

Flying Fish

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Flying Fish

A Section of a Novel by

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The following chapters constitute a section of an unfinished novel. The section is intended to stand on its own as a long story. I plan to expand the piece beyond what I have written here, and to slow down what currently stands as the ending. The long piece will continue to follow the characters after this story leaves off with chapt Good Lord willing and the creek don't rise, I intend to finish the book and publish it, if it turns out well enough. If it does turn out well, it will only be with the help of Dee James, who might just be the best teacher I've ever known. I am deeply grateful for her help with this manuscript, and for her kindness.

CH

Chapter 1

Stella

I hated to abandon the dog. We spent all morning after the fire looking for him, all over the neighborhood and around the burnt-out shell of our doublewide. Just before I gave up, I sent Anna out to look for him at the church down the street, and I made my way back to our home. The fire department told me to stay away, said it could collapse, but it was all we had and I needed to see what was left.

The front window off the kitchen had bubbled out and burst, scattering the yard with warped chunks of glass, and I had to pick my way through it in my sandals. Flip flops were all I threw on before I ran out the door in my nightgown with Anna in my arms. I had to borrow sweat suits for me and Anna from my next door neighbors 'til I could get to Wal-Mart.

I would have gone back in for Gus after I made it out with Anna, but he bounded out the door right after us. I remember him standing in the yard with the neighbors, but when the fire trucks pulled up, he took off running. The sirens must have scared him. I thought for sure he would come back once the trucks were gone. Somebody's bound to

find him. He was wearing his collar and tags when he took off. I left my mama's phone number and address with both of the next door neighbors, in case anybody brings him back there. I've had that dog since two weeks before Anna was born. He housebroke a lot quicker than she potty trained. I can't help but think that if we could just find him, I could make my peace with losing our home, our furniture, even the photo albums with Anna's baby pictures.

It was getting on toward dusk, with the mosquitoes starting to bite when I finally gave up on Gus and loaded Anna up in the car. The neighbors offered to let us sleep another night in their living room, but I'd already taken enough of their charity. It might be months before I can save up a down payment on renting another trailer. So the only place I could think to go was my mama's, if she'd have us. It seemed better to call her than take charity. She said come on, so Anna and I made the drive.

I stopped off to buy us some snacks and some decent clothes first. I got Anna a little sundress and some new panties, and a pair of those little jelly sandals, pink and sparkly, like she's been begging for all summer. They were on sale now that the back to school shopping's started. I bought me some sneakers, a pair of jeans, and some socks and underwear. That's what we'll wear 'til I can find another job and put aside some spending money. I don't know how I'm going to pay off my credit cards this month.

Anna fell asleep sprawled out across the back seat about an hour into the trip to Mama's, so I drove the rest of the way with the radio turned down real quiet, drinking gas station coffee to keep awake. Soon as I crossed into North Carolina, gas prices shot up. Reckon it's a good thing I filled up the tank before we passed Greenville.

It was full dark by the time I pulled my old station wagon up to my mama's house, with the sky too wide above us, the Milky Way brighter and clearer than anywhere I've been since I left home, except maybe the desert. I looked at Anna, curled up in the backseat like a skinny caterpillar in an overstuffed cocoon, stuffed in between a pile of Wal-Mart bags and a pillow the neighbor loaned us. She stretched out and started putting on her shoes, and then asked me "Mama, what's Mammaw Earlene like?" I wasn't real sure how much to tell her, apart from Mama wearing big dark glasses all the time and walking with a cane she taps against everything. She used to swing at my backside with that cane when I acted up or talked back. Had pretty good aim, too. Daddy used to joke that she had sonar.

First thing I noticed when I knocked on the front door was the way the paint chipped off and stuck to my knuckles, all red in the webbing between my fingers, like the house was bleeding. And the porch was sagging real bad in the middle, all stretched and dipping low toward the ground. My daddy always swore this house was held together with chewing gum and worn out pantyhose. Then Mama opened up the door, and you could have knocked me over with a feather. She's using a wheelchair, like some little old lady. I don't even rightly know how old Mama really is, except that she had me late in life, but she can't be much past sixty. I never expected to see her looking so frail. First words out of her mouth were "don't mind the wheelchair, I've hurt my leg." Not *Hi Stella*, not *-welcome home*. She hasn't changed a bit. Then she said "Y'all have to sleep on the pull out sofa in the living room 'til we can get the back bedroom fixed up. It's a bit of a mess." So I turned down the sofa bed, Anna curled up next to me, and we fell asleep.

When I woke up this morning, my back was sore from the same old pull out couch my Mama had when I was in high school. It's an ugly orange and brown thing that matches the shag carpet. The carpet's so worn down and spotty that it looks like dead moss on a rock, peeling up in the corners, showing the bare gray beneath it. This house has been falling down around our ears ever since my daddy took sick.

I wish I'd have known that Mama had taken a fall, and that she couldn't manage. Nobody called me. I didn't call her either, from the day I left home six years ago up until the other night. Even if I had, Lord knows she'd be too proud to ask anyone for help. Especially me. But one of the neighbors could have called to let me know how poorly she's been. It was Mrs. Jackson up the street that took her to the doctor after she fell. Their phone was busy for an hour after Mama fell; she ended up crawling to the Jackson's farm, across two fields and a dirt road with her hurt foot to ask for a ride to urgent care. She could have died alone here in this falling-down house and I bet nobody would have found her for weeks.

She's too ornery for help anyway. When I woke up all stiff and finally got up off that sofa bed, I made some coffee and started breakfast. Mama rolled herself on in when she smelled the coffee, so I asked if she wanted me to fry her some eggs.

She just frowned and said, "I can make my own Goddamn breakfast." My jaw about hit the floor. I told her I hoped she wouldn't use that kind of language in front of Anna. It was Mama who raised me to go to church in the first place. She was always

mule headed, and she had some funny ways, but she sure wasn't blasphemous. It's funny; she swears just like she's singing a hymn, real sweet and slow and drawn out.

We ate breakfast and did the dishes, same as years back, only I washed and Mama dried, since she has a hard time reaching the sink in that chair. I honestly don't know how she's managed. And then I went to the back of the house to have a look at my old bedroom. Mama said it needed cleaning up, but she didn't mention the chickens. I guess she must still be pretty mad, because she threw open the windows and let them roost on my old double bed, a couple of those Aracunas like Mama's kept as long as I can remember. We used to call 'em Easter egg chickens, what with those colored eggs they lay. They've stained her pretty old pink and blue quilt so that it looks just like wet cotton candy, mottled dark in places. I threw it in the washing machine, thinking maybe it would come through alright. The whole room is crusted with feathers and chickenshit.

"What do you do," I asked Mama. "Just roll on in here in the mornings to get you some eggs?" Then I realized that she can't get her wheelchair through the doorway. There's a raised step to get into the room that she must not be able to get past.

She said the Meals-on-Wheels folks have been bringing her dinners since her fall, even though she keeps telling them she "don't need any damn charity." I guess I must come by it honest. One of those Meals-on-Wheels ladies opened the windows for Mama a few months back, like she was doing her a favor, nevermind that there weren't any screens in the windows. That must be when the chickens moved in. Those windows have been open all spring and half the summer, and Mama hasn't been able to get into the room to close them. Lord only knows how long she'll be in that chair. If she can't use her cane, though, she must not be leaving the house. At least in her own home she knows

where all the obstacles are. I've already told Anna half a dozen times to be real careful not to move things around on Mama.

I figured the first thing to do, before I could get the room cleaned up, was to kick the chickens out. The first one jumped right onto the nightstand and out the window, down onto the ground, but the second jumped back behind the bed. Every time I lunged at her, she jumped away, kicking up feathers and shit all over the place. Mama just slumped in the doorway and listened to the chicken squawking and flapping, then muttered "Mind you don't hurt her." I had to call Anna in to help me, and Lord, that ended badly.

Anna

Gram Early's house talks. She said it was okay if I called her Gram Early because it's too hard to say Grandma Earlene. But her house is a talking house. Her telephone says numbers, and there's a clock that tells you what time it is, right out loud, and a thermometer on the wall that reads out how hot it is when you push a button. Mama says Gram Early needs stuff that talks because her eyes don't work. It must be neat to be blind and have talking stuff. I like it here and I hope we get to stay but I don't know if we will 'cause Mama keeps yelling at Gram Early, and Gram Early keeps yelling at Mama, and it makes my ears and my brain in between my ears hurt.

