpeted floor.

“Scott, my word. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Nothing happened,” Tabitha comforted, bringing her seatback upright and tentatively placing a hand on his shoulder.

Scott cried until he had nothing left in him. He took a deep breath and pressed his back against the seat. He looked at Tabitha, her expression a mix of startled concern. A sharp sting of embarrassment rose in him upon realizing what just happened.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry, I have no idea where that came from,” Scott stammered, wiping the tears from his face.

“It happens to all of us,” Tabitha said softly as she pulled her hand away and buckled her seatbelt.

She looked out the passenger window as if to give him space to regain his composure in private. He was grateful for the sentiment. Gathering his wits, he turned the ignition and put the car in drive. As he pulled onto the highway, it dawned on him that he had been without a drink for almost twenty-four hours, the longest in decades.

“Hungry?” Scott asked to break the awkward silence.

“Starved,” Tabitha replied.

They took the next exit, which billboards implied options a mile off the highway. Scott realized the sign over-promised when he came to an intersection that had a diner on one corner and a bar on the other. Scott turned into the diner parking lot. Tabitha looked at him as he turned.

“I think it’s time you enjoy a different setting,” he said without prompting.

She straightened in her seat and smiled.

The waitress led them to a booth by the window.

“What can I get you to drink?” she asked.

“I’ll take a coke,” Tabitha answered, pulling menus from the end of the table.

The waitress turned her attention to Scott, who replied, “Coffee. Black.”

They looked over their menus silently before the waitress returned with their drinks and took their order. Tabitha replaced the menus as Scott took a long sip of his steaming coffee.

“Not like home, but it’ll do,” he said between sips.

“So, what is home like?” Tabitha asked.

Scott nearly choked on the hot liquid as he swallowed.

“That great, huh?” Tabitha teased in response.

“Well, it’s just. I don’t...I mean...” Scott stammered, realizing he didn’t know how it was, or maybe he wasn’t ready to admit it wasn’t great at all.

Tabitha's expression softened. "Hey, I didn't mean to bring anything up," she said.

"No, it's fine. I just. Um, well, the move will definitely help," he offered. "If there is still a move," he continued, his voice trailing off before lifting the mug to his lips.

Tabitha looked out the window as the conversation fell silent. Maybe it was the kick of caffeine or how tired he was of his habit of bringing down the moment, but Scott scolded himself for making things difficult when all she was trying to do was get to know him. He took a deep breath.

"I have two daughters. Melanie's seven, and Maggie is three," he started.

Tabitha looked toward him, her expression lifting with interest. She put her elbows on the table and clasped her hands together as if eager to hear every word.

"Go on," she encouraged.

"Mel's in second grade, and she's really smart," Scott started. Sometimes too smart. "She loves to read and draw. She's very observant, well beyond her age. And she feels everything that's going on. We can't keep much from her. She knows things before we even tell her. Sometimes, I'm afraid that's going to really hurt her one day." If I haven't already.

"I'm sure there's a lot to be afraid of for a parent," Tabitha said before sipping her drink.

"Yeah," Scott murmured as a heaviness dropped inside him.

As if describing Melanie out loud gave him a realization he had never known before, his heart began to break for her, began to break over all the times he knew she could hear him and Debra fighting, all the times she kept Maggie in their room and entertained her until they finished with the slamming of doors and crashing of dishes. How she took over bath time when Debra ran out of the bathroom in tears because Scott came home from work late and tipsy again.

Melanie just knew when and what to do for Maggs because she knew how to take care of her. *Oh, my little Katherine. What have I done to you?*

Tears welled up in Scott's eyes, and he blinked several times, unsuccessfully willing them to go away. He turned his face toward the window and wiped them as they fell down his cheek.

Coughing and clearing the knot from his throat, he said, "Good lord, I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm not usually this, well—"

"Human?" Tabitha offered.

"Yeah, I guess," he chuckled, grateful to have her there, even in his embarrassment.

"Keep going, keep going," she encouraged.

"Okay, um, then there's Magg's. She's our curious little handful. She's into everything and loves to make messes and chase our dog, acorns, or leaves around the yard," Scott shared, relieved by the lightness rising within him. "She adores Mel—thinks she hung the moon."

"That's so sweet," Tabitha commented. "I always wanted siblings. But my mom was almost forty when I was born. So, even if she had lived, I'd probably still be an only child."

Scott looked at her, an assuring smile stretched across her face. He paused, realizing it was the first time he had sat across from her and really saw her. Her olive complexion was light enough to reveal subtle freckles across her cheeks. The sun through the window highlighted the auburn in her light brown hair. Her bangs framed her thin face, which emphasized her blue eyes. Scott stared longer than he meant to.

Scott had opened his eyes. The bedroom had never been this bright when Katherine had woken them for school. Scott had figured they were playing hooky that day. Kathy's not gonna

like this. He looked beside him where Katherine was sleeping between him and R.J. His brother must have made his way from the living room floor to the bedroom sometime in the night.

Knowing Katherine, she woke him up and made him.

Scott sat up and realized his dire need to relieve himself, grateful he hadn't messed the bed. He didn't want to add more to Katherine's work. He rushed to the bathroom.

