
THE ORIGIN OF FELONY
SOMEBODY'S DYING HERE TONIGHT
CRAIG SOBOLEWSKI

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CS SOBO GROUP, LLC

Somebody's Dying Here Tonight
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Nobody clapped so I counted myself
Six strings, ten thousand hours, one way out

— Felony, "My Life Story"

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ONE

Gate Rolled Back

NOON · JULY 22, 2025

They give you back what you came in with.

That's the rule. Whatever you were wearing the night they booked you, they put it in a bag with your name on it and a number under the name, and they keep it in a room you never see for however long the judge said. Then on the last day a woman behind a window slides it to you through a slot like a lunch tray, and you sign for it.

Mine came folded.

I don't know who folds them. I asked once, in my second year, and nobody knew. A jeans skirt, a black tank top, a flannel I'd tied around my waist because it was ninety-one degrees and I'd been planning to be somewhere cooler by midnight. Socks. One pair of black Vans with the left heel worn through. All of it folded square, the Vans on top with the laces tucked in, like somebody cared.

The flannel still had a stain on the cuff. Brown now. It had been something else.

I put it all on in a room with a drain in the floor. The skirt was loose. I'd come in a hundred and twenty-two pounds and I was going out a hundred and thirty-one and all of it was in my arms and shoulders, so the tank was tight across the back and loose everywhere else. I looked like somebody who'd borrowed a dead girl's clothes. Which, in a way.

There was forty-one dollars and some change in a manila envelope. Gate money and what was left on my books. A bus voucher to Bakersfield. A sheet

of paper with my parole agent's name and an address and a date, Thursday, ten a.m., do not be late, underlined twice by somebody who'd underlined it ten thousand times.

The woman at the window said, "Pruitt."

I said, "Yeah."

She said, "Good luck," the way you'd say *bless you* to a sneeze.

Then the doors. There are a lot of doors between the room with the drain and the outside. I'd counted them going in. Seven. I counted them going out and got seven again, which surprised me for some reason. Like they might have moved one.

The last one isn't a door. It's a gate. It rolls on a track, and it's louder than you'd think, a long iron scrape that you feel in your back teeth, and then it's open and there's a strip of concrete and a parking lot and the sky.

That was it. Nobody clapped.

* * *

I want to tell you what the air was like, because people ask, and because I promised myself I'd remember it right.

It hurt.

That's the honest answer. It was ten-forty in the morning in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley in July and the air was already a hundred degrees and it came into my lungs like something with corners. It smelled like cow and dust and diesel and somebody's cut alfalfa. Inside, the air is always the same air. It's been through a thousand people before it gets to you. Out here it was raw. Nobody had used it first.

I stood on the strip of concrete with my bag and I breathed it, and it hurt, and I kept breathing it.

There was a Coke machine against the wall of the visitor building. Old one, red, with the picture of the bottle sweating. It was humming. That's all I remember hearing. Not birds, not traffic. A Coke machine humming to itself in the heat like it was the only thing out there that had something to say.

I had a dollar fifty in quarters in the envelope. I could have bought one.

I didn't. I don't know why. I think I didn't want the first thing I did free to be the thing a machine told me to.

* * *

There's a lot in the parking lot of a prison on release day. Mothers in sun visors. Boyfriends leaning on Camaros. A church van with a magnetic sign on the door, HOPE RESTORED MINISTRIES, two old women in it with a cooler of water bottles for anybody who didn't have a ride. I watched a girl I knew from C-yard, Danielle, walk straight into her grandmother's arms so hard they both almost went down. The grandmother was crying. Danielle wasn't. Danielle was laughing, this high, scared laugh like she'd just gotten off a ride.

I stood there long enough to be sure.

I wasn't waiting for anybody. I want that understood. I knew who was coming. I'd known for three years. Nobody had put me on a visiting list because nobody had asked to be on it, and the one person who wrote me every month, Mrs. Ruiz, was seventy-four years old and didn't drive on the highway anymore, and I'd told her not to try.

I just stood there long enough to be sure. That's different from waiting.

One of the church ladies came over with a water bottle. She had a face like a dried apple and a T-shirt that said JESUS NEVER GAVE UP ON YOU.

"You need a ride, honey?"

"No, ma'am."

"You got somebody coming?"

"Bus."

"Bus is at twelve-ten," she said. "You'll cook out here." She held out the bottle. "Go on."

I took the water. I said thank you. I'm not an animal.

She looked at my arms. Everybody does. The bones go from my shoulders down to my wrists on both sides, humerus and radius and ulna, done in blue the way you'd draw them in a science book, so you can see what you'd be hitting before you hit it. Some people look at them and look away fast. She looked at them for a long time.

"Who did those?"

"A friend."

"In there?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She nodded like that explained something. Then she said, "Your hands are clean," and I said, "Yeah," and she said, "Why?"

Nobody had asked me that before. Not out loud.

"They're for work," I said.

She patted my wrist where the ink stopped and went back to her van.

* * *

The bus to Fresno was a county bus with a cracked windshield and the AC on high, and I sat in the back and didn't look out the window for the first ten minutes because I was afraid of what it would do to me. Then I looked.

Almond orchards. Rows and rows, going by so fast they flickered, every row lining up for a second into a long tunnel of green and then breaking apart. Irrigation pipes. A crop duster, yellow, banking low over a field. A billboard for a personal injury lawyer. A billboard for a church. A billboard for a personal injury lawyer who looked like he went to that church.

I'd been in a bus like this one three years ago going the other way. Different bus, same road. I'd had chains on that time, a belly chain and wrist cuffs, and a guard named Ames had talked at us the whole way down Highway 99 like he was getting paid by the word. Keep your head down. Don't stare. Look 'em in the eye. Square up. Don't back down. He gave us every piece of advice there is and the opposite of every piece, and by Chowchilla I'd figured out none of it meant anything. He just liked hearing himself be the last free voice we'd hear.

This bus nobody talked. A man up front was asleep with his mouth open. A woman in scrubs was eating sunflower seeds and spitting the shells in a cup. There was a kid with headphones, and I could hear the tinny edge of whatever he was playing, and I realized I didn't know what it was. Three years. There were songs now I'd never heard. Whole songs, whole artists, that everybody on this bus probably knew the words to.

I put my hands flat on my thighs.

I did a C major scale on my left leg. Two octaves, up and down, the fingers walking on denim. Then E minor, melodic, up and down. Then the first eight bars of the Villa-Lobos Étude Number One, the arpeggio pattern, right hand on my right thigh, left hand making the chord shapes on nothing. I could do it with my eyes closed. I'd done it with my eyes closed every night for three years on a mattress so thin you could feel the bolts.

Paper frets. That's what I'd had. A fretboard I'd drawn on the back of a commissary slip with a golf pencil, nineteen frets, six strings, every note labeled. I'd taped it to the underside of the bunk above me so I could practice

lying down. My cellie my first year thought I was crazy. My cellie my second year thought I was praying. My cellie my third year didn't think anything about me at all, which was the best cellie I ever had.

The kid with the headphones looked back at me. At my hands moving on my legs.

I stopped.

He looked away.

* * *

In Fresno I changed to a Greyhound. Two hours to Bakersfield, south on 99, the same road I'd watched through a mesh window going north.

I should tell you I didn't have a plan. People ask you in there about your plan. Counselors ask. The parole packet asks. *What is your plan for successful reentry.* I had written: *get a job. find housing. stay out of trouble.* Three lines. Every girl in there wrote some version of those three lines. You could have photocopied them.

The real plan was one line, and I'd never written it down because writing things down is how they get used against you.

The real plan was: *get a guitar.*

Everything else was after that.

* * *

We came into Bakersfield from the north at two-fifteen in the afternoon. You can tell you're close because of the oil. The fields of pump jacks on the bluffs, the nodding donkeys going up and down, up and down, like they're agreeing with something. The air turns. It gets that taste, sweet and sour, petroleum and dust. When I was a kid I thought the whole world smelled like that.

The bus crossed the Kern River. There was water in it, which there isn't always. A thin brown strip moving slow under the bridge with tules on both sides.

Oildale was on my left. I didn't look. I'd look later. I'd been saving it.

The Greyhound station is downtown, by the tracks. I got off with my bag and my forty-one dollars and my water bottle from the church lady, and I stood on the sidewalk in the heat, and a man on a bench said, "Hey, mama," and I didn't look at him either, and he said, "Damn, okay," like I'd hurt his feelings.

I walked.

I knew where I was going. I'd known for three years. There was a pawn shop on Union Avenue that I used to walk past with Mr. Ruiz when I was ten, and there were always guitars in the window, cheap ones, acoustic ones with plastic bridges and steel strings and the price written on a tag in grease pencil. He'd stop and look at them and shake his head. *Garbage,* he'd say. *Furniture. You could not play Bach on that if God Himself tuned it.*

And then he'd stand there another minute, looking.

I was going to that window.

It was a mile and a half. I walked it in the heat with my bag over my shoulder and my flannel tied around my waist the way it was tied the last time, and the sun was straight up, no shadow anywhere to stand in, and the sidewalk was so hot I could feel it through the worn-out heel of my left Van.

I didn't mind.

I'd had three years of that sun. Ten o'clock every morning, every day, the yard, the fence, the light coming straight down. I never saw it go down once. Not once. You're inside by four.

So I walked down Union Avenue at the hottest part of the hottest day, and I didn't look for shade, and I thought: this is all I got. This is all I got and it don't move.

Then I saw the window.

TWO

A Baby in a Back Room

MORNING · MARCH 2004

She was born on a Saturday night during a party, which is how most things happened at the Dust Kings clubhouse.

The clubhouse was a cinderblock building behind Voss Tire & Wheel on Roberts Lane, with a steel door painted black and a hand-lettered sign over it that said MEMBERS & GUESTS, though nobody could remember a guest. Inside there was a bar made from a bowling-alley lane, a pool table with a slash in the felt that somebody had repaired with duct tape, a jukebox that played Merle and Waylon and Skynyrd and, if you put in enough quarters and nobody stopped you, one Def Leppard song. There was a back room behind the bar with a cot in it and a mini fridge and a framed photograph of the club's founding members in 1979, eight men in denim cuts squinting into the sun on the bluffs over the Kern River.