Mama says this place is a mess but I think it's really neat. There was a chicken in the bed this morning, and a cat under it, and there was something dead under the dresser that Mama wouldn't let me see. She took it outside on a shovel and I sneaked a peek and it looked like a rat, but only part of one cause it didn't have a head. It was really gross.

The chicken was awful mean. Mama said to help her catch it but not to pick it up, but I picked it up anyway and it bit me. It had big fingernails like a cat, or like the lunch lady at my school with the long red fingernails with pictures painted on them. Sometimes she wears glitter nail polish. I had glitter polish in the bathroom cabinet but it got burned up in the fire. Our whole trailer got burned up and that's why we came to stay here and I think Mama's sad about it but I really like Gram Early's house. I asked Mama when we went to Wal-Mart if I could get some new glitter nail polish and she said not right now. I want blue this time instead of purple. With silver glitter stars in it, like my friend Lily from next door had. Lily gave me a purple sweat suit with butterflies on it after our house burned down. I miss my house and I miss Gus and Lily but Mama says the neighbors will keep looking for him and I think maybe he'll just show up here one day like that dog and cat in the movie did. We can't watch movies at Gram Early's because she doesn't have a TV. I asked her why and she said she likes radio better and she can't see TV. She can't even see me. She touches my face a lot and I asked her why and she said that's how she sees, with her hands and her nose and her ears. I tried to close my eyes and see with my hands and my nose but I guess my nose can't see like hers can.

She really can see with her fingers though 'cause she brushed my hair and put it in two braids just like I wanted. She pulls my hair a lot less when she braids than Mama does. I asked Mama why she's so mad at her. Mama said she's not mad anymore, even though she was mad a long time ago, before I was born, and so was Gram Early. But I think they're mad now, too, cause they sure do yell a lot. First Mama yelled at Gram Early about me, 'cause Gram Early said she should cut my hair. Then Mama said her and me would have to go live somewhere else and she left and Gram Early started to cry,

even though she said she wasn't. Once when I was crying in the car Mama stopped at Burger King and bought me a cheeseburger, and the lady behind the counter asked me why I was crying, so I said I wasn't, I had just been to the swimming pool and it made my eyes red. Mama heard but she didn't tell on me for lying. Maybe the lady knew anyway.

Stella

First place I walked in the door of hired me on the spot. Coffee shop just down the highway from Mama's house, not too far a drive, and they were looking for someone to work afternoon hours as well as evenings. It should be enough for us to get by on, and I can work evenings now, because Mama says she'll mind Anna. Don't know when I'll ever see her, if I'm working all the hours she's not in school, but we'll manage. And this'll get us into our own place pretty quick. Probably not a doublewide, but we can make do.

Earlene

We finally got that old guest room cleaned up, and I went to tuck Anna into it tonight after Stella left in a huff. I barely know the child, but I raised a daughter of my own once.. .I reckon I still remember how. I shouldn't have said what I did about cutting Anna's hair, but those tangles feel like a rat's nest. I really didn't mean a damn thing by it.

After Stella stormed off, I asked Anna what kind of bedtime story she'd like, and she asked me right out what it's like to be blind. So I told her. You just sit still and close

your eyes, if you really want to know what it's like to be a blind woman. Just shut 'em tight and sit for a minute, then get up and walk through the house, doing the things I do every day. Use the bathroom with your eyes shut. Take a shower, but use my shampoo. You'll really notice that it smells like blueberries. Or go outside and water the flowers on the porch. There's still a purpose to having flowers, even when you can't see them. But you plant with a different idea in mind. You plant lamb's ear because it's soft to touch, so silky, and honeysuckle along the porch columns, tea olive by the walkway, wisteria along the chimney so you can smell it when it blooms. Summer when the wisteria blooms is my favorite time of year, all hot and sweet and buzzing. Every one of those flowers is a joy to me, for their touch, or their smell.

My Joe planted roses for my birthday the year I turned forty. That wasn't a birthday I had looked forward to. It was the year I started to feel old. But I would have looked forward to it if I'd have known what he was planning with those roses. Thomless, so I could touch 'em, and fragrant.. .they smell like home to me; they remind me of him every year when they bloom. He was such a good man. I wish Anna could have knowed him. He was a real family man, the kind of husband I hoped her mama would find someday, before she ran off with that Mayes boy. Now there was a no-account man, grown from a no-account boy. I remember Joe caught him out in our field, shooting our barn cat with a slingshot, when the boy couldn't have been older than ten. And Joe would have dragged him home and told his daddy, but we all knew Ted Mayes for a mean drunk, and Joe said he couldn't have the boy getting beaten on his conscience.

I'll tell you this, though, I'd whip that boy myself if I could find him today. I knew the day he left poor Jessie to run off with my girl that he would leave her alone

somewhere too far from here, probably with a baby. And I was right, too. It like to have broke Joe's heart if he'd lived to see her run off. But I knew she was a good girl, even then, and I should have told her so. There's a thousand things I still want to tell her. I know she thinks I turned my back on her, but I never forgot the little girl who used to help me tend my garden. Even when she was a little thing, younger than Anna is now, she did the weeding for me, 'cause she could see what she was pulling up. I grew snapdragons in a planter on the porch in the spring, because she and I could sit on the porch and pop 'em open, like little flower dolls with mouths that opened. I liked that feeling, the way they popped. Always wanted a Venus flytrap, but you can't just grow one of those on the porch, I don't reckon. They'd got some of them carnivorous plants in a bog over by the school for the blind when I was coming up. My mama and daddy used to like to go see 'em when they came up to visit on the weekends. I couldn't touch 'em though, and they didn't smell like anything over the smell of the bog.

What I missed out on with flowers was the colors. And I remember when they came out with color television. My daddy ran out and bought a set as soon as he could save up. I never minded watching TV with him and Mama and my brothers before then. It was just like listening to the radio. But when they come out with Technicolor movies and color TV sets, it really hit me what I was missing. I could only hear the program; I'd drive my brothers crazy asking what was going on every couple of minutes. And they could really *see*, in Technicolor. I don't think I'd given sight or blindness much more than a passing thought until then. Blind's just the way God made me, no asking why. But after Technicolor, I got preoccupied with colors, trying to figure them out. Some's

easier than others. In my mind rose looks like it feels; a color with the texture and velvet of petals, and a little bit of edge, like thorns.

I remember when I turned six, I started learning colors in school. Since I couldn't see them, I tried to imagine them through touch. I would pick up a handful of earth and ask my mama, "What color is it?" "Brown," she would say, and I got it in my head that brown is rich and musty, and glossy and smooth sometimes like polished wood. Joe used to say that it was a rough color, earthy, all tree bark and coffee. The one I really wish I could ask him about now is gold. I'd give anything to see that. I know it catches the light differently from other colors, but what does it mean to sparkle, or shimmer? I listen to that old Ella Fitzgerald record of Joe's and I think I know; the variation of her voice, and the way it jumps from note to note, must be like light reflecting off gold. And I imagine that it feels like *goldfish*, slick and wriggling.

My daddy won me a goldfish at the Mountain State Fair when I was a little bitty thing, back when the fair was my favorite thing in the world, for the popcorn and the funnel cakes and the rides that made you feel like you was flying. The world's so different anymore from how it was when I was a girl. Moves so much faster. The girl at the library says you can order books in Braille off the internet and have them delivered right to your front porch. 'Course, I don't know how to use that internet. Years back I'd walk down to the library at the bottom of the hill and check out books on tape, and listen to them at home on that tape player Joe gave me. He bought me some books on tape, mostly love stories. Some of those love stories have got a lot of bedroom scenes in 'em. Not the kind of book you'd want your preacher to catch you reading. I liked them as good as anything, but they always ended the same. The librarian use to pick out some

pretty good books for me, though. Southern Fiction, Flannery O'Connor kind of stuff. For the first couple years after Joe died, I walked down there once a week and picked up a new book. But I'm not in much shape for walking these days.

I know Anna thinks her mama's house burning down was the worst thing that could have happened. I don't know why it took her house catching fire to bring Stella home to see me. When they come up that walk the other night, smelling of wood smoke and burnt plastic, I heard Stella's voice and thought to myself, that's my girl. Then I heard a little voice and thought, reckon I'll finally get to meet my grandbaby too.

