

## *Independence*

**Paris, South Dakota. May, 1976**

### **Chapter 1**

I was barely a hundred yards from the house when I first saw Lee. He was standing against the Petersens' fence and it was that more than anything else that got my attention. The fence was long, running around the whole yard. It was always a beautiful clean white, no matter the weather. My guess was that one of Mr. Petersen's gardeners scrubbed down that fence every night, and now there was some stranger with his boot on it.

Sure, he was good looking and all—the best looking person I'd ever seen, truth be told, with his dark hair and the way it fell over his light eyes. But the way he looked at me, with that smile of his with its beautiful row of perfect white teeth, he seemed cocky. So I kept walking, all the while he was still looking at me.

Mama never really talked to me much about men except to tell me they're almost always snakes and think of themselves first. Men she'd known seemed to think they owned you the moment the bloom went off. All sweetness and light, as she called it, and then once you're dependent, well, that's the time you can depend on them least. Until her man Hank, that is. She seemed to think Hank was the one different one.

When I got about twenty yards or so away, Lee raised his hand and said hi, still smiling at me.

Considering Mama's opinion of men, and the fact that he was no one I knew, I should have probably ignored him or, at most, just said hello to be polite but then kept on walking. But it was the adventurous side of me that made me stop. If nothing else, it guaranteed that this day wouldn't be like every other. Mama had already set everything off-kilter earlier. I'd caught her on the phone, kind of whispering, and when she hung up she had this big smile on her face.

Hank's comin' home, she said.

I noticed it right away, how she used the word 'home'.

You mean here?

Well now . . . she said, and she didn't need to say anymore.

You'll be getting married then.

Lilly, don't I deserve some happiness, after all this time?

I couldn't argue with her. It had been nine years since my Pop left so I was sure she got lonely at times. Still, she had me. And wasn't she always telling me that I was all she ever needed? Plus, when she started sentences with my name, it meant she was agitated, so I knew to leave it be.

I'll head over to Mr. Robeson's, I said. Get breakfast.

I walked out the door—and that's when I saw Lee.

Hi, I said, though I didn't smile.

Whatcha you up to?

Do I know you? I asked.

He shook his head, keeping his eyes on me. He was handsome, that's true. But I still didn't much like the way he kept looking at me, slowly shaking his head before he said to me, No, missus, you didn't. But I plan to rectify that.

I figured what he meant by that, but still, in the way he was looking at me, like no one ever told him it was rude to look at people like that: I didn't like it. But I came to realize that in

some weird way, I kind of did like it, too. There had been other boys who'd looked at me like that before, and I usually hated them for it. But with Lee, it seemed I was of a different mind straight away.

Didn't your mama teach you it's rude to stare? I asked.

He shook his head again, bent down, picked up a rock, and threw it. Hit the stop sign fifty clear yards away. Right in the middle.

My mama never taught me much, he said. Except maybe how to drink a whole can of beer in five seconds flat.

I laughed. He didn't. I would learn it wasn't meant to be a joke.

You made a mess of that fence, I told him.

He shrugged his shoulders.

You a relation of the Petersens?

Nope. I'm an auto mechanic. Been working over in Carney.

Never heard of it.

Didn't take me but half a day to get here.

Still never heard of it.

Near to the Wyoming line, he said. Shop closed up, so I come here to Paris looking for work. This guy in town, he told me, 'I don't know of any work, but you may want to try Swensen Petersen. Used to be the mayor and owns just about every acre from town out to Eagle Butte, where the Indians live.' Much obliged, I told the man. And then I asked him where I might find this Mr. Petersen. He points me down this street here, says, 'Look for the big white house. Paris's one palace—probably the only one in all the Dakotas.' Found it easy enough and figured I'd get an early start and try and catch him as he came out.

Good luck, I said. His wife is real ill and no one sees him much anymore. They pretty much just stay hunkered down in there all the time. And when he does come out, he hardly talks.

Lee looked at the house and then shook his head.

Goes to show you, he said.

What's that?

You can have all the money in the world, and it still don't get you what you need in this life.

Lee looked at me like he was waiting for my confirmation. When he stared at me, with those eyes of his, the way his face had of taking me all in, it made me blush.

I guess, I mumbled.

They have any kids? Lee asked.

I shook my head.

How do you like that? Just him and his wife all alone in that big old house.

I'd thought that very thing many times. I often saw Mrs. Petersen on their porch watching the world go by. I always waved to her. She never waved back, but I figured maybe she couldn't because of her illness, so I kept on waving. I wasn't losing anything by being neighborly. Sometimes at night I could see a light on on the lowest level of the house and I wondered if the Mrs. didn't sleep much on account of her condition, whatever it was. Or maybe it was Mr. Petersen awake. I could picture him, in a study or library, at a desk, awake with worry, probably looking over a stack of bills or something. I'm sure there's no fun in being poor, but it never seemed to me that being rich is any better path to happiness. In fact, being rich probably just gives you more things to worry over. And it sure didn't keep Mrs. Petersen from spending her days in a wheelchair anyway.