Walking down the hallway, he peered into this mother's room. Her bed was empty. He continued toward the living room and saw her lying on the couch. She was on her back, one arm hanging off the side. As Scott moved closer, he noticed the coffee table beside her was filled with razors, spoons, lighters, and needles. An ashtray overflowed with cigarette butts, one still smoldered. Scott waved the stench away with his hand as he maneuvered around the trashed room and toward his mother's side.

"Mommy," he whispered, standing beside the couch, assuming she was awake from her slightly opened eyes.

She didn't answer.

"Mommy," he said a little louder, nudging her shoulder with his hand.

She didn't flinch.

"Mommy. Mommy," he called out, hunching over her, placing his hands on the side of her face, and peering into the open slits of her blue pupils.

"Mommy!" he shrieked into her face.

She didn't budge.

"Kathy!" Scott screamed.

“Someone’s on their way to make sure you’re safe,” the female paramedic told the children as they sat on the trailer steps and watched as their mother was loaded into the back of an ambulance.

Seated between the boys, Katherine stretched her arms around each of them. R.J. shook her off, walked to the side of the steps, and vomited in the dirt. He proceeded to stomp back and forth, occasionally stopping to dry-heave. Scott searched Katherine’s face for assurance; she remained stoic and stiff.

Before a paramedic closed the door, a truck pulled into the front yard, and a large man jumped out of the driver’s seat. Scott recognized him from the green lady tattoo on his arm.

“Margie! Margie!” he yelled as he ran toward the back of the ambulance.

An equal-sized male paramedic stepped in front of him.

“Sir, I’m going to need you to back up,” he ordered.

“Is she dead? Is my Margie dead?” the tattooed man howled.

“No, she’s stable, but we need to get her to the hospital now,” the paramedic responded before climbing in and shutting the ambulance doors.

As the ambulance left, the tattooed man cursed loudly before turning to the trailer and taking a few stomps toward it. When a police car pulled up, the man abruptly turned around, got in his truck, and sped off.

A female police officer approached the children.

“Hi, kids, my name is Officer Thomas. I’m going to sit with you until a social worker can come and—”

“No, I’ll take them,” a voice interjected.

The children looked over to see Mr. Samuel standing in the side yard. Katherine jumped and ran to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She began to sob.

Chapter Eight

The waitress plopped a plate of fries on the table, jolting Scott back to the diner. He blinked hard, attempting to recall where they had left off. Tabitha popped a fry in her mouth and continued the conversation Scott had apparently checked out on.

“Even though I didn’t have many girlfriends growing up, I just always thought it would be so cool to have a sister, ya know,” Tabitha said, retrieving a ketchup bottle from the end of the table. “Do you have a sister?” she asked, stopping mid-ketchup-pour, waiting for an answer.

“Uh, um, yeah,” he replied, trying to track his thoughts.

“You don’t sound so sure,” Tabitha laughed, drowning her fries in ketchup.

His mind finally catching up, Scott smiled and replied, “Yes. Yes, I do. Her name is Katherine.”

Tabitha’s eyes widened as she popped a few fries into her mouth. She tried to talk but put her hand over her mouth as she chewed.

“That’s so funny!” she blurted, still half chewing. “My middle name is Kate. Does your sister go by Katherine or Kate or anything?”

“Those closest to her call her Kathy,” Scott replied. “But occasionally, our mom called her Katy-girl.” Scott shrugged. “She was always Kathy to me and R.J.”

“Is R.J. your brother?” Tabitha asked as she pushed her sleeves to her elbows, placed her elbows on the table, and picked up her burger.

Scott noticed the dragonfly tattoo again. The position of her arm had it turned upside down, and Scott tilted his head slightly to get a better look at it. Tabitha noticed and lifted her arm to look at it herself.

“Yeah, I got this at sixteen,” she explained, straightening her arm across the table to give Scott a better look.

As she twisted her arm around, she knocked over her coke, pouring its contents across the table.

“Oh, my word!” she shrieked, dropping her burger and standing up. “I am so sorry!”

Scott chuckled as she fought frantically with the napkin dispenser while it doled out one napkin at a time. He made no effort to help, figuring he would only add to the chaos.

“Tabitha, it’s okay,” Scott assured, still laughing.

Pausing and taking a deep breath, Tabitha looked at Scott and smiled. She turned her attention back to the napkins, and once she had a satisfactory amount, she attempted to blot the liquid from the table.

“That bar training is really coming in handy now, huh?” she said without looking up. Scott watched as she worked quickly. He lifted dishes for her as she moved across the table. She leaned over to reach a corner when a necklace came out from under the collar of her T-shirt. Scott’s eyes followed the delicate gold chain as it dropped to a charm that swung slightly with Tabitha’s movement. Without thinking, Scott reached up and placed the charm in his fingers. It was oval with a dark aged gold trim, a cream background, and what looked like a tiny blue dragonfly painted inside. Scott froze.

Tabitha stopped her work and slowly sat down, visibly startled by Scott’s sudden change in demeanor. The charm dropped from his fingers onto her collarbone as she backed into her seat. In stiff silence, he studied the charm intently before looking into Tabitha’s eyes—they were nearly the same color as the dragonfly.

