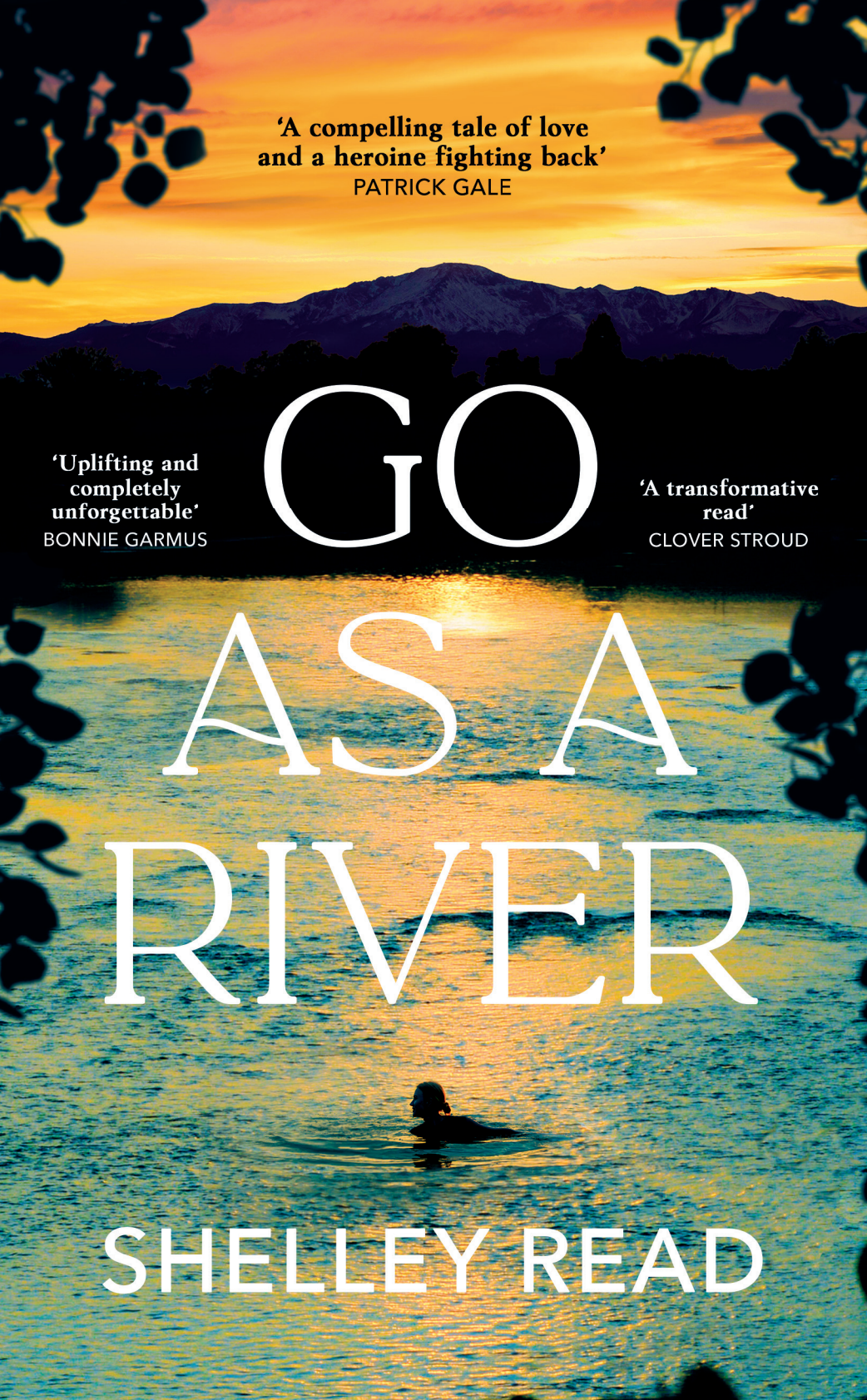

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*For Richard & Kathryn,*
*my parents and guiding lights*

*For Avery & Owen,*
*my inspiration*

*And for Erik,*
*my always*

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At a certain point you say to the woods,
to the sea, to the mountains, the world,
Now I am ready.