No doubt about it: give me one solitary room and my working legs over a palace and a steel chair.

What's your name? Lee asked.

Lilly.

Pretty name, he said.

People were always telling me that, I guess because it's a flower, but I didn't see it. Seemed a boring name to me. So I told him as much.

Yeah? What would be a more proper exciting name then?

I don't know. Calpurnia.

What kind of crazy name is Calpurnia? he said. And he laughed and laughed.

It's in a book. Nothing you'd know about.

Now, now, he said, seeing he'd angered me.

And what about you?

Lee, he said, and he did a silly bow.

I could barely keep from laughing.

He walked over to me, leaving his muddy tracks against the white of the fence.

I liked seeing that mud on the fence, I'll admit it. It was like Lee wasn't afraid of anything. It was also like Lee was one thing and the Petersens' fence, and everything else I knew, was another.

He put his hand on my waist and said he was sorry for laughing at me.

Almost any other guy and I would've slapped his face for putting his hand on me like that and in such a familiar place, too. But I let him stay. As I said, it was like he had some kind of power or something. Right from the start. Plus, I wanted to show him that I was no little girl.

How old are you? he asked.

Fifteen, I said.

He smiled again, and this time, I smiled back. And that, I guess, is where everything started.

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There are stories we tell ourselves, and there are stories we tell others. Which one is this, I don't really know. But I do know that it's a story that needs to be told.

Finally, and after all this time, it needs to be told.

### **New Orleans, Louisiana. November 4, 1992. 5:20 a.m.**

I've been telling my daughter all her life that her father is dead. And now, in just a few days, I'll no longer be a liar.

This morning suits the task before us: chilly, overcast even in the predawn darkness, long, as if a promise of daylight is something that will stay on the horizon, teasing, but never show itself fully.

The alarm went off at 4:15 this morning, but I was already awake. I'm not sure I slept even twenty minutes in total last night. I doubt if Lindsey did either. I saw the yellow from her bedside light underneath the door to her room after midnight. I can't fully know what's in her head and I know better than to ask. All I'll get is her usual shrug. It frustrates me. But I remember what it's like to be sixteen. And what she's dealing with is difficult at any age.

So it was in silence that we left for the bus station, not bothering to eat anything, either. Just too early for any kind of appetite and we'll have plenty of time for all that anyway. It'll take

us a whole day—some twenty-three hours—for this trip: New Orleans to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I don't know how I'll do it. There's the matter of length, for one thing. Patience isn't one of my virtues. That's for sure. Even if this trip was for something fun, it would be a struggle for me. But as it is, to go see Lindsey's father, my old soul mate, before he's to be executed, well . . .

I had surgery once. Would be classified as minor—only one day in the hospital. But it didn't feel minor to me then. I was scared witless. What I best remember was going to the hospital that morning in the dark. I had to be there really early and I remember that feeling of driving there, how envious I was at all the other people in their cars, just going about their day, heading to work, no doubt, and how lucky they were to be doing something as simple as that and how so many of them probably hated being up that early and probably hated the jobs they were going to, and how sometimes it takes something like driving to a hospital for surgery—'minor' or no—to be reminded what a luxury simply living a boring life can be.

It's something like that now. We're boarding a bus and it should be fun and exciting, heading to a different state, so far away, but my insides are churning like that day of the surgery. This time, it feels like I need surgery on my heart.

We place our bags of clothes and food above us and settle into our seats. Right away, Lindsey puts on her Walkman and she's lost. A girl of few words these days anyway, once she's got those headphones on, forget it. No getting through. But she'll take off the headphones at some point. Either her ears will start to ache, or the batteries will die—though I suspect she's brought extras with her—or she'll get tired of listening to the same five tapes over and over. So there will be time for me to tell her the whole story. One I've wrestled over for years. Sixteen of them, to be exact. The whole of her lifetime.

It's been a week since she found Lee's letter asking us to come see him before the execution, that it would allow him to die like a man. He needed to see her, he wrote. And she wanted to see him. This I came to understand after two straight hours of her screaming at me for daring to keep such a secret from her her whole life.

"How could you? How could you?!" she sputtered and spat while I sat there like a scolded child, her face so red it was purple. I thought she might actually burst something and so I made her sit down on my bed. But she sprung right back up, called me all kinds of terrible names, asked me again how I could be so thoughtless and uncaring and would hardly listen when I told her that she didn't understand and I tried to explain. Finally, she stormed out of my room, slammed the door to hers, and I didn't see her for the rest of the night.

That was followed by three straight days of dead silence, which was even worse. At least when you're being screamed at, you feel like an actual person and not a ghost.

Then, her demand that we go see him.