Lorna Pruitt was nineteen years old and eight and a half months pregnant and should not have been there.

She knew that. She'd known it all day. But Dale had wanted to go, because it was Royce Voss's birthday, and when Royce had a birthday every patch in the club showed up whether they had a pregnant wife or a broken leg or a warrant, and Dale was not about to be the one who didn't. And Lorna had not wanted to be alone in the rental on the gravel drive, because the baby had been kicking so hard all week she thought something might be wrong, and because when she was alone in that house she could hear her own thoughts, and her thoughts were not always good company.

So she sat in a vinyl booth by the jukebox drinking 7-Up with a straw, and her husband played pool in his cut with DEACON stitched on the front, and around eleven o'clock her water broke on the clubhouse floor.

Somebody said, "Oh, *shit*," and somebody else laughed, and the jukebox kept playing "Mama Tried."

* * *

Here is the part nobody agreed on afterward.

Lorna said she asked to be driven to Kern Medical and nobody would drive her. Dale said everybody was drunk, which was true, and that the nearest sober person was the prospect watching the bikes outside, who was sixteen and didn't have a license, which was also true. Royce Voss said he called an ambulance. Nobody ever found a record of the call.

What everybody agreed on was that there wasn't time anyway. The baby was coming fast. Royce's wife, Charlene, who'd had three of her own and was the only woman in the building who'd been through this, took Lorna by the elbow and walked her back behind the bar into the back room, and laid her on the cot, and told the men to get out and stay out and somebody boil some goddamn water, which nobody did, because nobody knew what you were supposed to do with it.

The baby came at 12:38 a.m., March the fourteenth.

She came out blue and quiet, and for a long few seconds Charlene thought she was dead, and Lorna thought so too, and Lorna would say later that in those seconds she felt something she'd never told anyone about, not even her pastor, which was relief.

Then the baby breathed and cried, and Lorna cried too, and the relief went wherever things like that go.

There wasn't a blanket. There were bar towels, but they were wet and smelled like beer. Charlene opened the back-room door a crack and said, "I need something clean and warm," and Dale, who'd been standing right outside with his hands in his hair, took off his cut without thinking and handed it to her.

So the first thing Felicia Rae Pruitt was ever wrapped in was a leather vest with a Dust Kings patch on the back, a skull in a crown of oil derricks, and the word DEACON on the front over the heart.

Somebody took a picture. The picture would hang behind the clubhouse bar for thirteen years, next to the founders, until the night it didn't.

* * *

She was a good baby. Everybody said so. She didn't cry much. She watched.

Lorna would hold her in the rocker in the rental's front room, by the window where you could see the gravel and the chain-link and the street, and the baby would watch whatever moved. Headlights. Dale's bike coming in. The neighbor's dog. Lorna would sing to her, the only songs she knew, which were the songs from the Lighthouse Holiness Tabernacle in the strip mall on North Chester, and she sang them low and soft and slightly flat, because in Lorna's church you did not sing loud. Loud was pride. You sang so God could hear you and nobody else.

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling.

The baby watched her mouth.

* * *

Dale loved her the way he loved most things, which was loudly and in bursts.

He'd come home at two in the morning and wake her up to show her to whoever he'd brought with him. *Look at her. Look at those eyes. You ever seen eyes like that?* And they hadn't, because nobody in either family had blue eyes like that, a deep cobalt that looked almost unnatural in her freckled little face, and Lorna's mother had made a remark once that Lorna never forgave and never repeated.

He'd take her to the clubhouse on Sunday afternoons when the bar was open for families, and set her on the bowling-lane bar in her car seat, and the patches would come by and make faces at her and give her their fingers to grab. She grabbed hard. They liked that. *Strong little hands on her, Deacon.* Royce Voss, who was thirty-five then and already president, with a gray streak in his beard and a voice like gravel in a coffee can, picked her up out of the car seat once and held her at arm's length and looked at her like he was pricing her.

"She's one of ours," he said.

It was a compliment. Everybody took it that way.

Lorna, in the booth with her 7-Up, didn't say anything.

* * *

Lorna had been raised in the church the way some people are raised in a house fire. She'd come out of it alive, and she'd never been sure what else she'd come out with.

Her own mother had been saved at a tent revival in Taft in 1981 and had never stopped being saved, every day, all day, out loud. Lorna had grown up with no television, no pants, no music but hymns, no questions. Hands folded. Head down. Don't ask. When she was nine something had happened in that house, something with an uncle and a closed door, and when she'd tried to tell her mother about it her mother had told her to pray on it, and she had prayed on it, and the praying had not helped, and the closed door had kept on closing.

She did not think about that. She had built her whole life on not thinking about it.

She'd married Dale Pruitt at eighteen because he was the loudest thing she had ever seen. He'd ridden up to the Dairy Queen on Chester on a black Shovelhead with no muffler, and the noise of it had gone through her like a revelation. Here was a man who did not ask permission to be heard. She'd thought some of that would rub off on her. She'd thought she could stand next to the noise and be safe inside it.

It hadn't worked that way. Noise isn't a house. You can't live in it.

But she had the baby now, and the baby was quiet, and the baby watched her mouth when she sang, and on her better days that was almost enough.

* * *

When Felicia was two weeks old, Lorna took her to the Lighthouse Tabernacle for the first time.

It was a Wednesday night service. The church was a storefront between a laundromat and a payday loan place, with the windows painted over in white so you couldn't see in, and the name stenciled on the glass door in blue. Inside, folding chairs in rows, a lectern, an upright piano nobody played well, and a cross on the wall made from two pieces of sanded oak. Thirty people, maybe. Mostly women. Mostly older.

Pastor Lyle Gentry, who was seventy and had been preaching in that storefront since it was a shoe store, came down the aisle after the service and looked at the baby in Lorna's arms.

"What's her name?"

"Felicia."

"That's not a Bible name."

"No, sir."

"What's it mean?"

Lorna didn't know. She'd picked it out of a magazine at the Food Maxx checkout, the name of a woman in a perfume ad who had looked like she'd never been afraid of anything in her life.

"It means happy," said a voice behind them.

It was the custodian. A small brown man in a gray work shirt with the name ABELARDO stitched on the pocket, holding a push broom, waiting for everybody to leave so he could sweep. Lorna had seen him before but never heard him talk.

"Felicia," he said. "From *felicitas*. Happiness. Good fortune." He looked at the baby. The baby looked back at him with those eyes. "It is a good name to carry."

Pastor Gentry grunted. "Well. We'll pray it sticks."

The custodian nodded politely and went back to waiting, leaning on his broom, and Lorna carried her daughter out into the parking lot, past the laundromat, under the yellow sodium light, and didn't think about the man again for nine years.

He thought about the baby once or twice. He would say so later.

* * *

That was the beginning. A back room, a borrowed vest, a name out of a magazine, a man with a broom.

The sun came up over the bluffs that morning, the way it does, the oil derricks going black against the orange and then gold and then gone into white. Dale rode home at dawn with his cut tied across the handlebars because it was still in the back room with the baby. Lorna lay on the cot and watched the light come under the door. Charlene Voss sat in a folding chair with a cigarette she wasn't smoking and said, to nobody, "Well, she's here now."

The sun rose on a baby in a back room.

She didn't know yet whose story she'd been born into. Nobody ever does.

THREE

Forty Watts and a Crack in the Glass

NOON · JULY 22, 2025

The window was empty.

Not empty like sold out. Empty like gone. The pawn shop was a vape store now, CLOUD 9 in purple neon, and the window where the guitars used to hang had a cardboard cutout of a girl blowing a smoke ring the size of a tire.

I stood there a long time.

Then I went inside and asked the kid behind the counter if he knew where the pawn shop went. He was maybe nineteen. He had a ring in his lip and a look on his face like I was asking him about the Civil War.

"There was a pawn shop?"

"Yeah. Guitars in the window."

"Huh." He thought about it. "There's one on Chester. By the Walmart. Golden Empire something."

Chester was the other way. Two miles, maybe more. It was three-thirty and the heat was coming up off the sidewalk in sheets and I had forty-one dollars and a shirt with blood on the cuff.

"Thanks."

"You want to try something? We got a mango."

I looked at him.

"Okay," he said. "No mango."

* * *

I didn't make it to Chester. Not that day.

I got about a mile and my body just quit on me. It wasn't the heat. I'd been in heat. It was everything else. The cars. There were so many cars, and they were so fast, and every one of them was a person going somewhere they'd decided to go. Nobody was counting them. Nobody was telling them when. The noise of it all came at me from every side, horns and bass and a leaf blower and a dog and a man yelling into a phone, and inside you learn to sort noise, you learn which noise means trouble and which means nothing, and out here my sorting quit. Everything sounded like trouble. Everything sounded like nothing.

I sat down on a bus bench and put my head between my knees.

A woman with a stroller said, "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You don't look okay."

"I just got out," I said, and I don't know why I said it. You don't say it. It's the first thing they tell you not to say.

The woman looked at me for a second. Then she reached in the stroller basket and handed me a granola bar and kept walking, and she didn't look back, and I sat there holding a granola bar with a cartoon bear on the wrapper and cried for the first time in three years.

Not long. Maybe a minute. I want to be honest about it. I'm not going to make it bigger than it was, and I'm not going to pretend it didn't happen.

Then I ate the granola bar and found a motel.

* * *

The Sundowner Motor Inn on Union Avenue was thirty-nine dollars a night plus tax, cash, no questions, and the man behind the bulletproof glass did not ask me any, which is the only kind of hospitality I trust.

He slid a key under the glass. An actual key, brass, on a green plastic diamond with the number 14 on it.

"Checkout's eleven," he said. "No guests after ten. No cooking in the room."

"I don't have anything to cook."

"Then you're fine."