~*Annie Dillard*

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# *Prologue*

Imagine what lingers on the black bottom of a lake. Debris, rivered in or tossed from boats, grows shaggy and soft. Pouty fish swim their strange lives, far from the hook, in inseparable breath and motion. Imagine patches of lake weed dancing like lithe, unobserved women. Stand on the edge of a lake, the low waves gulping at your shoes, and imagine how close you are to a world as silent and alien as the moon, out of reach of light and heat and sound.

My home is at the bottom of a lake. Our farm lies there, mud bound, its remnants indistinguishable from boat wreckage. Sleek trout troll the remains of my bedroom and the parlor where we sat as a family on Sundays. Barns and troughs rot. Tangled barbed wire rusts. The once fertile land marinates in idleness.

A history-book version of the creation of Blue Mesa Reservoir might portray the project as heroic, part of the grand vision to carry precious water from the Colorado River's tributaries to the arid

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Southwest. Good intentions may have plugged the once wild Gunnison River and forced it to be a lake, but I know another story.

I used to stand knee-deep in this section of the Gunnison when it still rushed fast and frothy through the valley of my birth, the vast and lonely Big Blue wilderness rising above it. I knew the town of Iola when it woke each morning to fragrant breakfasts and bustling farms and ranches, how the sunrise illuminated the east side of Main then inched uptown, across the train tracks and schoolyard, to ignite the tiny church's one round red-and-blue stained-glass window. I timed my life by the hollow whistle of the 9:22, the 2:05, the 5:47. I knew all the shortcuts and townsfolk and the oldest gnarled tree consistently producing the sweetest peaches in my family's orchard. And I knew, perhaps more than most, the sadness of this place.

Good intentions relocated the Iola graveyard high on a hill—each of my family's headstones hopefully matched with their appropriate remains—where it still sits behind a white iron fence, bent and twisted from the weight of snow. Good intentions otherwise drowned the entirety of Iola, Colorado.

Imagine a town silent, forgotten, decomposing at the bottom of a lake that once was a river. If this makes you wonder whether the joys and pain of a place wash away as the floodwaters rise and swallow, I can tell you they do not. The landscapes of our youths create us, and we carry them within us, storied by all they gave and stole, in who we become.

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# PART I

## *Dark and shiny as a raven's wing*

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# *One*

## *1948*

He wasn't much to look at.

Not at first, anyway.

"Pardon," the young man said, a grimy thumb and forefinger tugging at the brim of his tattered red ball cap. "This the way to the flop?"

As simple as that. This ordinary question from a filthy stranger walking up Main Street just as I arrived at the intersection with North Laura.

His overalls and hands were blackened with coal, which I assumed was axle grease or layers of dirt from the fields, though it was too dark for either. His cheeks were smudged. Tan skin shone through trickled sweat. Straight black hair jutted from beneath his cap.

The autumn day had begun as ordinary as the porridge and fried eggs I had served the men for breakfast. I noticed nothing uncommon as I went on to tend the house and the docile animals in their

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pens, picked two baskets of late-season peaches in the cool morning air, and made my daily deliveries pulling the rickety wagon behind my bicycle, then returned home to cook lunch. But I've come to understand how the exceptional lurks beneath the ordinary, like the deep and mysterious world beneath the surface of the sea.

"The way to everything," I replied.

I was not trying to be witty or catch his notice, but the angle of his pause and slight twist of smile showed that my response amused him. He made my insides leap, looking at me that way.

"Real small town, I mean." I tried to set things straight, to clarify that I was not the type of girl that boys noticed or paused to smirk at on a street corner.

The stranger's eyes were as dark and shiny as a raven's wing. And kind—that is what I remember most about those eyes from that first glimpse until the final gaze—a gentleness that seemed to fountain from his center and spill out like an overflowing well. He studied me a moment, still grinning, then pulled again at his cap brim and continued walking toward Dunlap's boarding house near the end of Main.