"Okay," I said—through a tight jaw and a pounding heart and the chills and everything else a human body can do to itself to punish the one living in it. Like every single part of me was battling with my brain and with the stories I've told myself, convinced myself of, the stories I need to believe. Maybe sometimes there are places I choose to forget or maybe things I add. But now, when I've agreed to tell her, there's a big part of me that knows I shouldn't leave out anything, that it's her right to know. But then there's this other part of me. It's fear; I'm scared she won't understand. Scared she'll think her mother is a monster. And I can't live with that. I've already experienced losing the most important people in the world to me. And there's a piece of you that dies and never comes back when that happens. And I'm afraid there'll be nothing left of me one of these days. I need Lindsey. I need my daughter. I figured maybe these are the stories I

would tell her on my deathbed—that's how I've always pictured it. But now my hand has been forced.

There's this other part of it, too, that has me all stewed up. We all need our secrets, those things to keep to ourselves so only we need to live with them, so they don't infect the people we love. This whole thing: is it really more for me to tell, confession as it were, or is it for her? Who knows the line between selfish and selfless until after we act?

But this is her father. She has a right to know. So, I'll have to swallow hard and keep swallowing harder and harder until I either burst from it or manage to cram it all down and go on living like before, as normal a life as I've managed for myself, and for her, too. But she'll have to be told. Hopefully she'll get what she needs.

But how really, to tell such a story as this? How near and full to the truth do I give her? When I might just lose her should she know everything? I'll have to tell her everything I can and then pray to God she'll understand. Pray she'll still be my daughter. But *how* to tell, when I can hardly understand it myself?

I grip the armrest, close my eyes, concentrate on my breathing and keeping my heart from knocking its way clear out of my chest. I have to do it.

We leave New Orleans behind, heading for my old home, reverse from the journey I'd once made with Lee, before there was a Lindsey. When I open my eyes, I see she's turned away from me. I watch her face in the reflection of the window. Quiet and introspective as she is, staring out at the early morning sky, still black in spots, gray in others, the day trying to come on. I know that face well. Of course I do, as it's my face, too. People always ask us, You two twins or something? Makes me laugh still, and blush a bit. Cause to me, it's a compliment. But as she gets older, it makes her more and more angry, or embarrassed, or something unpleasant. I can see it in the way her eyebrows move and the way the ends of her lips curve down, this little pouty thing that flashes across her face. I wonder if that's something I used to do. I don't think so. It's more him. I can see him in there.

I take a big breath and then, about two hours outside New Orleans, tap her on the shoulder.

"Here's how it started," I say.

She removes her headphones. She stares straight ahead but she's listening.

"I first saw him outside my house where I grew up. Your grandmother had just told me that Hank would be moving in and it upset me, so I left. I was heading to the store and there he was."

## **Paris, South Dakota. May, 1976**

### **Chapter 2**

Lee nodded, told me he remembered fifteen, like it was some long time ago, though I could tell he wasn't much past eighteen himself.

So you know of anyone looking to hire here in Paris? he asked me.

How would I know about that?

You live here, don't you?

I'm not one who does any hiring.

He stuck his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and looked at the ground like a boy who'd just been scolded. I wanted to laugh. He was funny. Handsome and funny.

Well, I wish you luck, I said. I need to go.

You mind a little company?

Free country.

Lee followed me to the stores downtown, chattering all the way. Got his start working garages in his hometown, he told me, some out of the way place no one'd ever heard of, near 'the confluence of Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma'. Got a car, he told me also, and a lot of money from the old job. Even got me a monster set of tools, he said.

I didn't see how any of that was my business one way or another and I surely hadn't asked. But I didn't mind listening to his easy way of talking.

When we reached the grocer, Lee followed me inside. I acted like I didn't know him, which, really, I didn't. And I acted like we hadn't come in together, which, really, we hadn't, even though we sort of had. Strangers always got a second look in Paris. It was one of those things about living in Paris, or any small town, I guess, where everyone knows each other: strangers can generally count on being looked after, cared for, given what they need. And yet locals will still look at them with suspicion. You don't know them, you don't know what they're capable of. And Lee was a stranger.

I said hi to Mr. Robeson and he said, Hi, Lilly, how's your ma, like he always did. He looked at Lee, tipped his head in greeting, but didn't say anything. Just stared at him.

Lee paid it no mind and followed me through the aisles to the refrigerator and when I reached in to grab a bottle of milk, he threw himself in front of me and grabbed it himself. I stood there staring at him and he was staring at me and it all seemed so foolish and then he looked around and galloped to the front of the store and got a cart and put the milk in and then raced back over to me, almost knocking down a pyramid of cereal boxes, and then he slowly wheeled the cart behind me while I walked down the aisles. Every now and then I looked back at him; he'd put both feet on the bottom rail so he could kind of glide and once or twice his weight caused the cart to tip up in the air a little bit. I wanted to laugh at him, but I hid my face when I felt it coming on.