I guess Stella was pretty surprised to see me with a wheelchair. I'll be able to get around alright once they take this damn cast off. It's been two surgeries already, and they bandaged it up like a mummy after both. I must've tore my foot up pretty good. Goddamn cat. She usually mews when she sees me coming. That morning she snuck up silent as the grave, and down I went, right on top of her. 'Course she's fine, and I'm here in a wheelchair and an itchy cast. Makes it real hard to take a real bath. Especially now that I've got company, I'm afraid of somebody walking into the bathroom and finding me with one leg hanging out of the tub, naked as a jaybird save for six inches of bathwater. I feel so clumsy, and worn out, and I can't hardly breathe anymore. I started smoking when I was thirteen. What else have I got left besides cigarettes and a mangy barn cat for company? I've got my books on tape and my pottery to keep me busy. It still sells pretty well. I stopped sculpting once Stella took off out of here. And now she's back like she owns the place, with a half grown child, sleeping in my living room.

That question Anna asked, about being blind.. .that's one question her mama never asked me, the seventeen years I raised her before she took off out of here

Chapter 2

Stella

I found Mama in her studio out back of the house, hands buried in a pile of red clay. She didn't hear me come in over the hum of the wheel as she threw a bowl. She worked at it for a couple of minutes, dipping her fingers in a big basin of water and then running them along the bowl, shaping the sides, deepening the center. Her foot worked the pedal for the wheel.

The side of the bowl collapsed, folding outwards, and she stopped the wheel and wiped the clay from her hands with the towel she keeps by her when she works. She heard me when I took a step toward her, and she turned toward me, listening. She couldn't have known it was me, and didn't ask. She just sat there, waiting. I wonder how often blindness has left her frightened over the years, how often she's had to wonder who was watching her that she couldn't turn her own eye upon.

"Stella."

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Anna would have said something by now, chatty little thing. Don't hardly anyone else come out to see me here anymore."

She meant for it to sting, for me to know I'd abandoned her. Every time I think things might get better between us, she puts me back in my place. It's been that way since I was fifteen years old. Since Daddy took sick. And I snap back, just like a teenager, every time.

"Maybe they don't come visit you because you make them feel unwelcome." Soon as I said it, I bit down hard on my cheek, waiting for her to say something awful, or to order me out of her studio.

But she didn't. She just nodded and turned, soaking her hands in the basin and then plunging them back into the folded over clay.

Earlene

It's been pottery lately, mugs and plates, things I don't have to put much thought into. I can throw them on the wheel, slap a coat of glaze on them and into the kiln they go. Long as I use the same copper glaze, I know how they'll turn out. It interacts with the red clay and turns bright blue. They sell like hotcakes. People seem to really like the color, and the idea of a blind potter. I like the simplicity, and the feel of the clay. But it was sculpture, of people and trees, things I shaped without a wheel, that first got me started working with clay. We had a neighbor, city lady up the hill. Fancy sculptor art teacher woman who'd retired to the romantic countryside, all that. She took me under

her wing. Maybe she thought a blind girl sculpting clay was romantic too. But she taught me for years, 'til her city children came and put her in a home.

'Course, by then I was hooked, and even without her, I kept sculpting. And then a piece I made when Stella was a baby ended up in a museum. I was pregnant in August, watermelon bellied pregnant, big enough that I could feel her bounce within me when I walked. Joe and I had been married thirteen years by then, almost fourteen. I really didn't think there were going to be any children for us. They always said carrying children wore you out, but it gave me more energy than I've ever had in my life. I got it into my head that I wanted to sculpt women. Real women. Old women, fat women, pregnant women. I wanted to model their curves and their folds and their wrinkles in clay.

Joe had this coworker, a real big girl who worked with him at the textile mill. Kathleen. She must have been three or four hundred pounds. He offered to pay her to sit for me, and told her I'd have to be able to touch her to get a sense of her body. I don't know how he talked her into it, except that he told her he'd pay her good money. And he must've told her she'd have to undress some, because somehow that girl got it into her head that I wanted her to model nude. And I don't mean bra and panties nude. I mean drawer dropping, jaw dropping, wearing nothing but what the good Lord gave her nude. I sat down with her in my studio and the next thing I knew she'd stripped off every last stitch of clothing and was waiting for me to "touch her all over" so I could get started with my sculpture. I was so embarrassed I didn't even know what to say. My face got hot as a kiln, and I just started laughing. That poor girl didn't know what was funny, and must have figured I was laughing at her, because she put her clothes back on in a hurry.

It took me a good half hour to persuade her to stay and help me sculpt, to tell me her stories, to let me feel her arms, run my hands along the folds of her back. I had her come back a couple of times while I was sculpting, and sit for me some more. She was as sweet as the day is long, and the piece turned out right nice. I felt like I'd captured the touch of her, the way she was all curves and no angles. Not a bone on her that I could feel unless I dug my fingertips into her flesh.

That was the first piece I did to end up in a gallery, and they commissioned me to do the other ones I'd planned. I did the pregnant woman first, and then an old lady, all skin like crepe paper. That one was a challenge, to get the skin right. I asked my great aunt to sit for it, and I ran my fingers along her lines, feeling the way the skin draped off her bones, loose like cloth. It took me about five tries to figure out how to do that with clay. I still have the failed attempts out in the shed, hunched old women with lumped skin that I've held onto all these years since Aunt Alva passed on. She was my grandmama's younger sister, the storyteller of the family, always warm, always talking. A lot like Anna.

I made enough off those commissions to build a real studio out back of our house. I'd been using the part of the old shed that Joe had fixed up for me. We left that up for storage, and built me a two room studio, one room for my wheel and tables, and one room just for the kiln and the shelves. I started feeling like sculpting was something real and worth holding on to, more than just something to keep busy and earn a little spending money. After I lost Joe and Stella, I didn't have much heart for it anymore. Pottery's the only thing I really held onto. I guess I get another chance with Anna. I'm 'bout ready to give up on Stella. She's even bitterer than I am, and that's saying a good bit these days.

I wonder what happened since she's been gone, and whether it was out in New Mexico after she run off with Eddie, or after she got back in North Carolina that something left her so broken and angry. Been living one town over for a year and a half, and I had no idea. She don't seem so bitter around Anna. Maybe it was me. Maybe I left her feeling this way about the world. Hopeless, seems like.

I always wondered if Eddie beat up on Jessie. People talked like he did. Now Stella come back with scars on her arms she didn't have when she left. It's a good size scar like she never had when she lived in this house, but she sure won't tell me where she got it, and so I ain't gonna ask.

Anna

Gram Early asked if I miss my daddy, and I said no. She said why, so I said all I 'member about my daddy is that he used to make Mama cry. But I do remember him. He hit Mama real hard with a chair and then we had to run away. I had to help and be real quiet and carry my own backpack like a big girl. I had a pink Barbie backpack with real rhinestones on it, and I had my toothbrush and my favorite books and clean panties in the front pocket and my princess dress and my overalls and my mary janes in the back. Mama let me bring whatever I wanted, except I had to bring panties and a toothbrush. In the secret little pocket in the front I had my favorite beanie baby. She got burned up in the fire at the trailer with everything else.

When we ran away from Daddy, Mama helped me pack while he was asleep in his chair, but we had to wait until he went and got in bed before we could leave. I wanted to go real bad before he woke up and got mad. I asked Mama when we got in the truck,

after we could talk again, why we couldn't just run away when Daddy wasn't home, and she said it was 'cause we needed the truck. That's why we had to be real quiet and leave when it was dark. But Mama traded that car real quick, for the one we have now, because the one we have now we can lie down in and go to sleep and still be inside the car. In Daddy's truck if we slept in the back we were outside and the mosquitoes were real bad and there weren't any doors we could lock.

Mama said not to tell anybody about Daddy. I think it's okay to tell Gram Early though. I'm real good at keeping secrets. I only tell them to Gus, only he's not here, so I told Gram Early instead. I used to tell them to my parakeet, Minnie Belle, but we had to leave her with Daddy when we ran away. I wanted to just put a towel over her cage to keep her quiet but Mama said she might still be scared and squawk, and that I shouldn't worry because Daddy would feed her. But I miss her. And what if he doesn't take care of her? I don't think he liked Minnie Belle, so hen I'm a grownup I'm going back to our old house to get her. But I'll go when Daddy's not home so he won't hit me with a chair and call me bad names or throw bottles at me like he did to Mama. Sometimes she called him bad names too. She says we don't ever have to go back, but I will when I'm brave and I'll get Minnie Belle. She's family. We named her after Mama's grandma. I told Gram Early about Minnie Belle 'cause I'm pretty sure parakeets don't have to be kept secret from anybody, and I told her how I tried to teach Minnie Belle to say "Anna Banana" like Mama calls me sometimes when she's happy. But she never said it. All she ever learned to do was whistle.