It was true that this one crumbling sidewalk led to everything. Along with Dunlap's, we had the Iola Hotel for fancy folks and the tavern tacked on the back for drinking folks; Jernigan's Standard station, hardware, and post; the café that always smelled of coffee and bacon; and Chapman's Big Little Store, with groceries and a deli counter and too much gossip. At the west end of it all stood the tall flagpole between the schoolhouse I once attended and the white clapboard church where our family used to sit, polished and proper, every Sunday when Mother was alive. Beyond that, Main Street dove abruptly into the hillside like a period after a short sentence.

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I was heading in the same direction as the stranger—to drag my brother out of the poker cabin behind Jernigan's—but I wasn't about to walk right on this boy's heels. I paused there at the corner and shielded my eyes from the afternoon sun to study him as he continued on. He strolled slowly, casually, like his only destination was his next step, his arms swinging at his sides, his head seemingly a tad behind the pace. His dingy white T-shirt stretched tightly beneath the straps of his overalls. He was slim, with the muscular shoulders of a workhand.

As if he felt my gaze, he suddenly turned and flashed a smile, dazzling against his soiled face. I gasped at being caught eyeing him. A rush of heat tickled up my neck. He tugged his cap as he had before, turned, and strolled on. Though I couldn't see his face, I was pretty sure he was still grinning.

It was a fateful moment, I know in retrospect. For I could have turned and headed back down North Laura, toward home and fixing supper, could have let Seth stumble to the farm on his own accord, stagger in the door right in front of Daddy and Uncle Og with his own hell to pay. I could have at least crossed over to the other side of Main, put the occasional car and a row of yellowing cottonwood trees between our two sidewalks. But I didn't, and this made all the difference in the world.

Instead, I took one slow step forward and then another, intuitively feeling the significance in each choice to lift, extend, then lower a foot.

No one had ever spoken to me about matters of attraction. I was too young when my mother died to have learned those secrets from her, and I can't imagine she would have shared them with me anyway. She had been a quiet, proper woman, extremely obedient to

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God and expectation. From what I remember, she loved my brother and me, but her affection surfaced only within strict parameters, governing us with a grave fear of how we'd all perform on Judgment Day. I had occasionally glimpsed her carefully concealed passion unleash on our backsides with the black rubber flyswatter, or in the subtle stains of quickly swept tears when she stood after prayer, but I never saw her kiss my father or even once take him in her arms. Though my parents ran the family and the farm as efficient and dependable partners, I didn't witness between them the presence of love particular to a man and a woman. For me, this mysterious territory had no map.

Except for this: I was looking out the parlor window on that gloomy autumn twilight just after I turned twelve years old when Sheriff Lyle pulled up the wet gravel drive in his long black-and-white automobile and hesitantly approached my father in the yard. Through the steam of my breath on the glass I saw Daddy slowly collapse to his knees right there in the rain-fresh mud. I had been watching for my mother, my cousin Calamus, and my Aunt Vivian to return, hours late from making their peach delivery across the pass to Canyon City. My father had been watching too, so antsy about their absence he spent the whole evening raking the soggy leaves he'd normally allow to compost on the grass over winter. When Daddy buckled under the weight of Lyle's words, my young heart comprehended two immense truths: my missing family members would not be coming home, and my father loved my mother. They had never demonstrated or spoken to me of romance, but I realized then that in fact they had known it, in their own quiet way. I learned from their subtle relations—and in the dry, matter-of-fact eyes with which my father later walked into the house and somberly

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shared the news of my mother's death with Seth and me—that love is a private matter, to be nurtured, and even mourned, between two beings alone. It belongs to them and no one else, like a secret treasure, like a private poem.

Beyond that, I knew nothing, especially not of love's beginnings, of that inexplicable draw to another, why some boys could pass you by without notice but the next has a pull on you as undeniable as gravity, and from that moment forward, longing is all you know.