I got the few things I needed and Lee unloaded the items onto the counter. Mr. Robeson was looking at us like he didn't know what, but still he didn't say anything. I suddenly got a sick feeling in my stomach thinking that Lee was going to take some of his own money and try and pay for my things. But he didn't. Just stood there and took the bag from Mr. Robeson and tipped his head to him in thanks and then we walked out into the sun.

We were outside maybe thirty seconds before Lee said, Hold it. One minute. And he went racing back into the grocer. I was thinking I should walk away, but I stayed. Seemed rude of me to just leave.

He came racing back out holding two vanilla ice cream cones and immediately they started melting in the sun. He ran his tongue over one of them and handed me the other.

Only had vanilla, he said. Kind of place sells ice cream doesn't have chocolate?

I like pistachio the best, I said.

Well, seems we already have one thing in common, Miss Lilly. Pistachio's my favorite, too.

I wondered what were the chances of that and thought maybe he was putting me on. But I didn't say anything. Didn't seem a thing worth questioning about.

You in school? he asked.

Just about finished up for the year.

What's your favorite subject?

I like history.

He nodded.

I liked poetry, too, but I didn't tell him that. He didn't need to know everything. That seemed to me a secret worth keeping. I liked Emily Dickinson the most. I hardly ever understood the meanings in her poems, but I liked to try and puzzle them out and I could spend a whole afternoon doing that. Such a line as this: 'Demur,—you're straightway dangerous / And handled with a chain . . .' It put a flutter in my chest when I thought of it. It had a different meaning every time I pondered it, depending on my mood. It never mattered to me if I was getting it right or not. She was long gone by the time I discovered her, Miss Dickinson, and what she left behind were just the words on paper, and they didn't mean a thing all by themselves until someone like me came along and read them. So in that way I couldn't ever be wrong about those poems, and it kept me reading.

I'm guessing you're all excited about this bicentennial then, Lee said.

What do you mean?

Two hundredth birthday of America. It's exciting.

Seems overdone. Everything done up in red, white, and blue. And here barely not even summer. It's like putting up Christmas decorations in October.

I disagree with you there. A country only turns two hundred once. Seems a thing to celebrate all year long.

I shrugged my shoulders.

Besides, didn't you just tell me you like history?

But the bicentennial is the present. It's not history.

He laughed, shook his head. I guess you're right about that, he said, When you think about it. I'll give you that.

When we got a block from my house, I reached out for my bag.

I can help you all the way to your house, he said.

My mama sees me with you, you holding our groceries, me eating ice cream for breakfast

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What about it? he asked me.

Well, that's just it. I don't know what about it and she'll be liable to have questions I don't have answers for.

He looked around, still holding my bag, like he was thinking of running off with it or something, but then he handed it over.

Well, Miss Lilly, he said, I aim to see you again.

At first I just stood there and didn't say anything because I had nothing to say. But then it became awkward standing there in the street not talking. So finally I said, Well, that's your prerogative, and I walked away.

I didn't look back, but I could tell: he was watching me. And I liked that. And I liked also that he aimed to see me again.

Mama could have her man, and I could have mine.

### Chapter 3

The house was nice and cool with the windows open and a breeze coming through. I set the groceries on the counter and started breakfast. Mama came up behind me and ran a brush through my hair, over and over, a thing she'd done ever since I could remember. There were nights we did nothing but sit on a bed or a couch and she sat behind me running that brush through my hair like a meditation or something.

You have beautiful hair, she said.

I never thought of my hair as beautiful. But people told me that all the time, so I guess there was some truth in it. I think it looked a little like straw when I was younger, the color and all. And when it got to be a mess, like after a fitful night of sleep or something, it kinked all up like a spent broom. But then Mama fixed it, running that brush over and over until my hair got soft and untangled again.

When it was just the two of us, before Hank, it sometimes felt like Mama and me were the only two people in the world. Friday nights we'd sit on the couch and share a blanket and watch whatever movie would come on TV on the ABC movie of the week. Sometimes they were good, those movies, but mostly they were pretty dumb. But it didn't matter. Either way we'd have our bowl of popcorn between us and our scratchy old blanket over our legs and I'd feel her shoulder against mine and every now and then we'd both reach into the popcorn bowl at the same time and bump hands and spill popcorn and she'd yell at me like she was mad but she'd smile when she did it and she wasn't mad at all. When it was over and I could hardly keep my eyes open she'd tell me to come sleep with her in her bed. It wasn't like her bedroom was anything more than five feet closer to the couch than mine. But we'd pretend otherwise and I'd get into her bed even with my teeth all filmy from popcorn and fall asleep there for the night.