Stella

You can keep the kid but give me back my fucking dog. First words out of his mouth the only time I called him, after I ran with Anna and Gus. Many times as I'd seen him kick that dog, he wanted him back. And his truck. Typical. He probably meant the part about Gus, but I think he said what he did about Anna just to dig at me.

Eddie wasn't always mean. Even after things got bad between us, I never saw him raise his hand to Anna. I would've left him a lot sooner if he had. Or killed him. He started screaming about killing me when I told him I'd sold the truck for a station wagon. But he was so far away by then it was funny, to hear him get mad and know there was nobody for him to punch.

I thought about it sometimes, killing him. And maybe he would've killed me if I'd stayed long enough. But not Anna. I remember when she was born he wouldn't stop taking pictures of her. She was his first baby. He always said his first wife was barren. I wonder now if that's part of why he latched on to me. Anyway, we must've had an entire album full of pictures just of baby Anna sleeping in her crib. He spent a couple whole paychecks just buying film and then getting it developed, that first year after she was born, and I couldn't even get mad because it was so sweet to watch him with her. Some weekends he'd borrow a video camera from one of his buddies at the factory and he'd walk around the house filming Anna in her highchair, all covered in spaghetti sauce, or Anna in her swing in the backyard, or me giving Anna a bath. And he held her all the time.

She probably can't even remember us happy, but for a little while, we really were. Struggling, but in love. That's why it took me so long to leave him. I just kept hoping

things would get better, that he'd stop drinking and go back to work. But when he started hitting me in front of Anna, I had to leave. I miss him. I miss his good days, anyway. I just couldn't have her grow up seeing that and thinking it was right, or thinking that's just what husbands did. My daddy never so much as raised his voice to my mama, let alone his hand. Lucky, too, cause she would've killed him the first time and called it a night.

Chapter 3

Earlene

Some man called about that dog while Stella was at work. Said he'd seen posters the neighbors put up. Said they gave him my number. Anna got her hopes up about bringing the dog to live here. I told them all it was fine with me if they keep the dog tied in the yard, but I don't much care for dogs in the house. That set Stella off, and the next thing I knew, she was yelling that if I really wanted her and Anna here, I'd let the dog in the house. She called the dog "family." That dog is family and I'm not, is what I gathered. She'd leave me here alone again for the sake of a goddamn dog.

"You threw me out once already," she yelled, right in front of Anna. "And now you're doing it again." Then she got real quiet, real calm. "Anna and I will just find somewhere else to stay with Gus."

So I asked what money was she planning to use to rent another place, and how was she going to pay a pet deposit or a down payment without a job. I shouldn't have

said it. Next thing I knew she was out the door, saying fine, she'd pick up some extra shifts at work. She told Anna to wait with me, and to let me put her to bed if it got late, and she was gone.

The house was awful quiet after she slammed the door. Anna didn't say much for a little while, and I sure as hell didn't know what to say, so I made us some sandwiches. Handed her a bag of potato chips and poured her a glass of sweet tea and we sat at that table for a good long time. Must be the first time that child's ever been awake and quiet all at once. Of course it didn't last. Next thing I knew she was offering up Gus for a seeing eye dog. I told her I manage alright on my own.

I like dogs just fine, but not in the house. Her grandpa Joe always had a couple of hunting beagles, but they lived out back in the shed, between the barn and the chicken coop. They never did come in the house. Same with that old barn cat, except that I let her to catch a mouse when I hear one. I ain't never letting her in again, though, after that fall I took. I had to laugh at Anna's offer, but it was sweet. I made my mistakes in raising Stella. I should have listened to her better, should have talked to her like I've been talking to Anna.

Stella

My feet hurt so bad when I get home at night. Even with these sneakers, I'm getting bunions what with being on my feet all night, in and out of the kitchen. Tonight I found Anna all tucked up in my old bed under Mama's old quilt, and Mama asleep beside her. So I helped Mama back to her room. She hopped on one foot the whole way there, rather than fool with her chair, and she leaned heavy on my arm, but when we got to her

bedroom, she said "I don't need you to tuck me in," and turned her back to me. Same old Mama. Still too independent for her own good.

Just before I turned out her light, she said "Anna really loves that dog, don't she?"

I looked at her, in the half-dark of her bedroom. Really looked at her, for the first time in years. She's aged about a decade for every year I've been gone. Her skin's lined so deep and cracked that it's like old leather. But she's mellowed, too.

"That child's real excited that your neighbors found him," Mama said. "So I reckon he can come stay here, if that's what y'all want."

So in the morning, I guess we'll all get up early and drive back home to pick up Gus.

Chapter 4

Stella

Bastard looks exactly the same. Hasn't aged a day in the couple of years I've been gone, except he grew an ugly mustache. Lucky for him my mama didn't recognize his voice when he called to say he had my dog, and then gave her his address. I think she probably would have ridden the city bus all the way out here to shoot him.

Anna walked up to knock on the door with me, but then she recognized him and ran for the back seat of our car, curled up with her little blanket and watched, with real big eyes.

"I've got a guess how you ended up with my dog."

"My dog, Stella."

"The why'd you call?"

"I miss my girls."

"You can keep Gus," I told him. "Just take good care of him and don't come around burning down my mama's house." I was backing toward the car, and he was following me. "How'd you find me at her house?"

"Your neighbors from the trailer park." He grabbed for my arm, and squeezed hard. "You can go back to your mama, you bitch, but you'll leave me my kid. And your car, since you sold my truck."

I did what I saw in a movie once. I stomped on his foot hard as I could, to distract him, then caught his neck with my elbow, hard, and ran for the car as he just sort of folded up on the ground. Halfway there I remembered Gus.

"Lock the doors," I told Anna, and I ran for the front door.

Gus tackled me the minute I swung the front door open, licking my face. I ran back to the car and just hoped he'd follow me. He hopped right on top of Anna. When I drove away, Eddie was still balled up on his own front yard.

Anna

Mama killed my daddy today when we went to get Gus. I don't know how my daddy got Gus but I'm glad we got him back. Now Daddy can't hit Mama or scream at me and Mama and Gus. She says he's not dead but I saw. He wasn't moving anymore. I told Gram Early and she laughed and said that's her girl, but then she said not to tell anyone what Mama did, so I won't. Only me and Mama and Gram Early know. And Gus. I'm glad we have Gus back because I can talk to him about pretty much anything. I'm real good with secrets mostly cause I have Gus to tell them to. I don't talk to the other kids at school really. I mostly sit by myself and read my books at recess.

Sometimes I pretend my daddy's really not my daddy, and I'm really a princess and my real daddy's a king. And sometimes I pretend I'm one of the Boxcar kids like in the books and I don't have a daddy anymore at all. I like Jessie the big sister the best because she takes care of everyone. I wish I had a sister to be Violet. I asked Mama could I have a sister and she laughed and said probably not. That just means no and she doesn't want to argue. But I bet we could adopt one. That's how you get a baby if you don't have a husband, or at least a boyfriend. I told Mama that and she laughed again but then she said go get ready for bed. I only like bedtime now cause Gram Early braids my hair. If I had my favorite beanie baby that burned up in the fire I could sleep better but Mama still hasn't bought me a new one. Or new glitter nail polish. I wonder if I asked real nice would Gram Early take me to the store if she'd buy me new nail polish. It feels real nice when she braids my hair. And she doesn't like it that Gus sleeps on my bed but she doesn't make him get off neither.

I asked Mama when we were at Daddy's house if I could go inside and look for Minnie Belle but she was already driving away, shaking her head a lot. She said she'd get me another parakeet. But I only want Minnie Belle.

Earlene

First it was that dog. Lord have mercy, that child can beg. Now it's makeup. Seems to me like she's too young for makeup, even nail polish, so I told her no. Then she started in on me about sculpting. I told her I was done fooling with all that, that all I make is plates and cups and pitchers now. Table things. Pottery. But she just went on about those flying fish.

"The ones from your dream, Gram Early. The ones with wings like birds."

Took me a minute to figure out what she was talking about. The dream I remembered clear as could be. The dream I have all the time. I just couldn't remember telling her about it. But I did, at breakfast right after she and her mama moved back home. Goldfish wings. Must have stuck in her mind somehow.

"Why would we make fish with wings, child?"

"For school. To put in my classroom."

"How many fish are we talking about?"

"Lots. All over the ceiling."

I reckon she must have seen a mobile somewhere. Trouble is, I'm out of practice. Took me a couple dozen tries before I got a fish that looked right to Anna. It felt right, sculpting those fish, with the clay slick between my fingers. Once I got it down, I made more. Six more. One for every year of Anna's life, plus one for good luck. Then I told her that was enough fish.