“Where did you get that?” Scott whispered.

Tabitha pulled her hand to the charm and wrapped her fingers around it.

“Oh, this old thing?” she asked, lifting it to look at it herself. “It was my mother’s.”

“Hey, if he’s willing. We don’t have room to keep the three of them together anyway. According to the paramedics, their mother might not be coming back for quite some time—if at all,” the social worker had told Officer Thomas.

She had pulled up as Katherine wrapped herself around Mr. Samuel’s waist and screamed that she wasn’t going anywhere. R.J. was still off to the side, dry heaving—every few gags of liquid would hit the dirt, and he’d spit and cuss. Too weak to move, Scott kept his seat on the wooden steps. Even with all that was happening around him, he could only think of food, recalling that the last time he ate was lunch at school yesterday, which had been fully expelled hours ago.

The social worker approached Mr. Samuel. “Sir, you sure you’re good to take the children?”

Mr. Samuel nodded.

“All three of them?” she asked concerned.

Mr. Samuel nodded again.

“Good enough for me!” she declared, turning back to Officer Thomas. “You’re witness to the consent, Officer,” she said, walking toward her car. “I’ll be by in a few days to check on things,” she called over her shoulder.

Officer Thomas tipped her hat to Mr. Samuel and walked to her patrol car. What was a circus a moment ago was now just the four of them in the dirt yard. Mr. Samuel stood motionless

until Katherine looked around to ensure everyone was gone before she released her grip. She looked up at him, and he offered her a smile and wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb.

“Alright, kids,” Mr. Samuel said softly. “I guess it’s just us now.”

He turned and walked toward his trailer. Katherine watched him for a few steps, glanced back at the boys, then trotted to catch up with Mr. Samuel. As she reached his side, she grabbed his hand. He stopped and turned around. Leaving Katherine where she stood, Mr. Samuel walked toward Scott and knelt before him.

“Want to be carried, little guy?” he asked kindly.

Scott nodded.

Mr. Samuel hoisted Scott up, grunting and groaning until he settled the boy across his arms. Scott leaned his head against his chest and listened to the quick breaths made by the effort.

“Let’s go, R.J.,” Mr. Samuel instructed as he turned toward his trailer.

Mr. Samuel’s trailer wasn’t like the Abner trailer. It had a green grassy yard with a pebble driveway where the rocks always knew to stay within their boundaries. Lining the wooden porch were small flower bushes, each with different color blooms. Mr. Samuel’s porch had a roof where two windchimes played a melody amidst colorful wind spinners. Aside from a handful of small potted plants dotting the floor, two rocking chairs took up most of the space.

Mr. Samuel’s trailer wasn’t like any trailer on 12th Street.

R.J. stopped stomping, spit one final time, and trotted to catch up. Katherine joined them as they walked by. They climbed the front steps of Mr. Samuel’s trailer, and he motioned for Katherine to open the front door. She pushed the door open and entered as he stepped aside and motioned for R.J. to go ahead.

“Welcome home, kids,” Mr. Samuel announced as he entered the house, closing the door behind him.

“Your mother?” Scott asked in a rough whisper, his throat threatening to clench shut.

Tabitha stared at Scott. “Yes, it was my mom’s. Her grand—”

“—mother gave it to her,” Scott joined, and they finished the sentence together.

Tabitha’s eyes widened. “Well, that was a lucky—”

“Guess?” Scott interjected. “No, it wasn’t. Tabitha, I don’t know how to say this. It sounds crazy in my mind. But my mother wore the exact same charm.” Scott continued, trailing off, “I guess other people could have the same thing. I know it could be a coincidence, but your eyes are the same—”

“—color as the dragonfly,” Tabitha said before he could finish. “I’ve heard that many times from my dad. He always said I had her eyes.”

Scott sighed and looked out the window. Tears filled his eyes before they fell down his cheek. He smudged them away with the palm of his hand.

“I’ve never cried so much in my entire life as I have in the past twenty-four hours,” he said and chuckled. He cleared his throat.

“Now, this could be just a coincidence. I mean,” Scott explained, still looking away.

“Her name was—” Tabitha whispered.

“Margaret,” Scott interjected.

Tabitha’s expression confirmed the truth.

“I’m sorry,” he said abruptly, standing up and walking out of the diner.

He walked to the side of the building, pressed his back against the wall, and slid down until he was sitting on the ground. He put his face on his knees and sobbed.

What is happening?

After several moments, he stood and walked around the parking lot, attempting to catch his breath. Tabitha came around the building and stood at a distance. When Scott regained composure, he stepped toward her.

“Tabitha, I am so sorry...” he started.

She put her hand up in compassion. “Scott, you have nothing to be sorry about.”

Scott put his hands on his head and paced the parking lot as she waited.

Across from the diner was a long, quiet street that split down the middle of a vast empty field.

“Want to go for a walk?” he asked.

“Sure,” she answered.

They crossed the street and walked for a long while in silence. Scott tempered his breathing, determined not to lose it again as his mind raced to make sense of what he had learned—each moment of realization threatened to crumple him again. He took a deep breath and steadied himself.

“I thought she had died long ago,” he said, breaking the silence.