There was merely a half block between this boy and me as we walked the same narrow sidewalk at the same moment in this same little nowhere Colorado town. I trailed him, thinking that from wherever he had come, from whatever place and experience, he and I had lived our seventeen years—perhaps a bit longer for him, perhaps a bit less—wholly unaware of the other's existence on this earth. Now, at this moment, for some reason our lives were intersecting as sure as North Laura and Main.

My heart quickened when the distance between us crept from three houses to two, then one, and I realized he was ever so gradually slowing down.

I had no idea what to do. If I also slowed, he'd know I was pacing myself off him, paying too close attention to a stranger. But if I carried on steadily, I would quickly catch up to him, and what then? Or worse yet, I'd pass him and feel the sear of his gaze on my own back. He'd surely notice my gangly walk, my bare legs and worn leather shoes, the outgrown fit of my old maroon school dress, the ordinariness of my straight brown hair not washed since Sunday bath.

So I slowed. As if attached by some invisible string, he slowed as well. I slowed again, and he slowed, barely moving. Then he stopped

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dead still. I had no choice but to do the same, and there we were, like two fool statues right there on Main Street.

He didn't move out of playfulness, I sensed. I stood frozen out of fear and indecision and the disorienting first rumbles of desire. I had known of this boy for mere minutes and less than a town block, yet already he had my insides tumbling like pebbles in a stream.

I didn't hear the doctor's plump wife or the steel wheels of her baby carriage coming up behind me. When Mrs. Bernette and her toddler suddenly appeared at my side, trying to maneuver a pass, I spooked like a squirrel.

Mrs. Bernette smiled suspiciously, her thinly plucked brows raised to indicate an unspoken question as she snipped a terse, "Torie."

I barely managed to nod politely, couldn't even remember the baby's name or reach out with a friendly tousle to his blond hair.

The stranger took one sly sideways step so Mrs. Bernette could pass. She looked him up and down curiously and smiled feebly when he tipped his cap and said, "Ma'am." She looked back at me with a frown, as if struggling to figure out a riddle, then turned and continued to waddle uptown.

We actually were a riddle, this boy and I. The riddle went like this: What, once tied together, have bound destinies? The answer: Puppets on the same string.

"Victoria," he said with casual familiarity, as he finally turned and faced me squarely. "You following me?" It was apparently his turn to be clever, and he grinned with equal amusement at his own wit as with what he'd mistook for mine.

I stammered like a child caught stealing a nickel before managing a curt, "No."

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He crossed his tan arms and said nothing. I couldn't tell if he was pondering his question or me, or perhaps the happenstance of the moment.

When I could no longer stand my own discomfort in the quiet, I straightened in faux composure and asked, "How do you know my name?"

"I pay attention," he said. He was blunt yet somehow modest. "Victoria," he said again, slowly, seemingly for the pure pleasure of the syllables rolling in his mouth. "A name fit for a queen."

Charm belied his disheveled appearance and, despite my best attempts at aloofness, he could tell I thought so. His dark eyes extended the invitation before he spoke it, and then he said, "Care to walk with me? I mean right here," he pointed by his side, "in a proper way?"

I stalled, because, yes, I wanted to walk beside him, and yet either propriety or genuine teenage awkwardness held me back. Or perhaps it was premonition. "No, thank you," I said, "I couldn't . . . I mean . . . I don't even know your . . . ."

"It's Wil," he interjected before I could ask. "Wilson Moon." He let his full name hang in my ears for a moment; then he moved toward me with an extended hand. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Victoria." Suddenly very earnest, he waited for me to step into the space between us and place my hand in his.

I hesitated uneasily, and then I curtsied. I don't know which of us was more surprised. I hadn't curtsied since I was a little girl in Sunday school, but the gesture rushed through my mind as the only thing to do, so afraid was I to touch his hand. I immediately felt foolish and expected him to laugh, but he didn't. His grin spread to a full smile, bright, immense, genuine, but not the least bit mocking.