"I think so too, Gram Early."

Cute little thing. She's sweeter than her mama was, even if she is just as stubborn. "Can we make their wings sparkly?"

"With glaze? I don't know about no sparkly glaze, child."

"We could paint them with glitter nail polish." Back on about that nail polish again. I tried telling her it would burn right off in the kiln. Somebody probably makes a glitter glaze, though. There's all kinds of tacky things at that store downtown that carries a big glaze selection. I always get the same girl to help me. Seems like she's got good

sense. If I need something apart from the copper glaze like I usually use, I just tell her "I'll trust your judgment," and she picks the colors for me.

It wasn't really glaze that Anna was after, though. And in the end, I walked the child down to the store. She got three different shades of glitter nail polish, and was fuming up the house painting her fingers and toes all different colors the minute we got home.

Stella

When I get off shift at the diner, what I like to do is this: I pour my travel mug full of coffee and take it with me to that big bookstore near the mall. I sit in those big armchairs on the coffee-shop side of the bookstore, drink my travel mug down, and flip through the wedding magazines. It's a game, I guess. If I could have one thing on this page, what would it be? Or okay, maybe two things from this page. I love the glossy covers, the pictures of the dresses and the flowers and the rings and all the fancy places you can go for your honeymoon. Always have. I don't buy 'em anymore, but I had a whole stockpile in my old bedroom closet, before me and Eddie ran off. I had my whole wedding all planned out when I was a little girl. I wanted a train on a silk wedding dress, a mantilla veil, and I was going to carry irises in my bouquet. I wanted to wear gloves, with the ring finger that pulls off so he could slip the wedding ring on.

We didn't elope, really. That's what we told everybody, but Jessie must have known better, cause they weren't divorced proper. I don't rightly know if they ever did get divorced proper. Eddie never married me, and after we left for New Mexico, we never talked about Jessie again. He just sort of moved out of her house and in with me,

in a trailer outside of Santa Fe. I don't know how we picked New Mexico. I had an uncle there, and he used to send postcards. It looked real pretty, and we had to go somewhere, and I was getting real tired of long winters. When we left, my feet were too swole up to fit in my boots. I wanted to move to where I could wear flip flops year round, pregnant or no.

It wasn't what I expected. New Mexico. The trailer. Life with Eddie.

When I told Mama I was leaving, she said "You pregnant?"

"Five months."

Mama just nodded. "Figures."

"What's that mean, figures?" I said it real tough, like I was angry, but mostly I guess I was scared, thinking *are you going to tell me to get out*

"Whose baby is it?"

This one I didn't want to answer, but I told her anyway, and waited for the storm. "Eddie Mayes."

"Stella June, that man is married!" Mama was angry now, not cold, not distant. She hunched down in her chair. "Poor Jessie. Don't you know how people talk? What kind of business have you got with a married man? And thirty years old if he's a day."

"Thirty two." I said it real defiant like.

"You gonna keep the baby?"

"Reckon so."

"He gonna leave Jessie?"

"Yes, Mama, he's gonna leave poor sweet Jessie."

Mama slapped for me, bare handed, and I ducked back. She missed by a foot, and just brought her own face and cupped it over her mouth, slumped over her coffee at the kitchen table. I kept on carrying my bags out to Eddie's truck. He was waiting on me at his place, I was in a hurry, and Mama was cold to me again.

"Have y'all found a place to live?" she asked, on about my fourth trip to the car.

"We're moving away."

"Where's away?"

I shrugged, knowing Mama couldn't see it. *Ask me to stay here with you. Say you 'll help me with the baby.*

"Good luck, then." She took a sip of her coffee. "You need money?"

"I don't need your money, Mama." *You 're not going to ask me to stay. You 're not going to offer to babysit while I finish school. You 're not going to tell me it 'll all be alright.* I slammed the door, walked down the driveway, and drove to Eddie's. He was waiting at the curb, no suitcase, no nothing.

"Didn't want to make a big show of leaving," he said. I scooted over, he hopped into the driver's seat, and we just kept on driving.

Anna

After school I take the bus home most days and Gram Early makes me peanut butter toast, and sometimes she lets me have a coke, and we go out back to her studio. She even let me see the back room with all the weird clay people in it.

"Failed sculptures," she called them. I don't really know what that means. I think it means she thinks they're bad, like when you fail at school. There's a boy in my class,

Jim Hopkins, and he's failing math and reading and everyone knows because his big sister in fourth grade yelled it on the playground, "At least I'm not failing math and reading," after he called her dumb.

Gram Early is going to make me out of clay. I have to sit real still on this stool in the shed and she touches my face and then she touches the clay and I get clay all over my face and it tickles and it itches but I still have to sit still. Then I get to take a bath. It's really fun.

Mama has to go to work a lot, even when I'm not at school. Last night she came home before bedtime, after my bath, and we painted our fingernails together. She did hers just pink, with no glitter, and I did mine even more pink, with lots of glitter, and I didn't get much on my fingers.

Gram Early said "Maybe you'll be a painter." I said "I want to be a sculptor like you and make butterfly fish." She looked at me real funny, but then she said "do you want me to teach you?" and I said "yes," and she showed me how to make a bowl. Not on the wheel like she does. I have to wait for my hands to get bigger first. She called it a pinch pot. I think it sounds funny. You make it with just your fingers.

"It was the first thing I learned how to make out of clay," Gram Early said, but she must have been more little than me cause I already know how to make a snowman and a snake and cookie cutter ornaments cause we made all those in art class last year, out of real clay, but we used the white kind, not the red kind Gram Early likes to use.

Earlene

Makes me nervous, having a child in the studio again. She's already broke two dinner plates and a sugar bowl, all greenware, and that's in spite of me not letting her in the kiln room very often. I guess it does break pretty easy. I've gotten so used to handling it over the years that I don't crack it very often, but little hands have a hard time learnin' to be gentle. I remember that from teaching Stella to throw on the wheel. Anna's too little for that. I've still got her doing handwork, mostly pinch pots. It's a good way to get a feel for the clay.

I got three walls worth of drying racks in the room with the kiln, for the greenware and the bisqueware and then the bisqued stuff with raw glaze on it. And the fourth wall is all twice fired and ready to ship off. Joe built all the shelves himself, not long after we finished the studio. I don't let Anna touch the greenware or the raw glazed stuff. Not that raw glaze will hurt her; I switched to all lead-free years ago. It just scratches so easy, and then I have to sand it down and glaze it all over again. Sometimes I have a hard time feeling where the scratches are until after it comes out of the kiln the second time, and then it's ruined.

Truth be told, Stella had a steadier hand than Anna, at the same age. She was a real talented little thing. I guess she'd had more practice, though. She doesn't seem to have taught Anna a thing about working with clay. I've still got some of her pottery in the storage room with all my sculptures that didn't work out. Joe never would let me get rid of those. Before he came along, I just smashed everything that didn't turn out. Stella's got a couple of real nice pitchers, and some bowls, and I know she glazed it up real nice, but I don't know what all designs she used. She had books of glaze patterns

that her daddy bought her. Maybe I should drag those out and show them to Anna. I glaze everything real simple, mostly that blue that sells real well.

Anna

Mama and Gram Early yell sometimes but mostly they don't talk at all and the house is real quiet and I don't like it. I spend most days walking in the field with Gus, picking sweet pea and Queen Anne's lace and black eyed susans for Mama and Gram Early. Gram Early made me blue vases to put all my flowers in, and I can put 'em on the kitchen table as long as I shake 'em real hard to knock all the bugs off before I come inside.

Gram Early likes for me to tell her about the flowers, what color they are and what they look like and what they remind me of. Queen Anne's lace reminds me of spider webs a little. And sweet pea looks a little bit like pink shoes like fairies would wear. Or Thumbelina. I look for fairies in the field sometimes, but I don't never see any. I think Mama likes the flowers too. She showed me how to tie them together with ribbon and hang them up to dry. It works okay with the Queen Anne's lace, but some flowers just fall apart when you try to save 'em.

Earlene

After Joe died. That's how my life splits - before and after Joe died. I lost Stella after he was gone. Maybe while he was dying. I didn't pay much attention to her. The whole house revolved around Joe, near the end, feeding him and bathing him, just like we did for Stella when she was a baby.