The words hung in the air for several moments.

“Oh,” Tabitha responded.

Scott sniffled and swallowed the knot in his throat.

“The last time I saw her,” Scott started, suddenly realizing she may not want to know the side of her mother that he had known.

When he didn't continue, Tabitha stopped walking and placed her hand on his arm to stop him.

"Scott, you can share the mother you knew with me," she assured.

Scott started walking as Tabitha kept pace beside him.

"The last time I saw her, I thought she was dead. I found her overdosed on the couch. The ambulance took her, and I never saw her again...I was six."

"Oh, Scott," Tabitha replied, folding her arms. "I don't even know what to say. My dad hasn't talked much about my mom, um, well, I guess our mom."

She stopped walking again and faced the ground. Scott stopped after a few steps and turned, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Listen, we don't have to talk about—" Scott began.

"No, no. I think we kinda both need to," she replied, looking up at him as she began walking again. "My dad never liked talking about her," she continued. "And even though he sometimes does some pretty questionable things, I think he avoids it because he misses her so much. I can see it in his eyes in the rare moments he doesn't shut down the conversation."

Scott tried to imagine his mother falling in love and marrying a man who could raise someone like Tabitha. He thought about the horrible things he had done and how Melanie and Maggie were the best people he knew—despite who he was. A splinter of relief crept in at the thought that his mother wasn't alone for the rest of her life. But why didn't the rest of her life include us?

"What happened the last day you saw her, Scott?" Tabitha asked.

"Well, Mr. Samuel, our elderly next-door neighbor, took us home with him that night. Nothing at all was said about Mom. We took showers, ate dinner, and went to bed. I remember that he didn't have a bed big enough for the three of us to share, so he offered Kathy the

guestroom and made a pallet of blankets on the living room for me and R.J. She went to sleep in the guest room, but she was next to me on the floor when I woke up the next morning.” Scott looked to the blue sky and smiled, “Some habits just don’t die that easily.”

Tabitha chuckled in agreement.

“Anyway,” he continued, “Kathy woke us up the next morning for school like any other day.”

“Wake up, boys,” Katherine said, a touch of melody in her words.

Rolling over, Scott patted his hands on the bottoms of his pajamas. Phew. I didn’t wet the bed—or the floor. He smiled to himself proudly. He stretched his arms and legs, inadvertently landing his forearm across R.J.’s face.

“What the hey, Scotty?” he yelped, yanking Scott’s arm off his face before beginning to wrestle him. “Watch where your—”

R.J. froze, popping his face in the air and inhaling through his nose. Scott paused his jostling and inhaled a big sniff to join R.J.’s inquiry.

“Well, son of a gun, it’s bacon!” R.J. hollered while jumping off Scott and running toward the kitchen, Scott on his heels.

R.J. halted two feet into the kitchen, causing Scott to slam into the back of him. Without turning, R.J. reached back and shoved Scott off. The two stood side by side and watched Mr. Samuel pull a pan filled with bacon from the oven. The boys watched as he piled it high onto a white plate with blue flowers lining its edges.

Picking up the plate, Mr. Samuel turned toward the small kitchen table, “If you boys’ll wash up, you can have—”

The boys were already seated, their arms folded politely on the table, giant grins smacked across their faces.

“Well, alright then,” Mr. Samuel conceded, lowering the plate onto the middle of the table.

Scott and R.J. had bacon in each hand before the plate touched the table.

Katherine rounded the corner from the living room. Scott studied her as he shoveled another piece of bacon into his mouth. She looked different somehow, though he couldn’t place why. She was wearing her usual clothes, which Mr. Samuel had said he would fetch from their house while tucking them into bed. But when she reached over Scott to grab a strip of bacon, she smelled like flowers as her long, soft hair brushed across his face.

“Alright, it’s time to get dressed,” she said, still chewing.

The boys groaned as they slithered off their seats, each grabbing a piece of bacon. They went to the guestroom as Katherine directed. On the bed lay two outfits folded neatly with socks and underwear on top. Scott pulled out the shirt and pressed it to his face. Flowers.

Mr. Samuel cleared the table as the children filed out the front door in a single line. Even though no one had instructed them otherwise, they walked down the pebble driveway to the road rather than crossing over the grassy yard. Katherine reached the street first and turned left toward the direction of their school. R.J. paused and turned toward their trailer and stared. Scott stood beside him, unsure exactly what they were looking at or for.

Katherine placed a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Come on,” she said, turning and walking toward school.

The boys turned and followed behind her, R.J. bringing up the rear.

After a long silence, R.J. droned, “When do you think she’ll be back, Kathy?”

Without breaking stride, Katherine looked over her shoulder, “I hope never.”

Scott heard a muffled gag from behind.

Scott looked over to Tabitha, who was weeping. He stopped walking and placed a hand on her shoulder to bring her to a stop. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in close. She sobbed into his shoulder. He felt her shaking beneath his embrace.

Chapter Nine

Scott and Tabitha walked back to the car in silence, except for Tabitha's occasional sniffles and deep sighs. Scott pulled onto the highway. Scott could see Tabitha fidgeting with the charm between her fingers out of the corner of his eye. She would press on it or run her finger across the smooth, clear finish that covered the dragonfly.