She never said as much, but of course it was hard for Mama after my pop left. Me, I don't remember it all that well. But it's different when you're older. So I did my best to make things easy on her. She had enough to deal with, raising me and making sure we had food on the table. I could see it in her eyes when she got home from waiting tables at the bar, staying late to clean up and make extra money, being there all night and not getting back all that long before I was getting up for school. She'd usually stay awake the few hours and then come in my room while I was dressing, tell me how grown up I was getting and if she didn't watch it, she'd miss it all. Wake up one day and I'd be a woman. I told her that was silly. Back then, I hadn't even gotten my breasts yet and nothing else to do with being a woman. But she'd say it just the same, every day. She loved me, my mama.

So I held in check that side of me that screamed to get out, go somewhere and do something, so impatient I was for my life to start. It was in my nature to explore and be restless. I always thought it was the best part of me. As for Mama, I think she was of two minds about this characteristic of mine. She always told me that my adventurous side showed I possessed bravery and that was a good thing. There are so many people in this world that are scared of their own shadows, she said, And never take a risk on anything.

The way she would say this to me, standing there with her eyes cast down, what looked like a sad smile on her face, I got the sense she might have been talking about herself. Though she didn't say. Course, she added, that adventurous spirit might also get you in all kinds of trouble.

When Mama met Hank is when things changed. He was nice and all, to her and to me. That wasn't the problem. More that she began to live for him and not only for me and I hated that. Hank drove trucks long haul and so he'd be gone sometimes weeks at a time. Then it was just Mama and me again. But when he was coming back home, she'd start getting all antsy two, three days before. She'd clean the house until everything shined and I was hardly allowed to eat anything or touch anything for fear I'd mess something up. And then when Hank got back it was almost like I wasn't even there anymore. He'd bring me gifts, little knickknacks from the road, and Mama would stand there beaming looking at me and him and say things like, Well wasn't that nice of Hank, to have thought of you when he was on the road.



I guess so, I'd say.

But I never asked for anything and it didn't matter to me if he brought something or not. He could've forgotten for all I cared.

Well now, don't act like I never taught you manners, she'd say.

Thank you, I'd mutter.

You're very welcome, Hank would say, and then he'd turn to Mama and say something like, I didn't forget about you, either. And they'd smile and giggle and act like little kids and it was enough to make me want to throw up. I'd excuse myself and let them be alone.

Hard as it was, I did my best to be understanding. I missed having Mama to myself, of course, but I suppose everyone gets lonely now and again. And it must have been worse if you had someone once and then you didn't. As for me, before Lee came around, I never did mind being alone—preferred it in most cases—but then again I never did have anyone to lose.

I made us French toast and we ate mostly in silence. Mama kept looking at me, getting exasperated, until finally she said, What's gotten in to you?

Nothing, I said.

Well, it doesn't seem like nothing.

Just tired is all. I didn't sleep great last night.

Well, then, get yourself to bed early this evening.

Okay, Mama.

I cleaned up our dishes and afterward I headed out to the porch with a book. I sat there reading when suddenly the sun got blotted out and I heard, Hi, Lilly, what you got there?

It was Lee.

I was surprised by the feeling that ran through me, all excitement and happiness, like I was seeing him for the first time after a long separation. Just like that, my mood lightened and it was enough to make me forget all about Mama and Hank. The sun was behind him and it made a kind of halo and he looked like an angel. The light turned his hair from dark brown to something lighter. And his eyes, those light blue eyes of his, blue like the sky in January when there aren't any clouds and the air is so cold it hurts you to your bones—his eyes I could see real clear, and they seemed even lighter than the light behind him. He was almost hard to look at at that moment, the way you can see something so beautiful that you want to look away and preserve it there forever, keep it from ever getting messed up with anything else.

Lee took the book from my hands.

Why you spend your time reading poetry? he asked.

I guess I like it.

He nodded, like that was a satisfactory enough answer, and handed the book back.

Until I spotted you here, I didn't know which house was yours on account of you making me stop down the street before. Had I known, I would have knocked.

And how would I have explained that? I asked.

You can't have friends?

No friends that look like you.

Mind if I sit?

He sat down on the last step and the light seemed to follow him.

He held his hands together and let them drop between his knees. He looked up and down the street.

Anything to do around here? he asked.

Not much.

Peaceful then?

Boring.

Can I take you out somewhere later?

I paused and caught my breath. But then, remembering myself, I said: I doubt that.

Saturday night, gotta be something to do.

I shook my head. There was no way Mama would let me go out with a stranger, not on a Saturday night. Not ever.

How about tomorrow then? Maybe in the afternoon, after church.

I don't go to church.

No?

No. Used to. But the preacher told Mama that she had to honor her husband no matter what. She disagreed with that, so we stopped going. Besides, Mama says there are too many Lutherans and Presbyterians around anyhow; she calls them 'The Frozen Chosen.' She thinks they can be real chilly toward others, and this includes her own kin. So it wasn't all that hard for her to give up, I guess.