And then he was gone, and it seemed like Stella was too. She just stopped caring about school, for one thing. Didn't show up for class, didn't show up for tests.. .one of her teachers wanted me to bring her in to talk to the guidance counselor about test taking anxiety. My ass. I finally stopped going to them teacher conferences. I just told her one night, "If you don't care, I don't either." I don't know if she dropped out right then or after she ran off with Eddie. She didn't stay home of a morning, that's for sure. She was on that school bus every day. What she did after they got to that parking lot I just couldn't control.

While he was dying, when he couldn't get out of bed and the hospice nurses were changing his diapers, we didn't talk much. None of us. I told him I loved him every time he woke up.

"I know," he said, every time, and stroked my cheek.

I laid in the bed next to him, wrapped my arms around him. He was pitiful, all bones and loose skin, the last bits of my Joe with breath left in him, whispering "I know." And one morning I woke up and it was quiet. No ragged breathing, no more Joe.

It was real early, before the hospice nurse came, and I laid there with him in my arms until the roosters started in. Then I got up, made coffee, took some in to Stella. It was the only time I ever brought her breakfast in bed.

She rolled over, real sleepy, and she knew. "Daddy's dead."

I nodded, stroked her hair, and she rolled away. I left the coffee on her nightstand.

Stella

Daddy was always the mediator, always helping us make up, always telling me to look at things from her point of view. And after Daddy died we couldn't figure it out on our own. It was my fault, what happened with school. And with Eddie, too. I was real proud, in the tenth grade, cause I only turned in two homework assignments the whole year long. One was this map of Latin America. I took a library book home, with some pictures to copy from, and I spent just about the whole night at the kitchen table, drawing with those Prismacolor pencils Daddy gave me. It turned out pretty nice, that map. The other thing was an insect collection I didn't tell Mama about. I just kept it in the deep freezer until they were ready to be mounted. She found it one day, felt how light it was and knew it wasn't food. I heard her in the cellar, yelling up through the vents,

"Stella, what have you got in my freezer?" When I got down there she was giving the bag a good shake, listening to the sound it made.

"Lord, Mama, don't shake them! Their wings will break."

"Wings?" Her voice had an edge to it. She held the bag away from her, as if it was alive maybe.

"It's bugs." I said it real quiet-like. "For class." I started to walk back upstairs, then I heard her behind me.

"Uh uh. If you're gonna keep bugs in my deep freeze, you're going to have to at least tell me why."

"Zoology class."

"They dead?"

"Good and dead."

"You sure this ain't pot, now?" "You don't keep pot in the deep freeze, Mama."

She put the bag back in the freezer real careful-like, closed the top, and just walked away. I pinned them into a display case, all butterflies and beetles, speared with those sewing pins with the frosted glass heads. I got a pretty good grade on that one. It almost made me think I wasn't too stupid to do well at school, until I failed a couple more of the tests I showed up for. Those butterflies looked real nice in their case. I kept em for a while, after I got them back from my teacher, but then their wings started to fall off and I threw the whole thing in the kitchen trash.

Eleventh grade, I didn't do any homework. Twelfth grade I was gone. Especially after I got to know Eddie, and the couple of boys before him, I stopped going to class. I didn't run all that wild. Before Eddie, I dated mostly seniors, and a couple of dropouts. We stayed mostly in the school parking lot, til someone knocked on the car windows to chase us off, or tried to make us come inside, and then we drove to Burger King, and sometimes the Parkway. With Eddie it was different. He took me to movies sometimes, and motels. Mostly motels. Seemed like Jessie must not have touched him in years, that man was so starved, just to be touched. He'd hold my hand in the car, or rest his hand on my knee at the movies.. .took me years to figure out he wasn't just being sweet. Like a dog pissing on a fence, really, just marking his territory. But before we ran off.. .he could be pretty sweet sometimes.

There's a man at the diner that looks at me kind of like Eddie did, early on before he hated me. Blue eyes, work shirts, boots. Orders coffee and a sandwich every day for lunch. Either he really, really likes grilled cheese, or he's gathering up courage to ask me

out. I don't know whether to hope for it or against it. I ought to be spending more time with Anna. But a man.. .I miss having a man to wake up to.

Chapter 5

Stella

I probably should have called first, but I couldn't think what to say, apart from I'm sorry, and I didn't want to just say that over the phone. So I just drove over to her house. Eddie's old house, where he waited for me in the driveway the day we ran off. We had a couple of youth group meetings there when I was in middle school, when Eddie and Jessie were newlyweds, helping out with the junior high youth.

She was working in her garden when I pulled up. It looked real nice, hydrangeas and columbines. I parked on the street. She didn't look too surprised to see me walking up.

"Hi, Jessie."

"Heard you were back in town." She set down her pruning shears, folded her arms. She was wearing yellow gardening gloves with little flowers on them. She'd put on some weight.

"How's your mama?" I was expecting something more along the lines of get-off-my-lawn than how's-your-ma. It took me a minute.

"She broke her foot falling over a cat, but she's healing up alright." I stopped, waited for her.

"You might as well come on up to the house. I've got sweet tea, and coffee."

"You sure you want me in your house?"

She looked at me a good long while, at my scar, mostly. There were deep bags around her eyes, and her face was sunburned. "If you're here to do penance, that ain't necessary. You didn't take anything I wasn't ready to be rid of."

I stared at my tennis shoes, wondered how long I'd have to save up tips before I could afford a decent pair of high heels. "How'd you know I was back in town?"

She turned back to her house, motioned for me to follow. "I've got a little boy in the same class as your girl. Saw you dropping her off one morning."

I stopped. It seemed like the world was spinning. Barren, barren, left her because she was barren. "Eddie's boy?"

She shook her head, kept walking. "Not anymore. His name's Tanner. After my daddy."

"Does Eddie know?" I knew the answer already.

She stopped, looked at me dead on, her blue eyes tired and lovely. "Oh, hell no. And he don't ever need to."

"We don't talk anymore." It came out fast, sort of breathless.

"You leave him or did he leave you?"

"I did."

"Smart girl." She opened the front door, waved me inside, but stopped just in the hallway. "You two humiliated me, running off like that."

"I'm real sorry, Jessie."

"He beat you?"

I nodded, looked back down at my tennis shoes. There was a Gus-print on my left shoe, red clay on the white canvas.

"Well then I'm sorry, too."

After coffee I showed her my cigarette burns. "Jessie?"

She nodded, refilled my cup.

"Did he hit you too?"

She shook her head. "Never laid a hand on me. But he was still mean."

I could've cried. When I left, she gave me a half-hug, and handed me a paper plate of crumb cake to take home to Mama and Anna.

Eddie

The first time, I just slapped her, and she probably deserved more. The mother of my child, standing outside the diner, smoking a cigarette, with some man's arm around her shoulder. She was wearing makeup, tight jeans, and hairspray. If she'd of been wearing high heels she could've been a hooker. And she sure wasn't wearing lipstick when she left the house. I'd just stopped by to check up on her, see how her night was going at work. I had Anna asleep in the truck beside me. But when I saw Stella, I jumped out, dragged her off to the side of the diner where Anna wouldn't see if she woke up, and all I did was slap her. Good and hard, too. What kind of mother runs around like that?

"He's one of the cooks," she kept saying. "He didn't mean anything by it." The cook was already back in the kitchen, hiding like a dog. I found her another job within a week, a daytime shift at a cafe. After that I stopped by on her at work a lot more often.

I started looking closer at Anna. Blue eyes, when Stella and I both had brown. I couldn't remember whether blue eyed people couldn't have brown eyed babies, or the other way around. I asked at the library. She could be mine. Has to be. Stella said she was a virgin, but maybe I only believed her because I wanted to. Anna favors Stella more than she does me. Same long dark hair, the way Stella's was before Anna got big enough to twirl her fists in it and tug. Stella chopped her hair off real quick after that, never mind that I loved it long and she could've just worn it pulled back until the baby got bigger. She never had any regard for me, not for a minute. At first I thought it was just because she was so young, still really a teenager. I thought she'd grow out of it. I loved her. But she never did. And now she's took off, with my kid. I didn't really think she'd come back, but I thought after a while she'd at least let me see my kid. I think about taking her sometimes. Just driving her up to Stella's mama's place and taking Anna out of the yard, and driving on off. I could dye her hair, grow a beard, and maybe they'd never find us. I could take it to court, I guess, but with the things Stella would say about me, I know which way that would go. "Full custody of the minor child awarded to Stella Mayes," and that would be that. They always side with the mothers. I just can't figure out any way to get my little girl back. And Stella and me have been fighting for so long I don't think I can reason with her. She looked scared, when she came to get the dog. I wasn't going to hurt her any. I want to find a way for all of us to be together

again, but that sure ain't what Stella has in mind. She's probably already got another man. That'd be just like her - out of my bed and into someone else's in no time flat.