Desperate to break the silence, Scott chimed, "It was awfully kind of your dad to hold onto that for you. He must have really loved your mom."

Scott grimaced, unsure how to refer to Margaret in front of Tabitha. Tabitha looked down at the charm and frowned.

"Oh, Scott. I'm sorry. I didn't even think. I imagine this would have gone to your sister had Mom not..." she trailed off.

Scott had empathized with her struggle to know the right thing to say.

"Well, Kathy and Mom didn't exactly have the best relationship," Scott assured.

"How old was Kathy when Mom, ya know?" Tabitha asked.

"Eleven."

"The idea that I have a sister and two brothers is just, well...wonderful," Tabitha said, squeezing the charm in one hand.

Scott realized that he hadn't even thought about the implications of what sharing a mother with Tabitha meant. He hadn't even thought about Katherine and R.J. in all of this. In fact, he hadn't thought about family much at all, his siblings or his wife and daughters.

"Can you tell me about her?" Tabitha asked, leaning forward, trying to make eye contact with Scott as he stared at the road ahead.

Glancing at her eager expression, he replied, "Um, yeah, sure."

“Kathy had been a force for as long as I’ve known her. She was motherly in all the ways two young boys need but don’t always want,” he said and chuckled. “She’d nag after us for everything, but she was just a little girl raising little boys.” *I would never put Mel in that situation. Dang you, Mom.*

Tabitha leaned against the seat and turned her body to face Scott. Scott glanced over and knew she wanted more.

“Now that I...know what I know...you have eyes similar to Kathy’s and Mom’s. And mine, too, I guess. Having Mom’s eyes was always a big deal to Kathy. Well, at the beginning, anyway. It wasn’t long before she really didn’t want anything to do with anything about Mom. But I couldn’t blame her. She’d gotten the ugliest end of all of it. In fact, it wasn’t until we lived with Mr. Samuel that Kathy finally got to be a child. But that didn’t last long enough, either.

“We knew things were going to be different after Mom,” Scott said, peering over to Tabitha to ensure he hadn’t upset her.

She flashed him a kind smile.

“On the first day with Mr. Samuel,” Scott continued, “We walked out of the school at the end of the day, and he was parked in front in his old pickup truck waiting for us. He motioned for us boys to ride in the back,” Scott said, gesturing with his thumb, “R.J. and I thought it was the best thing ever, nearly busting our heads as we climbed up the side. But he instructed Kathy to ride in the front seat, saying something about how Mrs. Samuel would roll over in her grave if he let a lady ride in the truck’s bed,” Scott added, smiling at the memory. “Kathy felt like a queen that afternoon...and every day after. Until...” Scott said, his voice trailing off.

Scott paused and situated himself in his seat.

“Until?” she asked.

“We lived with Mr. Samuel for six years. A social worker would stop in, and Mr. Samuel would send us outside while they talked. But she quit coming around as often until she never visited again for probably...about the last three years we were with him,” Scott said.

“What happened?” Tabitha asked as she settled into her seat.

“When I was twelve, we came out of the school building, and Mr. Samuel wasn’t there. We figured maybe he had gotten caught up at the store or something—the man loved to grocery shop,” Scott continued, “so we made the familiar walk home without thinking anything of it. Now that I think of it, Kathy didn’t say a word the whole way, which was unusual. We walked up the street and saw Mr. Samuel’s truck in the driveway. Kathy told me and R.J. to wait at the mailbox, and she went inside the house. Not a minute later, she stumbled down the porch steps and collapsed on the ground, hysterical. They think it was a heart attack,” Scott said and paused. “I’d never seen her that upset before.”

Tabitha sighed and looked at the road for a long moment.

“I can’t imagine,” she started. “I mean, I know I didn’t have the best childhood. And I’m not a fool. I know my dad has done some pretty bad stuff, but I feel like I’ve always been wanted. Maybe not loved all the time, but I was taken care of. And Dad’s friends had girlfriends around the bar who always looked out for me and made sure I had what I needed.”

She looked down at her fidgeting hands before continuing, “Uncle Mikey, he was always a good friend. Someone I could depend on. And when my dad was around, he was kind enough, never hurt or treated me badly. I guess I thought that was enough. It could have been worse...” she trailed off as if talking to herself before turning back toward Scott. “I’m sorry my mom made it worse for you and your brother and sister. I never really considered what her life was like before. Dad just always talked about how wonderful she was. But as I got older, I wondered

about the kind of woman that would have been with someone like him. He's not evil, but he's no saint either."

"No dads are," Scott added, a sting darting his heart as he thought of his girls.

"That's true," Tabitha nodded. "My dad has his good moments. Like when he took me to get this tattoo," she said, twisting her arm around so she could look at it. She eyed the dragonfly carefully before adding, "It was my sixteenth birthday. I had begged him for one forever, and I didn't want some alley job from one of the bar guys. So, he drove me to a parlor in Hattiesburg, and he made me promise I'd never get some guy's name tattooed on me," she said, looking out the window as if watching the memory in her mind. She smiled, "It was kind of a sweet moment. We were sitting there, side by side. He finally got one of his tattoos fixed like he'd always talked about doing," she continued. "He'd always wanted Mom's name in the place of some old girlfriend's. So, he had *Margie* tattooed over *Cindy Jo*."