Room 14 was on the second floor, at the end, facing the parking lot. Inside: a bed with a bedspread the color of old mustard, a TV bolted to the

dresser, an air conditioner in the wall that rattled like it had a bolt loose in it but blew cold, a nightstand with a Bible in the drawer and a cigarette burn on top. A bathroom. A shower with a plastic curtain and a ring of rust around the drain. A sink. A mirror.

I closed the door.

Then I locked it. The deadbolt and the chain both.

Then I stood in the middle of the room and listened to the fact that I had locked it, and nobody else had, and nobody else could unlock it, and if I wanted to open it I could, at any time, for any reason, without asking.

I unlocked it. I opened it. I stood in the doorway and looked out at the parking lot, at a pickup with a camper shell and a woman smoking by the ice machine and a palm tree with half its fronds dead.

I closed it. I locked it again.

I did that four times. I'm telling you so you know.

* * *

There's a thing nobody tells you about getting out, and it's this: you don't know how to be alone in a room.

Inside, you are never alone. There's always a cellie, a CO, a camera, a count. Somebody is always looking at you or could be. You learn to live like that. You learn to dress fast and pee fast and cry facing the wall without making noise. You learn to keep your face shut all the time, even asleep, because somebody might be watching your face.

Then you're in Room 14 at the Sundowner Motor Inn and nobody is watching your face, and you don't know what it's supposed to do.

I sat on the edge of the mustard bed. I turned on the TV. A game show, people screaming about a car. I turned it off. I turned on the air conditioner all the way and stood in front of it until my arms broke out in goosebumps. I took my Vans off and put my feet on the carpet, which was dirty and soft, and I realized I hadn't stood barefoot on carpet since I was eighteen.

Then I went into the bathroom to wash my face, and the light over the mirror was one bare bulb, forty watts, I checked it later, and the mirror had a crack that went from the top left corner almost to the bottom right, and I looked at myself in it for the first time.

* * *

Inside, there's no real mirror. There's a square of polished steel bolted to the wall over the sink, and what you see in it is a shape. A blur. You know it's you because nobody else is standing there. You can fix your hair in it and see if you've got something in your teeth, and that's about it.

So I hadn't seen my own face in three years. Not really.

I got in close. Forty watts. A crack in the glass going right through the middle of me, so the left half of my face was a little higher than the right half, like two different photographs taped together.

The freckles were still there. Darker, from the yard. The eyes were still the same blue, which I don't know why I'd worried about, eyes don't change color in prison, but I'd worried about it. My hair was long and dark and dead at the ends, pulled back in a rubber band. I had a scar through my left eyebrow I'd forgotten about, from my third week, from a girl named Precious who'd been wearing a ring.

But that wasn't the thing.

The thing was the face itself. It wasn't the face I'd left with. Something had gone out of it, or come into it, and I couldn't tell which. The mouth was harder. The jaw. There was a look in the eyes that I recognized, but not from me. From the yard. From the women I'd learned to stay away from. From Inez.

I got in closer. I put my nose almost to the glass.

And I looked for her.

I looked for the girl with the guitar case on the bench outside the Valley Star, two months after Mr. Ruiz died, with a Juilliard letter folded in her back pocket so many times it was coming apart at the creases. The girl who'd held doors and said please and thank you. The nicest kid on the block, ask anybody. I knew she'd changed. I knew that. But I thought I'd at least be able to find her in there. Something. The shape of her around the eyes. The thing in the mouth when she was about to play.

I looked a long time.

Where did I go?

That's what I thought. Not in words. More like a feeling that had a shape, like reaching into your pocket for your keys and they're not there, and you keep feeling around anyway, in the same pocket, like they'll show up if you just keep looking.

Where did I go. Who am I now. What am I going to be tomorrow.

And then the worst one, the one I didn't want and had anyway:

Should I be afraid of what I'm going to become?

The face in the mirror didn't answer. It looked back at me, cracked down the middle, a little higher on one side than the other, and it didn't flinch, and it didn't soften, and I understood that whatever it was, it wasn't scared of me.

That was the part that scared me.

* * *

Here's what I did next. I think it's important.

I didn't break the mirror. People do that in movies. I thought about it. I thought about how it would feel, the glass going, the crack finally finishing what it started.

I didn't. I put both hands flat on the sink, on either side of the faucet, and I looked at them.

Clean. No ink. Inez wouldn't do them. *Hands are for the work, mija. You want to tell the world what you are, you tell it with your arms. Your hands, you keep for the thing.* She'd done the bones up to the wrist and stopped like there was a line drawn there, and when I'd asked her to do the knuckles, just the knuckles, small, she'd put down the machine and looked at me like I'd asked her to cut off a finger.

My hands on the sink. Long fingers. Calluses gone soft from three years of nothing but air and paper. The nails short because they make you keep them short. The right hand, the one that did it, looked exactly like the left.

That's the thing nobody understands. They look exactly the same.

I said, out loud, to the mirror, to the crack, to whatever was looking back:

"I need a guitar."

My voice sounded strange in that small room. Lower than I remembered. Flat. Like a voice that had stopped trying to go up at the ends.

Then I took a shower so hot the mirror fogged all the way over, and I didn't have to look at anything, and I stood under the water until it ran cold, and when I got out I lay down on top of the mustard bedspread in a towel with the air conditioner rattling and the chain on the door, and I did the Villa-Lobos on my stomach with my fingers, eight bars, over and over, until it was dark.

Nobody came to the door.

Nobody was coming to the door. I'd worked that out. I'd worked it out a long time ago, standing on the gravel. But it's one thing to know it and it's another thing to lie in a motel room on your first night and hear every car door in the parking lot slam and know it isn't for you.

Am I scaring you? I thought, at nobody. *Were you scared before? Or did that start the day you figured out nobody's coming to the door?*

I fell asleep around two. I dreamed about nothing. That was the first good thing.

FOUR

Hands Folded, Head Down

MORNING · 2009–2012

At five years old Lish Pruitt held doors.

Nobody taught her to. She just did it. At the Food Maxx on Chester, at the post office, at the Lighthouse Tabernacle three times a week, she'd plant herself by the door and lean on it with her whole body to keep it open while old women with walkers came through, and she'd say "You're welcome" before they had a chance to say thank you, because she'd learned that sometimes they forgot to say it and it was less embarrassing for everybody if she went first.

"That child," the old women said. "That *child*."

She said please. She said thank you. She said yes ma'am and no sir. She sat through two-hour services on a folding chair with her feet not touching the floor and her hands folded in her lap, and she didn't fidget, and when Pastor Gentry preached about hellfire she listened with her whole face like he was telling her a bedtime story. She liked the hellfire parts best. They were the only parts that were loud.

Lorna sat beside her, hands folded too. Head down. They looked like a matched set.

* * *

The bunny came on her fifth birthday.

Dale brought it home at two in the morning, the way he brought everything home, and woke her up to give it to her. She remembered that for the rest of her life: the light from the hall falling across the bed, the smell of beer and motor oil and outside air on him, his big hand holding out something white and soft in the dark.

It was a stuffed rabbit, about the size of a loaf of bread, white with pink inside the ears and a pink thread nose and two black plastic eyes. It had a blue ribbon around its neck. He'd won it in a claw machine at the Denny's on Rosedale, or he said he had. Lorna said later he'd probably taken it off somebody's kid. Lish never asked.

"What's her name?" Dale said.

Lish held the bunny against her chest and thought about it seriously.

"Bunny," she said.

Dale laughed so loud Lorna yelled at him from the other room, and he picked up both of them, Lish and the bunny, and spun them around in the dark until she was dizzy and laughing too.

It was the only soft thing he ever gave anyone. She didn't know that yet. She just knew it was hers.

She slept with Bunny every night. She took it to church in a plastic Food Maxx bag and kept it under her folding chair. She told it things. Not big things. Little ones. What she'd had for lunch, which kids at school were mean, what the pastor said about hell. Bunny listened with its black plastic eyes and never once told her to pray on it.

* * *

Brandi Voss was her best friend.

That was a fact, like the sky being blue or the Kern River being low in August. They'd been born six weeks apart, both of them club kids, and they'd spent every Sunday afternoon of their lives under the same picnic table behind Voss Tire & Wheel while the grown-ups drank and argued over the grill. They had a whole world under there. They had a kingdom.

Brandi was queen, because Brandi was always queen. She was a small, fierce, blond girl with a gap between her front teeth and a voice that carried, and she was the president's daughter and everybody knew it, including her. When Brandi wanted something, she got it. Not by asking. By deciding.

Lish didn't mind being second. She liked it. Brandi did the deciding and Lish did everything else, and it worked. Brandi would say, "We're running away to Hollywood," and Lish would pack the picnic basket with chips and two Capri Suns and Bunny. Brandi would say, "We're getting married," and Lish would make the rings out of pull tabs and do the whole service, the dearly beloveds and everything, because she knew all the words from church.

"Who are we marrying?" Lish asked once.

"Each other, dummy," Brandi said. "There's nobody else good enough."

They were seven. Lish thought it was the smartest thing she'd ever heard.

* * *

Here's the thing about Brandi Voss that nobody would remember later, that nobody would say at the funeral or the sentencing or anywhere else.

She was kind.

Not all the time. Brandi could be mean. She could look at another girl's shoes for one second too long and make that girl want to go home and burn them. But to Lish, when it was just the two of them under the table, she was kind in a way that nobody else in Lish's life was.

When Lish was eight her front tooth got knocked out on the monkey bars at school, and she came to the clubhouse with a gap and a swollen lip and was so embarrassed she wouldn't open her mouth. Brandi looked at her for a long time. Then she went into the clubhouse, got a pair of pliers off the bar, came back out, and handed them to Lish.

"Pull one of mine," she said.

"What?"

"Pull one. Then we match."

"Brandi, no."

"Do it or I'll do it myself."

Lish didn't do it. But she laughed for the first time all day, a real laugh, with the gap showing, and Brandi laughed too, and that was the end of being embarrassed.

That's who Brandi Voss was when she was eight. It's important. Everything that happened later is worse if you forget it.

* * *

Royce Voss liked Lish.