Stella

His name's Daniel. My friend from the diner with the flannel shirts and the work boots. I guess we're friends now for sure, 'cause he keeps leaving real big tips for me. Leigh Ann at the next station says he never did nothing of the sort before I started working here. Maybe that's why when he asked her for my phone number, Leigh Ann just told him to go to hell. Must be shy since he didn't ask me. But he left her a ten dollar tip along with the dollar twenty five for his bottomless coffee, and two nights later, I walked in the front door and Mama said "Some man called for you."

I hung up my coat, and left my gloves on the kitchen table. "He leave a name?"

"And a phone number," Mama said. She looked real tight, wound up, lips pursed. I waited 'til she'd wheeled her disapproval off to bed before I called him back. He sounded real groggy when he answered the phone. When I realized I'd woken him up, and glanced at the clock on the microwave, I just hung up the phone. Didn't say a word, just laid the phone down in its cradle and went to wash my face and brush my teeth for bed. Mama's teeth were sitting in a little plastic cup by the sink, as usual.

Daniel called back. I ran for the phone, hair pulled back, mouth foamed over with toothpaste.

"Hello?" I swallowed the rest of the toothpaste, and ran my tongue along my teeth.

"Is this Stella?" I knew the voice. Cup of coffee, black, grilled cheese, home fries. Sometimes a house salad. Rotten damned caller I.D.

"Yes."

"Why'd you hang up on me?"

"I didn't," I lied. "I just realized how late it was and tried to hang up before anyone picked up, so I wouldn't wake up your whole house." Toothpaste still bubbling in the back of my mouth, stuck all over my tongue.

He was quiet for a minute. "Would you want to go out to dinner with me?"

"Yes."

I heard Mama roll into the kitchen behind me. She punched the wall clock, and it read out loud, "the time is 1:04 a.m.," the same mechanical voice I remembered from when I was little. Then Mama rolled back on into her bedroom and closed the door hard enough that the house shook a little.

"I have to go," I whispered to Daniel. "Can we talk tomorrow?"

"Did I wake your whole house up?"

"Just my mama," I said, and then kicked myself. At least I hadn't told him yet that I had a little girl.

He laughed. "Sorry 'bout that. Turn about is fair play, I guess."

He picked me up on Thursday night, 'cause I had to work all weekend. I didn't ask him in the house to meet Mama and Stella. I was watching for his truck out the kitchen window, and when he pulled up I just ran out and hopped in. We went to see one of them war movies like Eddie was always crazy about. That plus Daniel driving a truck almost just like Eddie's made me ask it. We'd just stopped for ice cream on the way

back to Mama's. I ordered a coke float, and then just asked him, "You ever hit a woman?"

He'd just taken a big bite of ice cream sundae, and he looked a little like he was going to choke. "When I was eight I had a knock-down drag-out with my big sister. She won, though." He looked right at me. "Haven't laid a hand on a woman since then."

"You want some of my coke float?"

He shook his head. "Tickles my nose too much."

When he dropped me off, he kissed my cheek. I wanted to turn my head, catch him right on the lips, but I just hopped out of the truck, ran back up to the house, and waved goodbye from the sagging front porch while the moths crashed into the porch light.

Anna was still up when I got inside, with my lipstick kiss still on her forehead from when I left. I gave her another one on the cheek, and took off my new high heels.

"Bed," I told her. "Now."

"Who's your friend, Mama?"

"His name's Daniel."

"Is he your boy-friend?"

"I guess. Too soon to tell. Have you brushed your teeth?"

She nodded, real solemn like. "Is he nicer than Daddy?"

My mama was just sitting in her chair not ten feet away, petting Gus, pretending not to be hearing a word of what me and Anna were saying.

I leaned down to Anna's ear and whispered, "Yes, doodlebug, he's much nicer than Daddy. Now go wash all that lipstick off your face."

Chapter 6

Stella

When Daniel came to the door, I had to make Anna come out of the studio to meet him. Mama didn't even turn around when she heard me come in. They were sitting side by side, hunched over the table, and Anna's face was all covered in clay.

"Anna Mayes!" I told her. "You knew we were going out to dinner."

"Can't I just stay here? Gram Early says we can order pizza."

"Get over here and let me as your face."

I tried to clean her up as good as I could before I took her on up to the house, but she still had streaks of dried red clay in her eyebrows, and all crusted in her hair.

"This is my friend Daniel," I told her. "And this is my mess of a daughter Anna."

He shook her hand and said "It's nice to meet you, Miss Anna," real cute, but she stared at her shoes the whole time. I'm pretty sure she learned that from me.

"I thought you said he was your boyfriend, Mama."

I could have died right there, just sunk into that old pink carpet with the bleached out spots where the light hits it full on through the big window. I would have been glad to just be another spot on that carpet. But Daniel laughed.

"I'm both," he told Anna. "No point having a boyfriend unless he's a good friend to you, too."

"Are you going to marry my Mama?"

"Anna!" I was trying my hardest not to just bury my face in my hands. "Go get your coat. And try to wash your face off some more. With soap." Daniel didn't seem to mind, though. The whole night, he was real sweet with her. The way Eddie used to be. I can tell she likes him, and I think he even likes her. The couple of men I've been out with since Eddie have mostly taken me out on as many dates as it took me to gather up the courage to tell them I had a kid. Then they took off. One of 'em called her "baggage," like a suitcase or a problem I just can't get rid of. Asshole. I told him I reckon we've all got some baggage, but at least mine helps with the dishes and says "Mama, I love you" before she goes to bed at night. He didn't call again after that. But Daniel really seemed to think she was cute, even when she was just being rude.

Anna

Mama's new boyfriend is real nice. He took us to dinner and I wanted a cream soda and Mama said no, get water, but he said "aw, let her have a cream soda" and she did. And refills were free, so really, I had three. That's the rule, that if I want a drink refill we have to ask if they're free first, and usually Mama asks for me 'cause I don't like talking to grownups. Some grownups are okay. Mama's boyfriend says I can call him

Daniel but Mama says I have to call him Mr. Lloyd. There's a mean boy named Lloyd in my class at school, but it's his first name, and it must be Mama's new boyfriend's last name 'cause she always makes me call grownups by their last names. Especially at church. Last time Mama spanked me it was cause I called Mrs. Lee at church "Janet" the way Mama always does, and Mama hit my butt with her pocketbook, but she didn't hit it hard. Mama never spansks me real hard.

The best part was mama's boyfriend gave me a manicure kit. It has four nail polishes and one of them has glitter, and one is clear, and there's a red one and a pink one and a nail file with yellow stars on it. I put it all in the drawer in my nightstand, with my new Beanie Baby that Mama took me to get. It's a pink elephant, with white polka dots, and its name on its tag says 'Ellie'. It's really soft. Maybe next time he comes Mr. Lloyd will bring me a Beanie Baby. There's a brown dog with long ears and spots that I really want, like the one my big friend Stacy from school has.

He kissed Mama goodnight, too. When I got out of the car he said "Anna, you are just as pretty as your mama. I've got a nephew about your age that you should meet."

Mama elbowed him and she was laughing and she said "run on up to the house now," but I walked part way and turned around and they were still in his truck, and he was kissing my mama. It was kind of gross but then she seemed really happy, so I asked if I could stay up and eat ice cream before I went to bed.

She said "one scoop," so I picked the Napoleon kind with the stripes and tried to get as big a scoop as I could before she saw. She didn't let me eat it in the living room and watch TV, though. She made me sit at the kitchen table and then I had to go wash my face real good.

Eddie

I never stepped out on her. Not once. I might have drank more than she liked, but I was always faithful. I saw her out last night, sitting at a booth across from some man with muddy boots and blue jeans on. I could hear her laughing from the bar across the room. Reckon that's why she left. Took my kid in the middle of the night to run off with some asshole that don't have the sense to wash the mud off his boots and put on a clean pair of pants before he takes her out to dinner.

And then I saw Anna, with her little head poking up barely higher than the table, 'cause her dumbass mama don't have the sense to ask a waitress for a booster seat. I just stood there watching awhile, from the bar where Stella couldn't see me, until the guy gave me a look. Stella was all laughter, flirting right at the table and never mind that my kid was sitting right there watching.

I came back here for them. So we could all be together. And one way or another, we will. I ain't walking away so some asshole with dirty boots can take my wife and my kid. They're mine. He can have Stella. But they sure as hell aren't keeping my little girl.