Annotated Bibliography

Berman, Jeffrey. "Letters from the Dead: The Healing Power of Writing in Anna Seghers's 'Post to the Promised Land.'" *American Imago*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2017, pp. 405–422, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2017.0026>.

In his review of Segher's article, Berman likens the art of writing as an honorable burden on authors to weave history, tragedy, and biography into a story as a means to "write the wrongs" of injustices as witnesses-bearers to such events. Without written records, such events could be easily buried and forgotten, forever threatening to be repeated.

Bigongiari, Giulia. "Virginia Woolf and the Emotion Work of Reading George Eliot: A Case Study in Reader–Author Relationships." *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 77, no. 3, 2021, pp. 143–158, <https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12339>.

Bigongiari asserts that the "emotion work" of fully immersing oneself into the text to understand the author's voice and create a deeper engagement with characters. Bigongiari explores this theory in Woolf's encounters with Eliot's works concerning the legacy of Victorian female writers.

Chen, Yu Min. "Writing Beyond the Personal: History, Memoir, and Fiction in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*." *Taylor & Francis Online*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2019, pp. 257–270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2019.1592372>.

Chen discusses Hong's impact on writing as using one's voice to wage war against oppression against minorities. However, this method includes the peace of inner silence while bringing light and change to the world through literary content and engagement.

Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton University Press, 2011, *Google Books*,

<https://books.google.com/books?id=dmIQoPdb1SgC&printsec=copyright#v=snippet&q=body%20feels&f=false>, Accessed 2023.

Among several other topics, Cohn discusses the knowing of the internal mind when creating fictional characters and societies. Calling fiction writers the ultimate “fabricators,” Cohn explores the multifaceted art of exploring the inner workings and dynamics of fiction writing.

Cronon, William. “Storytelling.” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 118, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/118.1.1>.

In his presidential address, Cronon discusses the effectiveness and importance of utilizing stories to convey and communicate the events of history. Cronan emphasizes that using narrative effects to teach and communicate historical events is an impactful method to remember and respond to past events within a community or civilization. Cronan asserts that the imagined history of the past and elements of fiction are complementary.

Crothers, Samuel MacChord. *The Gentle Reader*. Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1903, *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38873/38873-h/38873-h.htm>, Accessed 2023.

Crothers describes the gentle reader as one who engages with the content as a form of art in and of itself. A consumer in which the author would happily pause the story to connect, the gentle reader lingers within the pages with patience. On the contrary, one who is not a gentle reader consumes material for purpose and with impatience.

Didion, Joan. "The White Album - Reach Cambridge." *Reach Cambridge*, 2009,

www.reachcambridge.com/wp-content/uploads/Friday-5th-August-Afternoon-Session-Oversharing-Joan-Didion-The-White-Album.pdf.

In her collection of essays, Didion discusses the relevance of the ongoing narrative in one's life and the integral nature of the writer to find the storyline throughout.

Friskie, Seren Micheal. "The Healing Power of Storytelling: Finding Identity Through

Narrative." *The Arbutus Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2020, pp. 19–27,

<https://doi.org/10.18357/tar111202019324>.

Friskie focuses on the individual's internal experience as it pertains to applying story to their inner narrative when confronting past traumas. By doing so, one can obtain a new awareness from a differing perspective through story. This experience allows clarity to assess painful memories and a better sense of how they process those memories toward healing.

Gabriel, Yiannis. "Storytelling in Organizations, Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies." *ResearchGate*,

Jan. 2000,

www.researchgate.net/publication/235701082_Storytelling_in_Organizations_Facts_Fictions_and_Fantasies.

Gabriel discusses the impact of storytelling within organizations to find and formulate a structure of unity that will link members through collective experiences. Gabriel believes that by paying attention to how narratives are formed around events and experiences, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and politically, one can better understand an organization's history and driving force.

Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, *ACLS Humanities Ebook*, <https://www-fulcrum->

[org.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/epubs/6w924f41t?locale=en#page=225](https://www-fulcrum-), Accessed 19 July 2023.

Within the parameters of this paper, Genette discusses the integral role a preface plays in the front matter of a book. The notion of “to get the book read and to get it read properly” is broken down into two distinct goals. The author utilizes the first goal to build a foundation for procuring the second.

Gerard, Philip. *The Art of Creative Research: A Field Guide for Writers*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Gerard examines and discusses ways writers can research for their work that extend beyond the academic, historical, and record-seeking accounts of information. Instead, he encourages writers to be observers of all facets of life, including the internal and external worlds in which they most often engage.

Hammel, Stefan. *Handbook of Therapeutic Storytelling: Stories and Metaphors in Psychotherapy, Child and Family Therapy, Medical Treatment, Coaching and Supervision*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2019, *Taylor & Francis Group*,

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780429461606/handbook-therapeutic-storytelling-stefan-hammel>, Accessed 18 July 2023.