Everybody could see it. He liked her because she was quiet and polite and looked him in the eye when she talked to him, which grown men in his club didn't always do. He'd give her a dollar for the jukebox and let her pick. She always picked the same song, "Okie from Muskogee," because it was the one with the most words she could sing along to, and she'd stand by the jukebox and sing every word in a small clear voice, and the patches would stop playing pool to listen.

"That one's got pipes," Royce said. "Where'd she get that, Deacon? Not from you."

"Not from her mama neither," Dale said. "Lorna sings like a mouse."

Lorna, in the booth, didn't say anything.

* * *

The singing was the problem.

Not at the clubhouse. At the clubhouse it was a party trick. At the Lighthouse Tabernacle, it was something else.

Lish had figured out early that she could hear things other people couldn't. When the congregation sang "Blessed Assurance," she could hear that old Mrs. Tackett was a half step flat on the high note and that the piano was out of tune on the low C, and she could hear the right note sitting there in the air like a shape everybody else was missing. She'd try to sing it soft, the way Mama sang. But the right note wanted to be sung right. It pulled at her.

So one Sunday when she was seven she sang it right, out loud, full, and her voice went up over the whole room, over Mrs. Tackett and the bad piano and the thirty people mumbling, clean as a bell.

The room went quiet.

Pastor Gentry stopped the hymn.

He came down the aisle with his Bible under his arm and stood over her, and the whole church turned around in their folding chairs to look, and Lish felt her face go hot, and she didn't understand what she'd done wrong.

"Young lady," Pastor Gentry said. "Who are you singing for?"

Lish didn't know what the right answer was.

"God?"

"Are you sure?" he said. "Because it sounded to me like you were singing for everybody in this room to hear how pretty your voice is. Did it sound that way to you, Sister Pruitt?"

Lorna, beside her, with her head down, said, "Yes, Pastor."

"Pride," Pastor Gentry said, "is the first sin. It is the sin of the morning star. Lucifer was the most beautiful voice in heaven and he wanted to be heard, and look where it got him." He looked down at Lish. "God hears you when you whisper, child. He doesn't need you to shout."

Then he went back to the lectern and started the hymn again from the top, and Lish sang it in a whisper, and nobody looked at her again.

In the car on the way home Lorna didn't say anything for a long time. Then, at the stoplight at Chester and Norris, without looking over, she said, "You have to learn to make yourself small, baby. It's safer."

"Safer from what?"

Lorna didn't answer. The light turned green.

Lish went home and told Bunny, in a whisper, that she was never going to sing again. And she didn't, not in church, not for years.

But the right notes didn't go anywhere. They stayed in her. They sat in her chest like birds in a box, and every time she heard something out of tune, they beat their wings.

* * *

She was nine the night she stayed late.

It was a Wednesday service. Lorna had stayed after to help Mrs. Tackett with the church accounts, which meant she'd be another hour at the folding table in the back with the cash box and the ledger, and she told Lish to sit and be good. So Lish sat in the last row of folding chairs with Bunny in her lap and her hands folded on top of Bunny, and she was good.

The custodian came in with his push broom. The small brown man with ABELARDO on his shirt. He nodded at her. She nodded back.

He swept the front of the room. He swept the aisle. Then he went into the little storage closet behind the lectern and came back out, and he wasn't carrying a broom anymore.

He was carrying a guitar.

It was old. Lish could tell even from the back row. The wood was the color of honey with a darker ring around the hole in the middle, and there was a crack on the front, low down by the bridge, that somebody had fixed a long time ago. It didn't look like the guitars at the clubhouse, the electric ones the

patches' kids played sometimes, all glossy black and red with lightning bolts. It looked like something that had been alive once and still sort of was.

He sat down on a folding chair at the front of the empty church, with his back to her, and put one foot up on a little wooden box, and set the guitar on his left leg. He tuned it. She could hear him do it, string by string, and every string went from slightly wrong to exactly right, and the right ones landed on that shape in the air she'd always been able to hear.

Then he played.

She didn't know what it was. She wouldn't know for two years: Tárrega, "Recuerdos de la Alhambra," a piece where the right hand plays the same note so fast over and over that it stops sounding like notes and starts sounding like water, like light on water, while the thumb plays the melody underneath it, low and slow and sad. She didn't know any of that. She just sat in the back row of the Lighthouse Holiness Tabernacle with her hands folded on top of Bunny and her mouth open and the hair standing up on her arms.

It wasn't loud. That was the thing. It wasn't loud at all. It was the quietest thing she'd ever heard. And it filled the whole room.

When he finished, he sat for a second with his hand flat on the strings to stop them ringing.

Then he said, without turning around, "You can come closer if you want. I don't bite."

She didn't move.

He turned his head and looked at her over his shoulder. He had a mustache going gray and glasses with thick lenses and a face that looked like it had smiled a lot a long time ago.

"You are Sister Pruitt's girl," he said. "Felicia."

"Lish."

"Lish." He seemed to try it out. "Do you like music, Lish?"

She thought about Pastor Gentry. *Pride is the first sin.* She thought about Mama in the car. *Make yourself small.* She looked over her shoulder at the back of the room, where Lorna and Mrs. Tackett were bent over the ledger with their backs to her.

Then she looked at the guitar.

"Yes," she whispered.

He smiled. The old smile, from a long time ago.

"Good," he said. "Then come here. And bring your rabbit. He looks like he likes music too."

"She," Lish said.

"She," Abelardo Ruiz said. "Forgive me. Come."

And Lish Pruitt, nine years old, the nicest kid on the block, unfolded her hands for the first time in her life and walked up the aisle.

FIVE

Thirty-Two Dollars for the Rest of My Life

NOON · JULY 23, 2025

Mrs. Ruiz lived on a street in east Bakersfield where every house had a fence and every fence had a dog and every dog had an opinion about me.

I'd taken the city bus. Forty-five minutes, two transfers, a dollar and a half. I'd had her address memorized for three years. It was on the back of every envelope, in her handwriting, which was small and slanted and careful, the handwriting of somebody who'd learned it from nuns.

She wrote me thirty-four letters. One a month, almost exactly, plus one extra on my twenty-first birthday. I kept all of them. They're in a Ziploc in my bag right now. They weren't long letters. Her English was good but she wrote it slow, and she told me small things. The tomatoes. Her sister in Guadalajara. Her hip. A program on the radio that played guitar music on Sunday nights, and what they played, and whether she thought Abelardo would have liked it. She never asked me anything about inside. She never asked me about that night. Every letter ended the same way:

Your hands are still yours. Take care of them. — G.R.

* * *

She opened the door before I knocked. She must have been watching from the window.

She was smaller than I remembered. She'd always been small, but now she was small like a bird, all bones and big eyes, with her white hair in a braid down her back and a cardigan on, in July, because old ladies are always cold. She looked at me through the screen for a long time.

I'd thought about what I would say. I'd thought about it for three years. I didn't say any of it.

She opened the screen door and put her arms around me.

I didn't know what to do. Nobody had touched me like that in three years, not with their whole body, not without wanting something. I stood there stiff as a board with my arms at my sides. She held on anyway. She was so small her head came to the middle of my chest, and I could feel her breathing.

"Ay, mija," she said into my tank top. "Look how big."

I put one hand on her back. That's all I could do. One hand, flat, between her shoulder blades, like you'd steady a ladder.

It was enough for her. She let go and wiped her eyes with the cuff of her cardigan and said, "Come in, come in, it's hot, I made albondigas," and I went in.

* * *

Her house smelled like him.

I don't know how. He'd been dead three years. But it did. Pipe tobacco and Murphy's Oil Soap and something else, a woody smell, like the inside of a guitar case. There were pictures of him everywhere. Abelardo young, in a black suit, holding a guitar on a stage somewhere with velvet curtains. Abelardo at his wedding. Abelardo with the grandkids at Disneyland, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. Abelardo at the Lighthouse Tabernacle in his gray work shirt, leaning on his push broom, squinting at whoever had the camera.

I stopped in front of that one.

"Mrs. Gentry took it," Graciela said. "For the newsletter. He hated it. He said he looked like a janitor." She laughed. "I said, Abelardo, you *are* a janitor. He said, Only from eight to four."

I ate two bowls of albondigas at her kitchen table while she watched me eat. She didn't ask me anything. She talked about the tomatoes. When I finished the second bowl she took it without asking and filled it again, and I ate that too.

Then she said, "Come. I have something."

The garage was full of his things. She'd kept everything. His tools on a pegboard, outlined in marker so you'd know where each one went. His workbench, with a guitar on it in pieces, a back without a top, sides bent in a mold, a neck with no frets. He'd been building one. I hadn't known that. I stood there looking at it and couldn't breathe right for a second.

"He started it the year before," Graciela said. "For you. For New York. He said you would need a better one than his for the big stages." She touched the unfinished neck with one finger. "He didn't finish."

I didn't say anything.

"I don't know how to finish it," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"It's not okay. But it's what there is."

Then she walked past the workbench to the other side of the garage, where there was a white shape under a tarp. She pulled the tarp off.

It was his truck. A white 1998 Ford Ranger with a dent in the tailgate and RUIZ JANITORIAL SERVICES still on the driver's door in faded blue letters, with a phone number that didn't work anymore. He'd driven it to every church and office building and school in Oildale for twenty years. He'd driven me to Fresno in it when I was sixteen, for the competition. He'd ridden with me to the airport in it when I was seventeen, for New York, too sick by then to drive, and made me take the wheel.

"My grandson keeps it running," she said. "He starts it every Sunday. I told him, this is for Lish, when she comes home. He said, *Abuela, she might not want a truck.* I said, she will want this truck." She held out a key on a ring with a little plastic Virgin of Guadalupe on it. "There's half a tank. It's what there was."

I looked at the key.

"Mrs. Ruiz, I can't."

"You can. He would want it. I want it." She pushed the key into my hand and closed my fingers over it with both of hers. Her hands were dry and cool and light. "You need to go places. You can't go places on the bus. Take it."

I'd cried once already, on the bus bench, with the granola bar. I wasn't going to do it again in front of her. I held the key in my fist so hard the Virgin of Guadalupe left a mark in my palm.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me," she said. "Thank him. Go to the cemetery sometime. Tell him what you did with it."