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He nodded knowingly, lowered his hand, let it slide into the pocket of his dirty overalls, and stood still before me.

I couldn't fathom it then, standing there suspended by his gaze, but I would come to learn that Wilson Moon didn't experience time the way most people do, or few other things for that matter. He never rushed or fiddled nervously or found a length of silence between two people an awkward vessel to fill with chatter. He rarely looked to the future, and to the past even less, but gathered up the current moment in both hands to admire its particulars, with no apology and no sense it should be otherwise. I couldn't know any of this as I stood stock-still on Main Street, but I would come to learn the wisdom of his ways and, in time, apply that wisdom when I needed it most.

So, yes, I changed my answer and accepted the invitation to stroll side by side down Main Street that October afternoon with a boy called Wilson Moon, who was no longer a stranger.

Though the conversation was mere pleasantries and the walk short, by the time we reached Dunlap's and scaled the worn steps to the porch, neither of us wanted to part. I lingered with him in the splintered doorway, my heart racing.

Wil didn't offer much about himself. Even when I asked if Wil short for Wilson was spelled with one *l* or two, he just shrugged and replied, "As you like." One thing I did learn about Wilson Moon that day was that he had been working in the coal mines in Dolores, and he had run away.

"I just up and had enough of that place," he said. "'Go,' I heard a voice inside me say, 'Go now.'" The coal cars heading to the Durango-Silverton line were filled and ready to be hauled, he said, and when the train's whistle blew, it sounded like it was calling for

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him, long and shrill and insistent. All he knew was that those cars were going somewhere other than where he was. As the train started its slow grind forward, he scurried up one car's rusty ladder and hopped atop a warm black bed of coal. The boss caught sight of him and chased the train a spell, hollering and cursing and furiously waving his hat. Soon the foreman and the mines were minute in the distance, and Wilson Moon turned his face to the wind.

"You didn't even know where you were heading? Where you'd end up?" I asked.

"Doesn't much matter," he replied, "One place is about as good as another, ain't it?"

The only place I had ever known was Iola and the surrounding land along a wide, straight section of the Gunnison River. The small town huddled against the foothills of the Big Blue wilderness on the south side and the towering Elk Mountains to the west and north. A patchwork of farms and ranches unfurled like a long tail along the river's edge to the east. My brother and I had been born in the farmhouse my daddy inherited from his daddy, in the tall iron bed that took up half the pale-yellow room tacked onto the back of the house, the room that was just for birthing and visitors until Uncle Og came to live with us after the accident. Our farm was nothing special, nor was it very big, just forty-seven acres, including the barns and the house and a gravel driveway as long as a wolf's howl. But from the barn to the back fence line our land produced the only peach grove in all Gunnison County, where the fruit grew fat and rosy and sweet. The curvy banks of Willow Creek carved the east border of our property, its icy water fresh from the mountain snow and eager to spill onto our trees and modest rows of potatoes and onions. At night, the creek sang a lullaby outside

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my bedroom window, hushing me to rest in the spindle bed where I had slept nearly every night of my life. The sunrise over distant Tenderfoot Mountain and the long whistle of three trains per day pulling through the depot on the town's edge served as my most reliable clocks. I knew just how the afternoon sun slanted into the small kitchen window and across the long pine table on winter mornings. I knew crocuses and purple larkspurs would be the first wildflowers to emerge across the farm each spring, and fireweeds and goldenrods would be the last. I knew that a dozen cliff swallows descended on the river with every mayfly hatch and that this would be the exact moment a rainbow trout would rise to Daddy's cast. And I knew that the fiercest storms, dark and ominous as the devil, nearly always blew in over the northwestern peaks and that every songbird and raven and magpie would silence just before the sky unleashed.

So, no, one place was not just like another in my mind, and I wondered why this boy didn't seem to know a thing about home.

"And your belongings?" I asked, intrigued by the life of a drifter.