I think me and your Mama would get along just fine.

Just then Mama came to the door.

Lilly?

Yes'm.

Who's that then?

This here is Lee. He just came by. Of his own accord.

Mama came onto the porch. She had on her agitated face.

Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Lee?

I had the pleasure of making Lilly here's acquaintance this morning and I thought I'd come by and say hi. I'm new around here, and don't have any friends in Paris and, well, heck, I don't know anyone in the whole state of South Dakota tell you the truth.

Lilly needs to come in and help me here in the house.

I got up and brushed the dirt from my skirt.

Lee got up, too. It was nice to meet you, ma'am, he said to Mama. To me he said, Lilly, I hope to see you again soon. Still looking for work, so if you know of any.

I'm certain she's not the one to tell you, Mama said, and then she pushed me in the house. Once I was in, she turned to Lee and said through the screen door, I don't think you have any business around here with my daughter. She's only fifteen years old.

Then she closed the inside door, too, something she hardly ever did. Even when we were gone from the house, that front door was left open. I don't think she even had a key to the lock.

Where you know him from? she asked me.

I don't. He followed me to Mr. Robeson's.

Who is he?

Said he was working in a mechanic's shop in someplace called Carney, near Nebraska, I think, and it closed and so now he's in Paris looking for work. That's all I know of him.

You sure that's all you know? she asked.

It was something in the way she looked at me when she asked me that, like she'd already made up her mind that I'd done something wrong or that I was lying to her.

Yeah, that's all I know, I said.

Well, you stay away from him. He looks like the murderin' type.

Oh, Mama.

I can see it in a man, and I can see it in him straight away, the way he keeps his eyes shaded and low when he talks to you, like he already knows to be ashamed of something he hasn't even done yet.

That's silly.

Let me remind you: I work in a bar and I see all types and I can tell a man through and through after only one look. And that man is no good.

I felt a great anger rising up in me, so sharp and sudden it almost took my breath away and maybe because of it I couldn't help myself and I blurted out: You think you know everything? You used to tell me *all* men are snakes and you got this one pegged, too. But you have your Hank now, and how is it you're able to get yourself the only one good and true man in the universe? How is that?

You watch it, young lady. Hank *is* a good and decent man and he earns himself a proper and respectable living instead of roaming around asking strangers for work.

Hank drives trucks. Lee *fixes* them. Now you tell me---

Enough of that! You stop it right there. That man you're talking about, I'm gonna marry him and he's gonna be your new daddy. So I strongly suggest you watch what you say.

Something changed deep inside me. I decided right then that I hoped I did, in fact, see Lee again—and I hoped it would be soon.

Like I said, Mama could have her man, and I could have mine.

#### Chapter 4

I heard it a few times but I was still in that hazy place in between sleeping and being awake. Like I was dreaming real life. But then it came again, this tapping noise, and finally I woke to see Lee outside my window. I didn't know at first if I was dreaming, but if it was a dream it sure felt real, right down to the way my heart was jumping all around and my stomach felt like it had dropped straight into my toes.

He looked like an angel again, or a ghost. His hair and shirt were powdery white from the moonlight. He looked like part of the world around him, the trees and flowers and the night sky and moon, but also apart from the world, too, like floating above it. When he saw me awake, he didn't smile or anything, like what he was doing was the most natural thing in the world. He just kept pointing at the window.

I got out of bed and went to the window and slid it open, little paint chips falling onto my fingers.

What are you doing here? I asked.

He puts his finger to his lips, shushing me. Then he whispered, Come on out here.

I could feel myself shaking as I threw on my old robe. He held my hand as I crawled through the window and I was already outside when I realized I'd left my feet bare, but that really didn't bother me. The night air was cool and clean and when we got away from my house, we walked straight in the middle of the street as if we owned the whole town and weren't afraid of anything.

What time is it? I asked.

Around two.

We walked some more, not talking, and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be doing or how I was supposed to be acting, but after my heart stopped thumping like a jackhammer, I actually felt something like calm.

Where are you staying? I asked.

I got a room over the hardware store on Main. Think Mr. Olson might let me work in the store, too, at least a few days a week. Said I gotta learn the metric system because of the change and all. I told him I already learned it in school, which isn't true. But, you know . . .

Lee patted his front pocket and said, Gotta keep the money coming in, like he'd got all his money right there in his blue jeans.

There was a path between the Petersens and the next house, where Rosemarie Van Waggoner lived, one I used to take all the time, and I led Lee down it. Once clear of the houses, it was nothing but prairie all the way down to the creek. I felt it on my feet, and it was a good feeling—familiar and safe. The coolness of the hard soil and bent grass, the way it held you up. I'd know it anywhere. In summer the grass went very tall and the ticks were in it and you had to clear your legs of them when you got down to the creek. And the grasshoppers bounced off your shins as you walked by like they couldn't see a thing despite their big eyes. There were plenty of snakes there, too, but they always scattered as you approached and all you ever saw of them was their skinny black tails curving away from you.