* * *

I asked her about his guitar before I left. I had to.

I knew what had happened to it. I'd been there. I'd knelt on the curb outside the Valley Star picking up the pieces. But I'd never known what happened to the pieces after. Whether the police took them. Whether they were in an evidence locker somewhere in a box with a number on it.

"They gave them back to me," Graciela said. "After. A detective brought them. In a bag."

"Do you still have them?"

She looked at me a long time.

"No, mija," she said. "I burned them. In the backyard, in the barbecue. I'm sorry. I couldn't look at it."

I nodded. It was right. I would have done the same thing.

"It was a good guitar," she said. "From Paracho. His father bought it for him when he was fifteen. He played it in Mexico City for the people from the conservatory. He played it for me the night he asked me to marry him." She smiled. "Then he played it for you. Nine years. More than for me. He said you were the best student he ever had. Better than him. He said, *Graciela, she's going to play the Chaconne at Carnegie Hall and I'm going to sit in the front row in a suit and cry like a baby.*"

I had to look at the floor.

"I'm sorry I'm saying this," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't."

"No," I said. "Say it."

So she told me the rest. That he'd talked about me at dinner every night for nine years. That he'd made a recording of me when I was fourteen, playing the Villa-Lobos, and played it for his friends at the senior center until they begged him to stop. That after the letter came, in those last seven weeks in the hospice bed in the living room, he told every nurse who walked in the door, strangers, *she's going to Juilliard*, until the night nurse could say it along with him.

I'd known most of it. Not all of it.

I drove away in his truck with the window down, and the half a tank, and the Virgin of Guadalupe swinging from the key in the ignition, and I didn't

look back at the house, because I knew she was standing in the screen door watching me go and I knew if I looked at her I'd stop.

* * *

The pawn shop on Chester was called Golden Empire Pawn & Gun, and it was in a strip mall next to a Little Caesars, and the guitars were on the back wall behind the counter, a whole row of them hanging by their necks like something at a slaughterhouse.

The man behind the counter was big and bald with a Raiders shirt and a revolver on his hip in a holster, which is legal for a pawn shop owner and also tells you everything. He looked at my arms. Then at my face. Then at my arms again.

"Help you?"

"Guitars."

He jerked his thumb at the wall. "Take your pick. Don't touch without asking."

I looked at them for a long time.

Mr. Ruiz was right. They were garbage. A Fender Squier with three strings. A Washburn with a cracked neck. A purple Ibanez electric with a sticker on it that said ROCK N ROLL WILL NEVER DIE in glitter. A First Act, the kind they sell at Walmart for kids, with a picture of a cartoon dog on the pickguard. Six or seven more that weren't worth the wall they were on.

And then, at the end, almost hidden behind a banjo with no head, a nylon-string.

It was cheap. You could see that from across the room. A plywood top, a satin finish that was wearing off, a plastic tuning head with one of the buttons missing. Some brand I'd never heard of, CORDOBA KNOCKOFF practically written on it. The kind of guitar a parent buys a kid for the first semester of lessons, and the kid quits, and it lives in a closet for eight years until somebody's moving and takes it to a pawn shop.

But it had nylon strings. It was a classical guitar. It was the only one on the wall that was the right kind of thing.

"That one," I said.

He took it down. He looked at the tag. "Thirty-five."

I had thirty-eight dollars left after the motel and the bus. I'd need gas. I'd need food.

"Thirty," I said.

"Thirty-five."

"It's missing a tuner button."

"Still tunes."

"Thirty."

He looked at me. He looked at my arms. Something happened in his face, a little thing, the thing that happens in people's faces when they decide you're not worth the argument or when they decide you are.

"Thirty-two," he said. "Final. And you're not getting a case."

"Fine."

I counted it out on the glass counter. Three tens and two ones. He slid the guitar across.

"Don't bring it back," he said. "I already got enough of those."

* * *

I didn't play it in the store. I didn't play it in the parking lot. I put it on the passenger seat of the truck like a person and drove back to the Sundowner with both hands on the wheel at ten and two, and I parked outside Room 14, and I carried it up the stairs, and I locked the door. Deadbolt. Chain.

I sat on the edge of the mustard bed with it on my left knee and my right foot up on the Gideon Bible because I didn't have a footstool.

It was out of tune. Of course it was. Every string flat, the G string so slack it buzzed. I tuned it by ear, string by string, the way he'd taught me, low E first, and I listened to every string go from wrong to right, and when the last one landed I felt it land somewhere in my chest like a bone going back into its socket.

Then I sat there.

I sat there for a long time with my left hand on the neck and my right hand over the hole and I didn't play anything.

I want to tell you why, and I'm not sure I can. I think it was this: for three years I'd practiced on paper. On air. On my own legs. And in my head it had been perfect. Every note. I'd played the Villa-Lobos and the Bach and the Tárrega in my head ten thousand times and I'd never missed once, because in your head you don't miss.

Now I had a real one. And the real one would tell me the truth.

The real one would tell me what three years had done to my hands.

I sat there until the light in the window went orange. Then I put my right thumb on the low E string, and I closed my eyes, and I played the first note of the first piece he ever taught me, the little waltz he wrote for me himself when I was nine, in E minor, that he called "Lish's Song."

It was wrong. The note was buzzy and thin and the guitar was cheap and my thumb was soft and the string was old.

It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard in my life.

I played the whole thing. Sixteen bars. I missed twice. I played it again. I missed once. I played it again. I didn't miss.

Thirty-two dollars. That's what it cost me. Thirty-two dollars for the rest of my life.

SIX

Learned My Scales in a Back Pew

MORNING · 2013–2014

The first thing he taught her wasn't a note. It was how to sit.

"Left foot up," Abelardo Ruiz said. "On the box. Like this." He had a little wooden footstool, scarred and worn, that he kept in the storage closet with the guitar. "The guitar sits here, on the left leg, in the middle of you. Not on the right. On the right is for cowboys."

"My dad's friends play on the right."

"Your dad's friends are cowboys." He adjusted the guitar against her. It was far too big. Her arm barely reached around the body. "Back straight. Not stiff. Straight like a tree, not like a broom. Shoulders down. You are not afraid of it. It is not going to hurt you."

"Okay."

"Say it."

"It's not going to hurt me."

"Good. Now. Hands."

He took her right hand in both of his and turned it over and looked at it like a doctor. Then the left. He bent her fingers one at a time, feeling the joints. He spread them as wide as they would go and measured the span with his eyes.

"Long," he said. "Good. Strong in the joints. Good." He let go. "These are good hands, Lish. You know that?"

Nobody had ever said anything about her hands before except *strong little hands on her, Deacon*, which wasn't the same thing.

"Hands are the most important thing," he said. "More than the ear. More than the heart. The ear and the heart you are born with or not. The hands, you build. Every day. Like a wall. One brick. One brick. One brick. Then one day you look up and there's a wall, and nobody can knock it down."

* * *

That first night he taught her one thing: the open E string, played with the thumb, rest stroke, the thumb pushing through the string and coming to rest on the string above it.

That's all. One note. Over and over.

"Again," he said. "Again. No, softer. You're hitting it. Don't hit it. Push it, like a door. Again. Good. Again."

She did it maybe two hundred times. Her thumb got red. Lorna was still at the folding table with Mrs. Tackett and the ledger, forty feet away, with her back turned, and Lish kept looking over her shoulder at her, and every time she looked, Mr. Ruiz said, "Eyes here. She's not going anywhere."

At the end of the hour he took the guitar back and put it in its case and put the case in the closet.

"Wednesday," he said. "Same time. If you want."

"I want."

"Then Wednesday." He looked over at Lorna. "Does your mother know you like music?"

Lish thought about the car. The stoplight at Chester and Norris. *Make yourself small, baby. It's safer.*

"No," she said.

He nodded slowly, like this was information he'd expected and didn't like.

"Then for now," he said, "it is our secret. Yours and mine and the rabbit's. Okay? But secrets are heavy, Lish. If it gets too heavy, you tell me, and we tell her together."

"Okay."

It never got too heavy. That was the thing about Lish Pruitt. She could carry more than anybody thought.

* * *

On the third Wednesday he showed her the key.

It was a big brass key on a ring with twenty other keys, and it opened the glass door of the Lighthouse Holiness Tabernacle, and it was the only key to that door except the one Pastor Gentry carried.

"The church is locked at night," he said. "Pastor Gentry locks it at nine. He goes home. And I come at nine-thirty to clean, and I unlock it, and I am here until eleven. Every night. Monday through Saturday."

He held the key out in his palm so she could see it.

"So if you ever need somewhere to practice," he said, "where nobody will bother you. Where it is quiet. Where the sound is good, because this room has a good sound, the ceiling is high, the walls are plaster, nobody knows it but it's true. You come here between nine-thirty and eleven. And I will let you in."

"Every night?"

"Every night I'm here."

She looked at the key for a long time. She'd never thought about the church being locked. She'd always been inside it when it was open. She'd thought it was the kind of place that was always open, because God was always there.

"Why does it lock?" she said.

Mr. Ruiz thought about that.

"Because people are afraid," he said finally. "Of what somebody could take. The piano. The cash box. The little bit of money in the collection. So they lock it." He closed his hand around the key. "But the good things in a church, nobody can take. The sound. The quiet. Those, you can't put in a pocket."

* * *

She came every night she could.

That wasn't every night. The rental on the gravel drive was a ten-minute walk from the strip mall on North Chester, and at nine-thirty at night a ten-year-old girl walking that stretch alone was something people noticed, even in Oildale. But Dale was gone most nights, at the clubhouse or on a run or somewhere he didn't say, and Lorna went to bed at nine with the bedroom door shut and the radio on to the Christian station, and once that door shut, it didn't open till morning.

So Lish would wait till she heard the radio. Then she'd take Bunny and go out the back, past the trash cans, through the gap in the chain-link where the dog had dug under, and walk up the alley behind the houses to Chester, in the dark, past the bail bonds place and the closed-up Mexican bakery and the Valley Star Liquor & Market with its neon sign that buzzed and turned the whole corner red.