"Same," he said with a shrug and a grin, like he knew something about belongings that I did not, which proved to be correct in the end. He would teach me how true a life emptied of all but its essentials could feel and that, when you got down to it, not much mattered outside the determination to go on living. If he had told me this then, I wouldn't have had the ability to believe him. But time pulls our strings.

I couldn't think of an excuse to follow him into Dunlap's. Even if I hadn't been in the company of a strange boy, a girl didn't go into the flophouse without a proper reason and a trusted escort. It was

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also getting on about supper time, and I still had the foul task of dragging Seth out of the poker shack and getting him home before Daddy came in from bailing the last of Mr. Mitchell's hay.

I suggested it was time to part by sighing, "Well . . . ," but I didn't actually begin to walk away. I expected him to take the cue, make the next move, but, again, he maintained a relaxed stillness, smiling at me, occasionally looking skyward as if reading something in the wispy early evening clouds.

"I guess I better be moving on," I finally said. "Supper to get and all."

Wil glanced at the sky again, then asked if I'd meet him the next day, show him around, share a piece of pie or some such.

"After all," he added, "you're the only person I know in this little cracker of a town."

"Well, you don't know me," I said. "Not much, anyway."

"Sure, I do." He winked. "You're Miss Victoria, queen of Iola." He bent and twirled his hand in a mock bow as if to royalty, and I laughed. Then he stood and eyed me so long I thought I'd melt like chocolate in the last rays of sun reaching low across the porch. He said nothing, but I felt as if he knew impossible things about me. He moved closer. I took my first deep smell of him, musky and sharp and strangely inviting, and stared for an instant into his bottomless dark eyes.

How does one live for seventeen years without ever considering whether she is known? The idea had not previously occurred to me, that someone could see into the heart of things and there you'd be. I stood on the dusty flophouse steps feeling transparent, held up to the light in a way I never imagined before meeting Wilson Moon.

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Shyly, I stepped back; then I agreed to meet him the next day. I wanted more of him, like a craving for sunshine hidden too long behind the clouds. But before we could share a plan—choose a time, a place, a reason—a familiar voice hurled at me from the middle of Main Street and hit me like a rock.

"Torie!"

There stood my brother, Seth, swaying in the middle of Main, his left hand gripping the neck of a brown beer bottle.

"Torie, get away from that filthy son of a bitch!" he slurred, pointing at Wil with the bottle, spilling beer in dark splotches onto the dirt road.

"My brother. Drunk," I sighed to Wil, turning quickly. I trotted down Dunlap's steps, throwing back an exasperated, "I've got to go," and rushed to Seth's side before he could cause trouble.

"Who is that bastard?" Seth grunted through the Lucky Strike dangling from his lips, aiming the question more at Wil than at me.

"He's nobody," I said, pushing Seth down the street from behind, one hand on each of his shoulders as if holding the reins of a reluctant mule, steering him back toward the intersection of North Laura and Main. Though over a year younger, Seth passed me in height near his fifteenth birthday and had grown at least two inches in the six months since. I was not a tall girl, however, and, compared to other boys his age, Seth was still short and sturdy, built like a boxer in body and temper. I struggled to get him out of Wil's sight and away from the other onlookers and get us on home.

"Some boy asking directions is all," I lied, though not fifteen minutes earlier this had been true. "Just passing through."

"Brown son of a bitch . . . ."

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"You stink, Seth," I cut him off. "Worse than that hog pen you'd better be tending when Daddy gets in."

"Screw Daddy," he slurred with drunken courage, taking a deep draw on his cigarette, then tossing it to the road.

"Just do as you're told for once and save us all a lot of fuss," I said, stamping out the Lucky Strike, then glancing over my shoulder to glimpse Wil still standing on Dunlap's porch, reading me like a mystery tale.

"Those pigs will fly from that crap-filled stall before I take orders from you, girl. Don't you reckon you can . . . ."