The moon made everything on the prairie look like a sheet of ice. And the way it shined like that, it made the creek appear as if some giant hand had laid a ribbon of silk across the land, this straight line cutting right through the prairie. But even in moonlight, I'd have recognized it anywhere. I knew every inch of the place and I could tell the time of year almost down to the day just by looking at the creatures in or near the water, like the crazy-looking tadpoles in their pools; some with their little legs already popped and others with their long tails still and no legs and only starting to get froggy with their rounded middles. It used to make me laugh when I saw them, but I know: we all go at our own pace.

I could tell the exactness of seasons, too, even if the wind tried to change things up with its cold or bringing with it some far off hint of coming warmth, either too early or too late for the calendar. When I walked certain paths at certain times of year, I'd scatter what must have been a hundred thousand tiny frogs all hatched at long last and taking part in that great journey to some spot their brains were hardwired to know from the moment they were born. I wonder if it's the same with us, too, if we humans are hardwired to always return home no matter where we roam.

The trees at the creek were tall and full of new life, with little bright green leaves that caught a breeze that didn't reach us even though we could hear the soft whoosh.

It sure is pretty, Lee said.

I like to come down here when I want to get away.

He laughed, asked me what it was I needed to get away from.

I don't know. Life, I told him, and he laughed again, like he didn't take anything I said very seriously.

Sorry, he said when he saw that he'd angered me. Tell me what you do down here.

Think mostly.

About?

About maybe setting off. Away from here. See something of the world. You know?

I do. I do indeed. Not all that often you meet a kindred spirit, he said.

He took a bit of my hair and tucked it behind my ear.

Where you want to head? Any place in particular?

I've always wanted to go to New Orleans, ever since I was a little girl and I saw people celebrating Mardi Gras on TV.

He nodded. I can see that, he said.

Tell me about your mama, I said.

Now why you want to know about her?

You met mine.

My mama is a good enough woman, I suppose. But she suffers, he said. Suffers from all the pains of the world. Tragedies befall some people all the way in China, she gets wind of it, she cries, and prays, and pulls her hair out. And then she says, Nothin' we can do about it anyhow, which is the point, really, and if she knows this already, why does she carry on like she does? But it seems she never remembers that part, and gets right back to carrying on again the next time some tragedy crops up.

What about your pop?

Lee said nothing. Instead, he put his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and turned his face toward the creek and beyond.

What's that? he asked.

What?

Rise over there. This place is level as a flapjack but that one rise there.

Just some feature of the land, I told him.

But it was more than that. I'd spent so many hours at the creek staring at that rise in the distance, the way it piled up from the flatness, the only thing for miles and miles that did, the way sometimes it was black and sometimes purple and other times the same color as everything else, depending on season and my own mood. And sometimes it got swallowed up in the waves of heat that floated up from the prairie when all the snakes and mice and crickets and grasshoppers and everything else laid low in the grass to keep cover from the sun. I'd stare at that rise forever, and sometimes I got frustrated at the way it just lay there like it was mocking me, how it was at once so close, at the edge of the horizon, and at the same time so far away. One time I decided to walk to it. I walked and walked, for hours I walked, and it never came any closer. I swear it, at times during that trek it looked even like it was moving farther away from me. And I had to turn back and it was cold and long dark when I got back to the creek and Mama had a fit for how long I was gone. I'm not sure what it was that fascinated me so much about that rise. But as long as I could remember it had. Maybe it was the way it had of insisting itself on the land. The prairie is all about the long view and distance and a refusal to be interrupted. And yet there was that rise, the only thing like it around. So I couldn't answer Lee's question about what it was, but I knew that I wouldn't have even if I could. I was jealous of its mystery, felt it was something only for me to crack, so I told him I didn't know, that it was only some feature of the land I guess.

I was quiet and he was quiet except to say that he'd like to come back in the day, see what it was like.

Then he asked if it'd be all right if he kissed me. A nervous sweat broke out all over me. And in my nervousness, I blurted out, I guess so, but you better hurry because I have to get back.

He put his hands on my hips and leaned in. I kept my eyes open but he didn't and before he closed his I could see that the light blue in them had turned light gray in the moonlight. He pressed his lips to mine and held them there, just pressing. I worried about the sweat on my lip. We stood like that for what felt like a long time before he pulled away and said, Maybe loosen up a little bit.

I turned away.

I didn't mean to criticize, he said. That was just fine. We'll keep working on it.

It was my first proper kiss. Well, there had been the time when Rand Keiser kissed me up in his hayloft, but we were really young and Rand was a little touched in the head ever since he

fell from a ladder, so that hardly counts. So this was it then, with Lee. And it had me all stewed up inside. All the different emotions and feelings running through me made me feel sick and thrilled and nervous and calm, all at once if such a thing is possible.