Mr. Hollis, who owned the Valley Star, saw her the first time and came out on the sidewalk.

"Little girl. Where you going?"

"Church."

He looked at the strip mall. Then at his watch. "Church is closed."

"Not for me."

He watched her all the way to the glass door. He watched Mr. Ruiz open it from inside and let her in. After that, every time she passed, Mr. Hollis would nod at her from behind the register, and once in a while he'd come out and hand her a bottle of water, and he never asked her again where she was going.

* * *

There's a version of this where a girl picks up a guitar and she's a genius and it just pours out of her. That's not what happened.

What happened was work.

Scales first. Always scales. C major, one octave, then two, then three. G major. D. A. E. The minors, natural and harmonic and melodic. Up and down, up and down, with a metronome on the front pew, an old wind-up one with a pendulum that went *tock, tock, tock* in that high plaster room like a clock in an empty house. Slow first. Sixty beats a minute. Then sixty-six. Then seventy-two. He wouldn't let her go faster until it was clean, and his idea of clean wasn't anybody else's.

"Again."

"It was right."

"It was almost right. The B was late. Almost right is wrong. Again."

Then arpeggios. Then slurs. Then the right hand, *p-i-m-a*, thumb and index and middle and ring, the fingers named in Spanish, *pulgar, índice, medio, anular*, hundreds of times a night across open strings, until the pattern was something her hand did by itself without asking her.

Then, finally, music.

He taught her to read it. Real notation, the lines and spaces, the clefs, the time signatures. He made flashcards out of index cards from the church supply closet and quizzed her while she walked up and down the aisle. *Every Good Boy Does Fine. F-A-C-E.* She learned faster than she'd ever learned anything at school. She learned it in two weeks. At school she'd been doing long division for two months and still didn't get it.

"Why can you do this," Mr. Ruiz said once, holding up a card, "and not your math?"

"This makes sense."

"Math makes sense too."

"Not to me." She thought about it. "Math is just numbers. This is numbers that mean something."

He laughed so hard he had to take his glasses off.

* * *

On her tenth birthday, in March, he gave her a piece of paper.

It was music. Sixteen bars, handwritten in pencil on staff paper, with the title at the top in his small careful handwriting: *Vals para Lish.* Lish's Waltz. In E minor. Three-four time. *Andante.*

"I wrote it for you," he said. "For your hands. Everything in it is something you know. Nothing you can't do. But it's music. Not an exercise. A real piece."

She looked at it. She could read it now. She could hear it in her head, looking at the notes, which was something she'd only just learned she could do. A rising line from E up to B. Then a C that fell back to B, like a sigh. Like somebody reaching for something and not quite getting it.

"It's sad," she said.

"A little."

"Why'd you make it sad?"

He thought about it. "Because you're a little sad," he said. "I think. Am I wrong?"

She didn't say anything.

"It's okay to be a little sad," he said. "Sad is not bad. The best music is a little sad. But look." He pointed at the last line. "At the end, it goes home.

See? It comes back to E. It resolves. That means, no matter how far it goes, it knows where home is."

She learned it in one night. She played it for him the next Wednesday, all sixteen bars, no mistakes, and when she finished he didn't say *again*.

He didn't say anything. He took his glasses off and wiped them on his gray work shirt for a long time.

* * *

Lorna found out in October.

Not about the nights. About the guitar. Mrs. Tackett had come back for her reading glasses on a Wednesday after service and heard it through the glass door before she opened it: a child playing Bach in the dark.

She told Pastor Gentry. Pastor Gentry told Lorna. Lorna sat Lish down at the kitchen table in the rental and didn't say anything for a long time.

"Is it true?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How long?"

"A year."

Lorna looked at her hands on the table. They were red and chapped. She cleaned houses in Rosedale three days a week, rich people's houses with pools, and the chemicals ate her skin.

"Does your father know?"

"No."

Something passed over Lorna's face then. Lish would think about it for years. It wasn't anger. It was something closer to fear, and something closer than that to relief.

"Don't tell him," Lorna said.

"Why?"

"Because anything your father finds," Lorna said, "he sells."

She didn't say anything else about it. She didn't forbid it. Pastor Gentry wanted her to. He'd said it was unseemly, a girl alone at night with a grown man, a Mexican, and he'd used a word about the guitar music, *worldly*, that Lish didn't know but could tell was bad. Lorna listened to him with her head down and said, "Yes, Pastor," and went home, and the next Wednesday, without saying anything, she walked Lish to the strip mall herself at nine-thirty and knocked on the glass door.

Mr. Ruiz opened it.

The two of them looked at each other for a long time.

"She's good?" Lorna said. "At it?"

Mr. Ruiz looked down at Lish, and then back up at her mother.

"Señora," he said, "she is the best I have ever heard. At any age."

Lorna nodded. She didn't smile. Lorna didn't really smile. But she reached out and touched the top of Lish's head, once, very lightly, like you'd touch something you were afraid would break.

"Bring her home by eleven," she said.

And she walked back down Chester in the dark alone, past the Valley Star and the closed bakery and the bail bonds place, with her head down and her hands in her coat pockets, and she didn't come again.

But she never stopped it, either. Lish would remember that later. When it mattered. When she was trying to remember one thing her mother had done right.

She never stopped it.

SEVEN

Every Headlight Leaving

NOON · JULY 24, 2025

I drove to Oildale on the third day.

I'd been saving it. I've said that. But that's not the whole truth. The whole truth is I'd been putting it off, the way you put off a tooth.

You cross the river on the Chester Avenue bridge and you're there. That's all it takes. One bridge. On the Bakersfield side there are palm trees and a Starbucks. On the Oildale side there's a sign that says WELCOME TO OILDALE with somebody's spray paint across it, and the first building is a bail bonds office, and the second building is a bail bonds office, and the third building is a place that buys gold.

It hadn't changed. I don't know why I'd thought it would. Three years is nothing to Oildale. Oildale was the same in 1975. The same pump jacks on the bluffs, the same chain-link, the same low stucco houses the color of cardboard with a truck in every driveway and another truck on blocks in the yard. The same heat coming off everything. The same smell.

I drove up Chester with the windows down. Past the Dairy Queen where my father met my mother. Past the Food Maxx. Past the Lighthouse Tabernacle in its strip mall, with the windows still painted white, between the laundromat and what used to be a payday loan place and was now a phone repair shop.

Past the Valley Star.

I didn't stop. I didn't look at the parking lot. I want to tell you I looked and it was just a parking lot, but I didn't look. I kept my eyes on the road and

my hands at ten and two and I could see it anyway, out of the corner of my eye. The red neon. The three parking spaces. The concrete wheel stops at the end of each space, gray, the size of a loaf of bread.

I turned left after the Valley Star and drove two more blocks and turned left again onto the gravel.

* * *

The house was dead.

Not empty. Dead. There's a difference, if you grew up where I grew up. An empty house is a house between people. A dead house is a house that's been left so long it forgot people were ever in it.

Plywood over the front windows, gray and warped and tagged. The chain-link sagging at the corner where the dog used to dig under. The yard was dirt and goatheads and one dead orange tree that had been alive when I was a kid and had given us maybe six oranges a year, small and sour, and my mother had made a big deal of every single one. The front door was hanging open. Somebody had kicked it in. More than one somebody, it looked like, more than one time.

There was a dumpster in the driveway. A big blue roll-off, the kind contractors use. And a pickup truck parked next to it with a ladder rack and a magnet sign on the door: KERN VALLEY RENOVATION — FLIPS • REMODELS • HAUL-AWAY.

The gravel was the same. I parked on it and turned off the truck and sat there and listened to it tick as it cooled.

This is the gravel I stood on. I'm telling you so you know. This exact gravel, this exact spot, ten feet from the front step. The engine was running right where that dumpster is. And I stood here in my socks.

I got out of the truck.

* * *

There were two men inside. I could hear them before I saw them: a Bluetooth speaker playing banda music, a crowbar on drywall, somebody laughing. I stood in the open doorway and looked in.

They'd gutted the front room. The carpet was gone, the floor was bare concrete with the tack strip still around the edges. The drywall was half torn off, so you could see the studs, and the insulation hanging out like the stuffing

of something. The kitchen through the doorway was just pipes. They'd taken out the cabinets and the counter and the sink.

My mother's rocking chair was gone. The window it used to sit by was a sheet of plywood.

One of the men saw me. He was young, maybe twenty-five, with a dust mask pushed up on his forehead. He turned the music down.

"Can I help you?"

"I used to live here."

He looked at me. He looked at my arms. Something careful came into his face.

"Okay," he said.

"I just want to look."

"It's a construction site, ma'am. It's not safe."

The other man came out of the hallway. Older, heavy, with a gray mustache and a clipboard. He looked at me too. The arms. The face. Then he looked at the truck in the driveway, RUIZ JANITORIAL SERVICES on the door, and something in his face changed.

"You're the Pruitt girl," he said.

I didn't say anything.

"I'm from Oildale," he said. "I know who you are." He didn't say it mean. He said it like it was weather. He looked at me a long time and then he said to the young guy, "Give her a minute, Junior," and the young guy said, "Tío, the insurance," and the older man said, "Give her a minute," and they went outside and stood by the dumpster and didn't look at me.

* * *

The hallway was dark. No power. Light came in from the open front door behind me and the holes they'd knocked in the drywall, thin slices of it lying across the concrete.

My mother's room was on the left. They'd taken the door off the hinges. The room was empty, just studs and concrete. There was a rectangle on the wall where the light had faded the paint less, the size of a framed picture, and I remembered the picture: Jesus knocking at a door, the one with the lantern, the one where the door has no handle on the outside because you have to open it from the inside. My mother looked at that picture every night before

she turned off the light. I used to think she was praying. Now I think she was waiting for somebody to knock.

My room was at the end of the hall.

The door was still on. It was closed. I don't know why that got to me, but it did. Everything else in that house had been torn open and my door was still closed, like the house had saved it.