Hammel’s handbook provides applicable ways storytelling is utilized in therapeutic settings and treatments. Hammel discusses the narrative’s ability to reframe one’s experience as a representative story rather than the explicit traumas and experiences. Doing

so allows the patient to approach and perceive stand-in situations, opening an avenue toward creative solutions without repeated trauma.

Heck, Joel. "The Personal Heresy - Official Site." Official Site | CSLewis.Com, 5 Jan. 2009, www.cslewis.com/the-personal-heresy/.

Heck discusses Lewis' position on the individuality of literature. Cautioning against burdening the author with the idea that knowing the author better influences the reader's engagement with content, Lewis supported the notion that a disconnect was preferable for the reader to evaluate the content on his or her terms.

Hochman, Barbara. "Disappearing Authors and Resentful Readers in Late Nineteenth-Century American Fiction: The Case of Henry James." *ELH*, vol. 63, no. 1, 1996, pp. 177–201, <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.1996.0001>.

Hochman discusses the historical accounts of how writers and readers engaged in the late nineteenth century and how those engagements impacted the writer/reader relationship. Throughout generations, that relationship has transformed numerous times due to social access, differing narrative voices, implementation of literary technology, and reader interest. Hochman asserts that these shifting dynamics impact both the writer and the reader, affecting the reader's experience and engagement with the content.

James, Henry. "The Novels of George Eliot." *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 18, 1986, pp. 479–492, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198125587.book.1>.

Within the context of this paper, James emphasizes Eliot's belief that the writer and reader were equal partners in an interdependent relationship in which both are impacted and affected by the engagement through literature.

Jensen, Meg. "Post-Traumatic Memory Projects: Autobiographical Fiction and Counter-Monuments." *Textual Practice*, vol. 28, no. 4, 17 Dec. 2013, pp. 701–725,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236x.2013.858068>.

In Jensen's article, she discusses the impact that fictional narrative has on the experience of recounting and telling one's experiences. Jensen allows for a play between the real-world encounters and the imagined narrative that may be lost to traumatic events. The culmination of both worlds provides an "interplay between what the writer knows and what they may never know."

Juma, Florence Akumu. "Recapturing the Oral Tradition of Storytelling in Spiritual

Conversations with Older Adults: An Afro-Indigenous Approach." *MDPI*, 17 June 2022,

www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/6/563.

Juma's article provides substantial discussion for the reintroduction of storytelling to unite and heal communities. She emphasizes the therapeutic qualities of the oral tradition and the impact of sharing past experiences to unveil a common humanity as people encounter one another through narrative experiences.

Kirmayer, Laurence, et al. "Healing Traditions: Culture, Community and Mental Health

Promotion with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples." *Australasian Psychiatry*, vol. 11, no. 1,

Oct. 2003, pp. 15–23, <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1038-5282.2003.02010.x>.

Kirkmayer et al. evaluate the usefulness of tradition within communities to heal from past traumas. The authors assert that when communities and cultures engage in communal settings, they are more apt to make sense of collective and individual suffering, providing an avenue toward healing and wholeness.

Kuminova, Olga. "To See across the Veil of Print:" *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2011, pp. 59–101, <https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.3.3.0059>.

Kuminova discusses the writer/reader relationship and how the printing revolution, mass production and distribution, and reader explosion have impacted it. These events disconnected the once writer-focused reader engagement and created a more economic concern for all involved. The byproduct of such transformation has created the "veil of print," in which a writer discloses as much or as little as desired through their content.

Kurz, Emily. "Understanding Literary Context in the Bible." *Ethnos360 Bible Institute*, 30 Sept. 2022, e360bible.org/blog/understanding-literary-context-in-the-bible/#:~:text=The%20main%20divisions%20of%20Biblical,read%20different%20passages%20of%20Scripture.

Kurz discusses the importance of recognizing and understanding the variety of literary contexts in the Bible, including "narrative, law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, letter, and history." She goes on to impress that each encounter with the Bible must be viewed with genre in mind and abide by that genre's rules.

Lewis, C. S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. 1961, Orcutt Christian Church, <http://www.orcuttchristian.org/C.S.%20Lewis%20Experiment%20in%20Criticism.pdf>, Accessed 2023.

Lewis argues that the literature critique can be measured by its reader, their habits, and the way they engage with the material through an open mind.

Lewis, C. S. *The Allegory of Love*. Oxf U Press, 1958. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.170836>. Accessed 2023.

Lewis discusses the allegorical approach to love in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Markos, Louis. "How to Be a Good Reader (According to C.S. Lewis)." CiRCE Institute, 2 Apr. 2015, circeinstitute.org/blog/blog-how-be-good-reader-according-cs-lewis/.

Markos discusses Lewis' argument that material should be engaged with and accepted on its terms, exclusive to the writer and reader's preconceived ideas, notions, and beliefs. That material should be evaluated by its genre and purpose and its ability to achieve that purpose.

Matthews, Angela. "Fictionalizing Pain: Processing Grief Through Fiction Writing." *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, vol. 27, no. 2, 27 Apr. 2021, pp. 137–148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2021.1907140>.

Matthews contends that by putting real-world situations within the context of fiction narrative, one can better manage the players and circumstances they may otherwise be unable to face. Fictional elements as representatives of characters, settings, and scenarios provide the necessary distance that allows the writer to redefine their experiences.