"Shut up, Seth," I sighed. "Just shut the hell up." I couldn't listen to another word. I hated him right then, even more than I ever had before. My loathing already had something to do with Wil. It had long had something to do with Daddy and Uncle Og and the mother and cousin and aunt I was starting to forget. But mostly my abhorrence for Seth was raw and ragged as a thistle, having grown a little sharper each day of our lives.

I started pushing him from behind with all my force. He took a blow, stumbled forward, then took another blow, cursing and whining and swigging beer the whole way but never fighting me. Maybe he was too drunk to care, or maybe he knew as well as I did that he had to be in the hog pen by the time the sun dipped behind the ridge.

We turned down North Laura. At its dead end, a thin trampled trail to our farm snaked through the weeds, past the tip of crazy Ruby-Alice Akers's pine-covered patch of land and across a wide, grassy field. It was the quickest route between the farm and town, and Seth and I had walked it a thousand times together. When we

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were children, our mother made it Seth's job to watch out for me when we walked that trail, coming or going, even though he was younger and far less responsible, simply because he was a boy. As we aged, I watched out for him, not because anyone told me to but because I had to, for my sake as much as his, for Daddy's sake too. But try as I might, I couldn't save Seth from his own mischief, and I was damn sick of trying.

I hurried him along the path, me pushing, him stumbling and cursing. Then he dropped the beer bottle from his hand. Before my mind could register that the bottle was in the path, I stepped square on it and toppled forward, pushing Seth to the ground and falling hard in the dirt on my right hip and elbow. Small things: a drunken boy's loose grip, a dropped bottle, a sprained ankle, a torn dress sleeve. But it is often the small fateful twist that alters our lives most profoundly—the beckoning cry of a coal train whistle, a question from a stranger at an intersection, a brown bottle lying in the dirt. Try as we might to convince ourselves otherwise, the moments of our becoming cannot be carefully plucked like the ripest and most satisfying peach from the bough. In the endless stumble toward ourselves, we harvest the crop we are given.

I lay in the dirt for a disorienting moment. Seth laughed weakly then silenced. Pain radiated through my lower leg. As I gingerly raised my chest from the dirt, Wil's arms suddenly slid beneath me with the sureness of a bridegroom scooping up his bride. And though there was no threshold—just the field of wilted goldenrods and tall brittle grasses—I remember that moment as our entry. I did not startle at his touch, did not protest his gentle embrace as he lifted with ease and cradled me against his coal-smudged chest, did not foolishly try to walk on the already bulging ankle.

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"You followed me," I said flatly.

"Yep," was all he replied, looking down at Seth, who lay on his side at the edge of the path, passed out. "What do we do about him?" Wil asked.

"Not a damn thing," I replied to Wil's amusement. *Not a damn thing*, I repeated in my head, shocked at my rebellion in both language and deed. I would leave my brother sleeping in the dirt. I would ride in this stranger's arms.

I trembled. Whether it was from pain or anger or love's first sparks, I don't know—perhaps all these—but my body shook as if Wil had plucked me from a frozen pond. My arms clung to his sinewy neck as he walked. His head bobbed slightly at the pull, as if nodding agreement. I felt light as a child in his arms, trusting as a child too. It was not like me to so readily accept aid and protection, to have such little suspicion of a strange boy's intentions. And yet, this girl in his arms was me. We traveled on the path I had walked my entire life in a way I never before knew, feeling everything around me subtly transformed. My father was perhaps waiting at the farm by now, and Uncle Og was most likely sitting in his wheelchair next to the window or on the front porch as he did most days—each a potential witness to this stranger carrying me through the field. But after years of fearing my father's judgment and Uncle Og's rage, I did not care what they might think or how they might react. In comparison to the immensity of Wil's arms around me, Daddy and Og and authority and decorum all shrank. Even the surrounding mountains, even consequence, seemed insignificantly small.

I had left the farmhouse that morning an ordinary girl on an ordinary day. I could not yet identify what new map had unfolded within me, but I knew I was returning home uncommon. I felt as

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the explorers I had once studied in school must have when they glimpsed a far and mysterious shore from their seemingly eternal sea. Suddenly the Magellan of my own interior, I knew not what I had discovered. I lay my head on Wil's broad shoulder and wondered where and who he'd come from, and how long a drifter ever stayed in one place.