I opened it.

* * *

Empty. Of course it was empty. What did I think.

Concrete floor. Studs. The window boarded over. In the corner, the closet, with the sliding door off its track. On the wall by the closet, at about the height of a ten-year-old's head, there were pencil marks. Hash marks. Dozens of them. Tiny, neat, in groups of five. I'd forgotten about them.

I'd made them in the summer of 2020. One for every day after she left.

I counted them. I couldn't help it. I'd spent three years counting. Eighteen groups of five and two more. Ninety-two days. That's how long I'd kept counting before I stopped. I don't remember stopping. I just remember there was a day I didn't make a mark, and then there was another day, and then I didn't think about it anymore.

Count the doors, Inez used to say. *Don't count the days.* She didn't know I'd already learned that, the hard way, at sixteen, on this wall.

I stood there a long time.

There was no bunny.

* * *

I'd known there wouldn't be. I'd known it in my head. It had been five years since I'd seen her. She'd been on my bed the night of July twenty-third, 2022, the night I went out with Mr. Ruiz's guitar and didn't come home, and after that the landlord would have come, and then the county, and then whoever comes after that, and a stuffed bunny on a bed in a house where nobody's paid the rent is just trash. I knew that.

I'd still let myself think it. Three years, I'd let myself think it. Lying on a bunk under a paper fretboard, I'd let myself think: maybe she's still there. Maybe she's sitting on the bed waiting. Maybe nobody touched my room. Maybe the house kept her for me.

It's a stupid thing to think. I knew it was stupid. I thought it anyway.

I went back out the front door into the light. The two men were by the dumpster, smoking. The older one, Tío, looked at my face and then looked away.

"You find what you were looking for?"

"No."

"Sorry." He tapped his ash. "We've been clearing it two days. Everything that was left is in there." He jerked his head at the dumpster. "It's not much. Most of it got taken before we got here. Kids. Tweakers."

I looked at the dumpster.

It was full to about halfway. Drywall. Insulation. Carpet, in long brown rolls. The kitchen cabinets, smashed. The rocking chair, on its side, one runner broken off. A mattress. Mine, I think. A box spring. Black trash bags. Wire. Tile.

I climbed in.

The young one said, "Whoa, ma'am, no, you can't—" and Tío said, "Junior," and Junior shut up.

* * *

I don't know how long I was in there.

It was a hundred and four degrees and the inside of a steel dumpster in the sun is hotter than that. The drywall dust got into my mouth and eyes. Something in the insulation made my arms itch, all the way up the bones. I went through every black trash bag. I went under the carpet rolls. I went under the mattress. I found a can opener, a coat hanger, a stack of church bulletins from 2019 swollen with water, a single pink sock that wasn't mine, a fork, a picture frame with the glass broken and no picture in it.

I found her under the rocking chair.

She'd fallen into the gap between the chair's seat and its broken runner, wedged in there like she'd crawled in to hide. She was face down. Gray. Not white anymore, gray, the color of dishwater, the color of dust. One ear was torn half off. The blue ribbon around her neck was gone, and there was just a dirty string where it used to be. Her stuffing had gone lumpy from getting wet and drying out and getting wet again, years of it, five rainy seasons, five summers, so she was stiff in some places and empty in others.

I turned her over.

One black plastic eye. The other one was gone. Just a little hole with a thread coming out of it.

She looked at me with the one eye.

I didn't cry. I'd done that already, on the bus bench. I was done. I just knelt in the dumpster in the drywall dust with the sweat running down the bones on my arms and held her up and looked at her, and she looked at me, and I said, out loud, the way you'd say it to a person:

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to leave you."

That's all I said.

But I knew what it was. I knew exactly what I'd done. I'd stood on that gravel at sixteen and begged somebody not to leave me behind, and then I'd gone out one night two years later and left the only thing that ever waited for me, on a bed, in the dark. And I'd never come back for her. Not because I didn't want to. Because I couldn't. But she didn't know the difference.

Nobody ever knows the difference. That's the thing. Whether they meant to or not. Whether they wanted to or not. From the bed, from the gravel, it looks exactly the same.

* * *

When I climbed out, Tío was holding a bottle of water out to me.

I took it. I drank all of it. He watched me hold the bunny under my arm against my ribs like a football.

"That yours?"

"Yeah."

He nodded slowly. Then he said, "My sister knew your mom. From the church."

I didn't say anything.

"She went to Oklahoma, right? With that guy. Tolliver."

"Yeah."

"She ever come back?"

"No."

He looked at the house. The plywood. The dead orange tree.

"My sister said she was a nice lady," he said. "Quiet. Said she cleaned houses. Said she was real scared of something all the time but nobody knew what." He dropped his cigarette in the gravel and stepped on it. "Sorry. I don't know why I'm telling you."

"It's okay."

"You going to be okay?"

I looked at him. He meant it. He was asking.

"I got a truck," I said. "And a guitar. And her." I held up the bunny an inch. "I'm better than I was yesterday."

He laughed, a short surprised laugh, and nodded, and went back inside, and turned the banda music back up.

I put the bunny on the passenger seat next to the thirty-two-dollar guitar. Then I backed out of the gravel and drove away, and I watched the house in the rearview mirror, the plywood, the open door, the dumpster, getting smaller.

I'd watched a car do that once. From the other side. From the gravel. I'd stood there and watched the taillights go up the street and turn left on Chester and disappear.

Every headlight leaving says the same damn thing.

I'd never been the one in the car before. I'll tell you what it says from inside.

It says the same thing.

EIGHT

Nobody Clapped So I Counted Myself

MORNING · 2015–2016

At eleven she could play the first Bach prelude. At twelve she could play it fast enough that Mr. Ruiz had to tell her to slow down.

"It's not a race."

"I know."

"Then why are you racing?"

"Because I can."

He took the guitar out of her hands. He did that sometimes, when she wasn't listening, and it was the worst punishment he had. Worse than *again*. He'd just take it, and hold it in his lap, and wait.

"Lish," he said. "Anybody can go fast. A machine can go fast. A sewing machine goes fast. You want to be a sewing machine?"

"No."

"Bach wrote this for a lute. Do you know what a lute is? It's quiet. It's an instrument for a small room, for a few people, at night. He wrote this for somebody to play by candlelight. Slow enough to think. You play it like you're running from the police."

She almost laughed. She didn't.

"Again," he said, and gave it back. "Like it's night. Like there's a candle. Like the only person listening is the one person you want to listen."

She played it again. Slower.

When she finished, he didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, "Who were you playing for?"

She thought about it. The honest answer was *you*. She didn't say it.

"Nobody," she said.

"Hm," said Mr. Ruiz, who knew.

* * *

He took her to play for people for the first time when she was eleven.

The Oildale Senior Center was a low building on Norris Road with a linoleum floor and a TV room and a cafeteria that smelled like boiled carrots, and on the second Tuesday of every month there was a "Musical Hour" in the cafeteria after lunch. Usually it was a woman named Doris who played the organ. Mr. Ruiz had cleaned there for eleven years and knew the director, and he asked if his student could play instead of Doris, just once, and the director said, "Sure, Abe, Doris has her colonoscopy anyway."

There were twenty-two people in the cafeteria. Lish counted. Most of them were in wheelchairs. Three were asleep before she started. One man had an oxygen tank and was watching the TV in the next room through the doorway, where *The Price Is Right* was on with the sound off.

She sat on a cafeteria chair with her footstool and her guitar in front of the steam table, and she played for twenty minutes. The Bach. A Sor study. The Tárrega, "Lágrima." *Vals para Lish.* She didn't miss one note. She played it all the way Mr. Ruiz had taught her, slow enough to think, like there was a candle.

When she finished, nobody clapped.

Not because they didn't like it. Some of them were asleep. Some of them had hands that didn't work well enough. One old woman in the front row had tears running down her face and her hands knotted together in her lap, and she was looking at Lish like Lish had just told her something she'd been waiting her whole life to hear, but she didn't clap. The man with the oxygen tank was still watching *The Price Is Right*.

Lish sat there with the guitar on her knee in the silence and the smell of carrots, and her face went hot.

She looked at Mr. Ruiz in the back by the coffee urn. He was smiling. He nodded at her. Once.

She stood up. She bowed, the way he'd taught her, a small bow from the waist with one hand on the guitar's neck. She sat back down.

And she counted.

She didn't know why. It just happened. She sat there in the quiet and counted to ten in her head, slowly, like a metronome at sixty, *one, two, three*, and when she got to ten she thought, *that was good. I know it was good. I don't need anybody to tell me.*

It was the first time she'd ever thought that. It would not be the last.

In the truck on the way home Mr. Ruiz said, "Mrs. Albright cried. In the front."

"Nobody clapped."

"Mrs. Albright has rheumatoid arthritis. She can't clap. She cried. That's more than clapping."

Lish didn't say anything. She held the guitar case across her knees and looked out the window at the pump jacks going up and down on the bluffs.

"Lish," Mr. Ruiz said. "Let me tell you something about applause. It feels good. I'm not going to lie. In Mexico City, when I was young, I played in a hall with eight hundred people, and they stood up, and I'll remember it till I die. But you know what? The next night, I played worse. Because I was trying to get them to stand up again. I wasn't playing the music. I was playing for the noise."

He was quiet a minute.

"The music doesn't need the noise," he said. "The noise is nice. But if you need it, you'll never be free. Somebody can always take it away."

"So what do I need?"

He took one hand off the wheel and tapped her on the chest, over her heart, with one finger. Then he tapped the guitar case.

"That," he said. "And that. That's all."

* * *

Her father didn't know.

That was the hardest part of being twelve, and the part she'd think about most later. Dale Pruitt was the loudest man in Oildale, a man who stood up in the clubhouse when somebody played a good song on the jukebox and yelled *hell YES* at the speakers, a man who would have been proud of her in the biggest, dumbest, most public way possible. And she couldn't tell him.

Because anything Dale found, he sold.