Mitchell, S. Weir. *Doctor and Patient*. Lippincott, 1887, *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15004>, Accessed 2023.

Doctor and Patient is a collection of essays on topics Mitchell believes "every physician has given some thought" and believes those topics will help inspire others.

Mitchell, Stephen. *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word*. First ed., Oxford University Press, 1999, *VDOC.PUB*, <https://vdoc.pub/documents/the-rise-of-the-image-the-fall-of-the-word-56n8u2ed4f60>, Accessed 6 July 2023.

Mitchell discusses the modern world's impact on literature due to the decreasing quality of readership and content engagement. Citing that the technology that once brought written

material to the masses began the uprising in technology that would ultimately distract readers from excellent writing.

Pennebaker, James W., and Janel D. Seagal. "Forming a Story: The Health Benefits of Narrative." *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 55, no. 10, 1 Oct. 1999, pp. 1243–1254, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(sici\)1097-4679\(199910\)55:10<1243::aid-jclp6>3.0.co;2-n](https://doi.org/10.1002/(sici)1097-4679(199910)55:10<1243::aid-jclp6>3.0.co;2-n).

Pennebaker and Seagal discuss the potential that framing a story around a particularly painful experience has on healing. Since storytelling is a natural human process, using a story to frame trauma can provide emotional healing and improve physical well-being. Utilizing narrative psychology by putting words to the internal experiences helps one better process their pain.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, *EBSCO Directly Purchased Ebooks*, <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzc1NzU0X19BTg2?sid=9c7de1a3-8b66-488d-887e-50ebf07c74a9@redis&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>, Accessed 2023.

As a reader and writer, Ryan explores the impact of fictional stories on the real-world experiences one faces and how the narrative can influence the natural world and vice versa. Ryan discusses these implications for all art forms, but within the context of this paper, the writer/reader relationship is central.

Schwartz, Murray. "Where Is Literature?" *College English*, vol. 36, no. 7, Mar. 1975, pp. 756–765, <https://doi.org/10.2307/375173>.

Schwartz emphasizes the importance of literature as a means to unite life's inner and outer realities. Assuming that writers can account for and document historical and social circumstances, Schwartz believes that literature authors impact context within the world we engage.

"The Association of American Law Schools Section on Legal Writing Reasoning and Research Section Annual Meeting: Developing the 5th MacCrate Skill--the Art of Storytelling."

Pace Law Review, vol. 26, no. 2, 2006, p. 501, <https://doi.org/10.58948/2331-3528.1161>.

During a panel discussion sponsored by AALS, professional storytellers share the impact of storytelling within the legal field with law students. Emphasizing that the storytelling elements of character, conflict, and resolution are integral parts of a convincing legal argument, the panel members encouraged the students to utilize narrative in the courtroom. By doing so, lawyers can more articulately shape the narrative of the circumstance rather than allow the jury to create their impressions.

The Bible. New International Version. Zondervan, 2011.

The Bible. New King James Version. Holman, 2015.

Tompkins, Jane P. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* ; Edited by Jane P. Tompkins. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Cited in Kuminova.

Walsh, William S. *Authors and Authorship*. G.P. Putnam, 1882, *Google Books*,

<https://books.google.com.na/books?id=a8kNAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, Accessed 2023.

Walsh explores the fascination readers have with their favorite authors. He discusses the necessary balance in interest and knowledge the reader has to know more about the writer's personal life, methods, and inspirations.

Walwema, Josephine. "The Art of Storytelling A Pedagogy for Proposal Writing." *Writing & Pedagogy*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2015, pp. 15–38, <https://doi.org/10.1558/wap.v7i1.26246>.

Walwema focuses on utilizing stories specifically within the discipline of proposal writing. However, applying narrative to the proposal process, Walwema asserts that writers can invoke a deeper understanding of their topic and write more persuasively. By adding narrative to proposals, writers can create an experience for their readers by creating a sense of common purpose, investment, and resolution.

Webb, Jen, et al. "Literary Bridges: Creative Writing, Trauma and Testimony." *TEXT*, vol. 25, no. 2, 31 Oct. 2021, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.29558>.

In Webb et al.'s article, the authors introduce the theory of "literary bridges" as an approach to utilizing creative writing with trauma recovery. Through creative writing, trauma survivors can record their testimonies in an environment that allows them to approach their experiences to find meaning and resolution. By writing one's experiences, they also can put language to their pain in order to be able to better manage and process those events.

Wharton, Edith. "The Vice of Reading." *The North American Review*, vol. 177, no. 563, 1 Oct. 1903, pp. 513–521, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25119460>.

Wharton asserts that reading is a vice well chosen. Wharton discusses the varying types of readers and their contribution to the literary world. The voluntary reader is the ideal

consumer of literature, engaging with challenging and engaging content as a habit. There is also the reader of books that is interested only in the trendy and easy content of the masses.

“What Is Storytelling?” *National Storytelling Network*, storynet.org/what-is-storytelling/.

Accessed 18 July 2023.

National Storytelling Network defines and describes storytelling's multi-faceted elements, abilities, and purposes across all genres.