Chapter 7

Anna

I don't hate school now, because of my big friend Stacy. She's in Ms. White's class. That's second grade, which is how come she's my big friend. Second grade and first are all in the same afterschool class. First we do homework in the cafeteria, which is boring, cause I don't have much homework. Sometimes Ms. Walsh gives us word problems but they're easy. So I have to sit there and look at my books for a whole hour until they let us go outside. I like the playground. Me and Stacy play boxcar kids. I'm Violet and she's Jesse and our boxcar is the trees by the third grade classrooms. Stacy won't let the boys play, even though in real life the boxcar kids had brothers. She even beat up my boyfriend Max. He sort of deserved it, cause he said I talk like Forrest Gump, and so Stacy told him he talked like Cinderella, and then he got real mad and kicked her. So she chased him all the way across the kickball field. He's the fastest boy in my class, but Stacy's way faster, cause she's a big kid. She doesn't come to afterschool on Fridays,

though. It's extra boring without her. Mama says I still have to go, but Stacy says maybe I can come over to her house instead.

Stella

I got a real bad feeling when I passed Eddie's house. I didn't realize it when Stacy's mama gave me directions, but they're only one street over from his place. My stomach started to hurt, but my heart didn't start beating fast until I saw the police car at Stacy's house. It had its blue lights on but no sirens. Then I knew. The Carlsons had called the police. They shouldn't have called the police. Eddie was just bound to think I'd called them. Soon as the fat officer asked was I the little girl's mother, I sat right down on the grass in Mrs. Carlson's front yard, beside a hydrangea. It seemed too bright, the summer light and the blue of the hydrangea. When I heard about this sort of thing, little girls going missing, I always pictured it happening in the dark.

Mrs. Carlson kept saying "She was just playing in the front yard with Stacy, they were playing tag," and "I'm so sorry," over and over.

"She ain't missing," I told her, told the police. "She's gone to her daddy's house down the street. She's been wanting to go there and get her bird for weeks."

One of the officers, a young one with a crew cut, took my elbow, helped me up. He had to half drag me to my feet. I rode in his patrol car, and I told them about Eddie. Things I never planned on telling police, like the night Eddie threw the chair because I called him a bastard. The fracture he gave me, it sounded kind of like that, bascular skull fracture or something. I told the nurse that I'd slipped in the shower, bashed my head on the toilet, but I told the crew cut policeman as much as I could in the couple of minutes

we sat in the car on Eddie's street, waiting while the fat officer radioed some woman. Finally they got out, told me to wait in the car, and went and knocked on Eddie's door, and waited. And waited, while police car after ambulance pulled up, an army of 'em. I watched the blue lights bounce off that big window in the front of Eddie's house, and off the glass on his door, and I knew.

When they finally broke in, they found Anna in his arms. That's what they said. I was still waiting in the car. The first stretcher they brought out was covered in a sheet, and I started shaking. Then came the second, and the shape under the sheet looked small. I couldn't get out of the car. I didn't have no door handle in the back. I started pounding on the window, and the fat one let me out, holding out his arms like he was going to hug me, or hold me back, but I couldn't move toward him, past him, couldn't move to the stretcher. My legs just wouldn't go. Under the sheet.. .she looked so small on that big steel stretcher, under that big white sheet.

Earlene

We buried my grandbaby in the plot where I thought she and Stella would bury me. Right next to Joe. I don't rightly know where Eddie's mama buried him. I don't plan on bringing him flowers, either. Oh God, Oh. You took the baby and left and old woman and a broken mother who ain't gotten out of bed in three days. She came to the funeral and then got back in bed and she don't get out except to use the facilities, and even then she don't bathe.

Stella keeps saying why not her, when he'd never laid a hand on Anna. But it wasn't Anna he wanted to hurt. It was Stella, and this was the best way he could do it. He took Anna out of this world, real quick, but he left Stella hurting. It won't never stop. But maybe one of these days she'll get out of bed. I'm not taking her dinner in there anymore. Most of the funeral spread the neighbors left us is gone. I froze what would keep, but we've had so much company. All my people have come by, and most of the neighbors. Wanting to tell Stella how sorry they are, like that's any help. If one of them would tell her to get the hell out of bed, that might do her some real good. She won't hear it from me, but joining the world of the living might help her heal a little.

Stella

I wake up sweating and it hurts to breathe. Every night, I sit right up in bed, gasping from a dream about killing him. He never laid a hand on Anna before, and in all the years he beat me, he never killed me. I don't understand. Mama's taken to preaching to me, saying I can't hate him because hate will make me just like him. Bullshit. I'll hate him till the day I die.

Earlene

I shook her awake in the middle of the night. Figured she'd been in bed for days, so what did it matter how late it was? Told her it was time to get up, and I wasn't asking, I was telling her to get her ass out of my guest bed.

"Why," she kept asking.

"Because we have to finish the fish," I told her. "Now you get dressed and come on out to my studio."

I always worked best late at night, after everyone was safe and in bed and I knew where they were, and that they wouldn't come bothering me. I used to sneak out to my studio after Stella and Joe were asleep. Joe usually woke up when I crawled back into bed, asked didn't I have any sense not to be wandering around and working in the dark. I kept having to remind Joe, dark don't make much difference to me. Stella got dressed alright, but then she wanted a flashlight to make it across the yard. Like I'd have any use for keeping a flashlight in this house. I held my cane in one hand, and her hand in the other, and we walked out back to the studio.

I showed her Anna's fish, pressed one into her palm and told her I needed her to glaze them. All of them. Even make their wings sparkly like Anna wanted. I don't rightly know where to get sparkly glaze, or if they make it. But maybe we'll paint over them with glitter nail polish like Anna wanted to, once they're out of the kiln.

"Mama." She sounds so old now, with Anna gone. Sounds like I have since Joe died, since she took off. "To what purpose?"

"To give to the school. That's what she wanted to do with them."

Stella sat there at my table, holding the fish, and then she threw it at the studio wall. I heard it smash, and heard the pieces hit the floor.

"Seems fitting," I told her. "That was the one I made for good luck." And then she was on the floor, bawling, just like cows do when you split them up from their calves. I sat down on the floor beside her, propped up my hurt foot, and wrapped my arms around her like I haven't done since she was little. She didn't push me away,

but she didn't hug me neither. We sat for a long time, my bones aching against the cold and the hard of the tile floor, and then we stood up and walked back across the yard holding hands, and we both just went back to our beds.

This morning, Stella got up and got dressed again. We drank our coffee, then she drove us to that art store down the mountain. Sure enough, they sell glitter glaze. And we glazed and fired the rest of the fish. Not a one of them broke in the kiln. We've got our mobile, six big fish with sparkly wings, all different colors, and Stella painted on each of them real small, "for Anna." I called the school myself, spoke to Anna's teacher. They had some assembly for her, and we walked it across the stage, handed it to her teacher. After the assembly they hung it up right in the middle of Anna's classroom, over the kids' desks where they could see it. Stella said it looked real nice there.

My girl. She seems real numb, real quiet, but she's up and out of bed, among the living.

Stella

When I'm awake I don't think about killing Eddie anymore. He's already dead, he's hurt me and himself and Anna as much as he's ever going to hurt us. Oh. Anna, Anna. I can't think of Anna without sobbing, without the breaths that come short and shallow and hurt deep in my lungs. I haven't gone back to work. I haven't seen Daniel, either, but Mama says he stopped by a couple times. Jessie too, but she knew enough not

to try to come tell me it'll be alright or get better with time. Sweet Jessie just left a pie and some chicken with Mama and went on home. I don't think about any of it; I just sit in the studio and try to sculpt myself as a fish, like Mama and Anna, and I think only about the dream.

I had it right after we buried her, the dream my mama always talks about. I stayed in bed too long, trying to hold on to it, trying to dream it again and forget everything but the clear cold water and the feel of the wind, but I wonder if Anna had it too, if that's why she was so insistent about the fish with the shiny wings.

I only had it once. But I thought if I had it again and again it would be like Anna wasn't really gone, because in the dream, there is no Anna, no Eddie, no empty feeling in my arms where Anna ought to be. In the dream, I don't have arms. I have fins. And I don't think about killing Eddie or hating him because all I can think about is the clear cold water in my lungs. I'm underwater and it hurts to breathe, and the water fills my lungs so cold.

When the water rushed into my lungs I thought, this is it. But then I grew wings. I grew great huge shining wings and I rose up toward the water's surface and it was all daylight, bright light on the water and I flew, across wave after wave, up and up and the water rushed out of my lungs and I could breathe again.