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# *Two*

The white farmhouse came into view, then the dilapidated chicken coops, the hog pen, and the patched gray barn that held equipment and bushel baskets and our gelding, Abel. No structures or fences had been painted since the summer before the accident. In fact, little on the farm had been cared for properly since then, and now, five years later, without my cousin Calamus to do the maintenance work and Mother to dictate it, the farm had become like a burlap potato sack to its former white linen. The transformation had occurred so gradually, I hadn't fully realized it until that moment, trying to perceive the scene as Wil might. My whole life was in that farm, and as he glimpsed it for the first time, I felt shabby and worn.

I wanted to say, "This isn't really who we are . . . or not who I am . . . it's just, there was an accident and . . . ." And yet, the evidence stood before us like a final proclamation of my family's fall.

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Added to the dilapidated buildings was a drunken brother lying behind us in the dirt and, now, my father's rusty truck grumbling up the long driveway. As Daddy climbed out the driver's door and began walking toward us with fury in his step, I saw Uncle Og wheel his chair out onto the peeling front porch to get a closer look at what he no doubt hoped would be a scuffle. I hung there in Wil's arms, unable to wash clean any of what he was seeing or to run with him around back to our peach orchard, the one last beautiful thing. I closed my eyes, anticipating in Daddy's approach the full collision of my life with Wil's.

Surprisingly, it came from behind.

Seth had come to. He had silently stalked us until his tight coil of anger unwound in the powerful lunge that landed him on Wil's back. The fight that ensued is surreal to me now, my memory a slow-motion and hazy version of what actually occurred. I recall details I still can't explain, like how Wil managed to float me gently to the ground, out of harm's way, and how the boys spun above me like a small tornado, Wil dancing birdlike on the air to avoid Seth's furious punches. I clearly recall the one solid blow from Wil that landed Seth on the ground, bloody-nosed and swearing, and my father's arrival, gasping for breath, pulling Seth to his feet, then standing between the two boys with arms outstretched like a referee.

Seth panted and pushed his chest against Daddy's palm, cursing Wil and trying to get at him. Wil backed up calmly, eyeing Seth like a wolf confidently staring down its prey.

"Who in tarnation are you, boy?" Daddy hollered at Wil; then he barked a warning at Seth to quiet down, gripping his son's shirt collar in his fist.

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"Wilson Moon, sir," replied Wil composedly, keeping his eyes on Seth, tipping the cap that had managed to stay on his head.

"That don't mean a damn thing to me," Daddy said.

"Just passin' through, sir."

"Passin' through with my daughter in your arms and my son on your back?" Daddy asked gruffly, suspicious and puzzled.

"Yes, sir," answered Wil with no attempt at explanation other than adding, "Picked up the one, tried to ride out the other."

Daddy glanced down at the ground where I sat, surveying my swollen ankle and torn dress, never going so far as to look for evidence in my eyes, then asked, "Did this boy hurt you?"

"No, Daddy," I replied. "It was Seth's fault. The boy found me hurt and was just helping me home is all."

"That ain't true!" Seth snarled. "That son of a bitch followed us from town to get his filthy hands on her." Pushing against my father with renewed furor, Seth punched the air toward Wil, shouting, "I'll kill you, spic bastard!"

Daddy gripped Seth tighter and looked with knit brows from me to Wil to me again. He ordered Seth to shut up, then asked me solemnly, "That true?"

"No, Daddy," I repeated. "Seth's drunk is all."

"That's plain," Daddy said, glancing wearily at his son, who, finally succumbing to Daddy's grip, hung from my father's fist and sullenly kicked at the dirt like a furious child.

Daddy surveyed Wil again, then fanned at him with his free hand, saying, "Get yourself on outta here, boy, and I don't want to see you near my land or my kin again. You got that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Clear as rain," Wil said, tugging his cap.

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