But I was stuck on those words, 'just fine.' I wasn't sure what it was he meant by it and I couldn't find the right way to ask.

But there was hardly any time to think about it anyway. Once it was done, we walked silently back up the path and back to my house, the whole way without saying a word.

Thank you, Lee said, For the nice night.

Sure.

I was about to step up again, so I could get back into my window, careful not to trample the daffodils, but he held me for a moment and asked if he could kiss me again, a goodnight kiss.

I guess that would be okay, I said, and this time I could see what he meant about loosening up. His lips were softer and that made it easier to let my lips go soft, too, and now I couldn't feel the hard edges of his teeth behind his lips and it felt nice and there was a certain kind of heat I'd never felt before that went through my whole body and even with the cool night air I felt really hot.

But just as quickly, I remembered where we were and that Mama was inside and what if she chose that moment to come into my room and check on me, what then? Hank was set to come back any day, and she'd been nervous and excited and not sleeping all that well.

Go, I told him, and he seemed to understand the urgency in it.

From my window I watched as he jogged out onto the street and then slowed to a walk like he was only out for a pleasure stroll. And then he disappeared down the street and I couldn't even follow the length of his shadow that the moon threw long and deep.

Once he disappeared, I felt a real emptiness.

I wanted to see him again, more than I wanted anything else in the world.

And there wasn't a thing that I was going to let prevent that. Not even Mama.

I closed the window and got back into bed. But it didn't make any difference that it was three in the morning or even later. My brain and the pictures it sent up to me wouldn't let me sleep.

Instead, it was Lee, down by the creek, Lee looking over the prairie, Lee at that very moment, for I could picture him climbing the narrow metal steps behind the hardware store to his own room, walking in and shutting the door and getting into his own bed, and for the first time in my life I felt the sharp pain of being apart from someone.

It was like our two bodies, separated from one another, were just empty pages scattered in the wind. But together we were like a book. A book of poetry—beautiful all by itself, but something that can change in meaning the more you read it.

## Chapter 5

After school I didn't walk straight home. I didn't stay at school, either. I never did. I didn't have many friends at school, and that was fine with me. Early on, I got a reputation as someone who liked to be by herself, a bit of a loner. That was fine with me, too. Mostly because it was true, I did like to be by myself. But people grew frustrated with you if you didn't have much to say and that was especially true after the local girls became teenagers. They whispered about this one and gossiped about that one and I didn't have any interest in it. And because of that, often their whispers and gossip turned to the subject of me. But I'd never cared much about

that either; I didn't really need friends, I discovered. Mama was all the company I needed, the way she could chatter on sometimes and I loved to just listen and then how other times she was quiet, for days at a stretch sometimes, and I liked that, too, the way we could sit in silence and not need to say a word and yet feel perfectly comfortable anyway. Even when Mama was at work, there were the cats to keep me company. We had four of them, two who never left the house and two who came and went as they pleased, sometimes disappearing for weeks at a time before we found them sitting on the porch like they'd never left. But, like I said, things changed after Mama met Hank.

So instead of turning towards home like I always did after school, I headed instead to the center of town. That's where the stoplight was, keeping the cars on Main and Elder from ramming into each other. Used to be, when I was real little, they had stop signs on those corners and when they brought in the light all the townspeople grumbled about it, calling it government interference and questioning why it was they couldn't be trusted to drive their own cars. But there had been a couple of accidents, one so bad it sent one of Mr. Petersen's gardeners to the hospital, and that was why the light went up. But when there was an accident, at least there was some excitement for a day.

There was another reason for that stoplight, too, at least according to what I'd heard: the shop owners demanded it, saying it was good for business to have people not moving there with nothing other to do than look in shop windows while they waited for the light to go green. It would certainly explain why people had to sit for two, three minutes sometimes with no cars at all taking advantage of the opposite green light. But it didn't matter to the old-timers in town, who only slowed down at that light, no matter if it was red, and then went on through. I suppose you might get to a point in life where you don't want to be told anything anymore. Like you're running out of time and so you try and speed things up. It's funny, because I'd always felt that way, even when I was just a little girl. I suppose life's like a circle where you start and end at the same place.

Mr. Olson's hardware store sat at the corner of that intersection, to the right of the beauty salon. I'd gone into the salon once to see how much it would cost for me to get Mama a day there and I didn't have near enough money. I asked about just a nail polish for her hands and I was short there, too, so I didn't do anything else but make Mama a card like I did every year. Still, like every year she cried when she read it and hugged me and told me how much she loved me, that I was the only thing in this world she needed. I know she believed that at the time—maybe she didn't even allow herself to imagine someone like Hank.

But nothing can ever stay the same. That's something no one had to tell me. And that's why on that day I turned one way when every day before I'd turned the other.