She'd seen it. The TV, when she was seven, gone one Saturday while Lorna was at work, and Dale with a new set of pipes on the Shovelhead by

Sunday. Lorna's mother's wedding ring, the only thing Lorna had from her family, gone out of the dresser drawer when Lish was nine, and Lorna crying in the bathroom with the faucet running so nobody would hear. Lish's own bike, the purple one with streamers, gone. *I'll get you a better one, baby. Daddy promises.* He never did.

He didn't mean it, exactly. That's what Lorna said, and Lish believed it, mostly. He just didn't think about it. Things were money to Dale and money was something you needed right now, always, for something important. A debt. A run. A deal. A round for the bar.

And he was in a lot of debt. Lish knew that by twelve. She could hear it in the house. The phone ringing at night and Dale saying *I'll have it Friday, I swear to God*. Men from the club coming by in the afternoon and sitting on the front step with him and talking low. Mr. Hollis at the Valley Star, once, coming out from behind the register when Lish came in for milk and saying, kindly, *Tell your daddy he still owes me for the beer, sweetheart. Three-forty. Tell him I'm not in a hurry, but tell him.* She told him. Dale laughed and said *Hollis can kiss my ass*, and went out, and came back at two in the morning with nothing.

So the guitar was a secret.

When she turned twelve, Mr. Ruiz gave her one of her own. Not his, the honey-colored one from Paracho. That one never left the church. This was a student guitar, an old nylon-string Yamaha with a cracked pickguard that he'd bought at a garage sale for fifteen dollars and fixed up. He gave it to her in a soft black gig bag.

"For home," he said. "For when you can't come here. You practice every day. Every day. Even ten minutes."

"My dad—"

"I know." He'd already thought about it. "Where does he never go in the house?"

She thought. "My closet."

"Then it lives in your closet."

So it did. It lived in the back of her closet behind her winter coat and the box of Christmas decorations they never put up, inside a black trash bag inside the gig bag, so that if anybody opened the closet it would look like a bag of clothes for Goodwill. She practiced when Dale was out, which was most of the time. She practiced quiet. She learned to play everything twice as soft as it

was written so the sound wouldn't carry through the walls, and her fingers got so precise from it that later, when she played loud, every note came out like it was cut with a blade.

He almost found it once.

It was a Saturday in August and he was looking for something to sell, she could tell, going through the house room by room with that look on his face. He came into her room. She was sitting on the bed with Bunny, reading a library book, and her heart was going so hard she thought he'd hear it.

He opened the closet.

He looked in. He pushed the winter coat aside. He looked at the black trash bag.

"What's this?"

"Clothes," she said. "For church. For the poor."

He looked at it a second longer. He picked it up. She stopped breathing. He hefted it like he was weighing it.

Then he set it back down.

"You're a good kid, Lish," he said, and closed the closet, and went into the kitchen, and took the toaster.

She sat on the bed and shook for twenty minutes.

* * *

Brandi heard her play once.

It was an accident. It was the summer they were twelve, the last summer, though neither of them knew that. Brandi had come over to the rental on a Tuesday afternoon unannounced, which she did sometimes, just showed up at the chain-link and yelled. Lish didn't hear her. Lish was in her room with the door shut and the closet open and the Yamaha on her knee, playing the Villa-Lobos Prelude Number One, the one with the long sad melody in the bass that sounds like a cello.

Brandi came around the side of the house to the bedroom window. And stood there.

Lish didn't know how long. When she finished, she looked up, and Brandi's face was in the window, with her hands cupped around her eyes against the glass.

Lish froze.

Brandi didn't say anything. She just looked. Then she came around to the back door and let herself in and came down the hall and stood in the bedroom doorway.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"That wasn't nothing." Brandi came in and sat on the bed. She looked at the guitar. She looked at Lish's hands on it. "How long have you been doing that?"

"A while."

"Who taught you?"

"Mr. Ruiz. The church janitor."

"The *Mexican*?" Brandi said it the way her father said it. Then she looked at Lish's face and stopped. "Sorry. Do it again."

"Brandi—"

"Do it again. Please."

Lish had never heard Brandi say please.

So she did it again. The Villa-Lobos, all the way through, soft, the bass melody singing under the chords. Brandi sat on the bed with her knees pulled up and her arms around them and didn't move.

When it was over, Brandi was quiet for a long time. And Lish watched something go across her best friend's face that she'd never seen there before, and couldn't name, and wouldn't be able to name for years.

Later she'd know what it was. It was the look of somebody who had just found out there was something she couldn't have.

Brandi sang in the school choir. She was good. She'd had a solo at the spring concert, "Over the Rainbow," and everybody had clapped, and Royce had stood up in the gym bleachers in his cut and whistled through his fingers. She was good. She was good the way a lot of people are good.

She'd just heard the difference.

"You should play that at the clubhouse," Brandi said finally. Her voice was strange. Too bright. "My dad would flip. Everybody would."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because my dad would find out. And he'd sell it."

Brandi looked at her. Then she laughed, a short, hard laugh that wasn't like her, and said, "Yeah. He would." And then: "Your dad sells everything, huh."

It was a joke. Lish knew it was a joke. Brandi made jokes like that all the time.

She'd remember it anyway. Later. When it wasn't funny.

"Don't tell anybody," Lish said. "Please. Not your dad. Not anybody."

Brandi held up her pinky.

"Swear," she said. "Queen's honor."

They hooked pinkies. Brandi went home. And she kept her promise, for nine more months, which was as long as there was anything to promise about.

* * *

That fall, Mr. Ruiz started saying a word.

He'd been saying it to himself, she found out later, for a year. To Graciela at dinner. To the old men at the senior center. But the first time he said it to Lish was in October of seventh grade, in the Lighthouse Tabernacle, at ten-forty at night, after she'd played the Bach for him at the right speed, by candlelight, for the one person she wanted to listen.

He sat in the front pew with his arms folded and looked at her for a long time.

"Juilliard," he said.

"What's that?"

"It's a school. In New York. The best one." He took off his glasses. "Lish, I'm not saying it to make you crazy. I'm not saying tomorrow. I'm saying, five years. Six. You keep going like this, every day, one brick, one brick. And then when you're seventeen, we send them a tape, and they say *come to New York and play for us*, and you go, and you play for them like you just played for me." "And then what?"

"And then you never come back here," he said. "Unless you want to."

She didn't say anything. She sat with the guitar on her knee in the empty church, in the high plaster room with the good sound that nobody knew about, and she looked at the painted-over windows that kept everybody from seeing in, and she thought about New York, which she'd only ever seen on TV. Buildings. Snow. Lights.

"I'll practice harder," she said.

"You don't have to practice harder. You practice hard enough. You practice harder than anybody I ever met. Just keep doing it." He put his glasses back on. "Every day. And don't let anything stop you. Nothing. Okay? Not anybody. Not anything."

"Okay."

"Promise me."

She promised.

It was October 2016. She was twelve years old. She had a guitar in a trash bag in the back of her closet and a waltz that knew where home was and a best friend who'd sworn on her crown and a word in her head that sounded like a door opening.

Five months later her father took the money and ran.

NINE

Day One

NOON · JULY 24, 2025

My parole agent's name was Marcy Delgado and she had a stress ball shaped like a brain.

She squeezed it the whole time I was in her office. Left hand. Squeeze, release. Squeeze, release. The office was in a building on Truxtun Avenue with tinted windows, and there were eleven other people in the waiting room ahead of me, and every one of them looked like they'd been told to be there at ten and had been there since nine. I'd been there since eight-thirty. I wasn't going to be late. They'd underlined it twice.

"Pruitt, Felicia R."

"Lish."

"Says Felicia." She didn't look up. Squeeze, release. "Address?"

"Sundowner Motor Inn. Union. Room fourteen."

"That's not an approved residence."

"It's what I have."

She looked up then. Forties, tired, reading glasses on a beaded chain. She looked at me over the glasses for a while. Then at my arms. They all look at my arms.

"You have family in the county?"

"No."

"Mother? Father?"

"Mother's in Oklahoma. I don't know where my father is."

"Any plans to contact them?"

"No."

Squeeze, release. She typed something.

"Employment?"

"I'm working on it."

"What kind of work?"

"Music."

She stopped typing. She looked at me over the glasses again.

"Music," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Like what. You sing?"

"I play guitar."

She waited for more. I didn't give her more. After a while she typed something, and I would have bet everything I had, which was eleven dollars, that it was some version of *unrealistic*.

"Okay, Felicia," she said. "Here's how this works. You check in with me every week for the first ninety days. You don't leave Kern County without permission. You don't associate with known gang members. You don't possess firearms or ammunition. You submit to search at any time. You get a job, a real job, and you get it in the next thirty days, or we're going to have a different conversation. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Anything else I should know?"

I thought about it. I thought about Royce Voss. I thought about Wade Voss and the Buick the color of a bruise, and whether he was still in Oildale, and what he'd think when he heard I was out. I thought about the Dust Kings, who were known gang members if anybody ever was, and the fact that I'd been wrapped in one of their vests ninety seconds after I was born.

"No, ma'am," I said.

She squeezed the brain.

"Thursday," she said. "Ten o'clock. Don't be late."

* * *

On the way out I saw a girl in the waiting room I knew from Chowchilla. Not well. She'd been in B-yard. She was maybe twenty, Latina, with a baby on her hip, and she was trying to keep the baby quiet with a pacifier that kept falling out. She saw me and her eyes went wide and she looked at the floor.

That's how I knew it had followed me out. The name.

Nobody in that waiting room called me Lish. Nobody in Chowchilla ever had.

* * *

I'm going to tell you about the bus now. And the first day. I've been trying to figure out where to put it, and I think it goes here, because Marcy Delgado called me Felicia and I didn't like how it felt, and the girl in the waiting room looked at the floor, and both of those things started on the same day.

November 9th, 2022. I was eighteen years and eight months old.

* * *

They move you from county jail to state prison on a bus. A white bus with CDCR on the side and mesh over the windows and a cage at the front for the guards. You sit on a bench seat, two to a bench, chained at the waist and the wrists and the ankles, and the chains are connected to a ring in the floor, and you can't scratch your nose.

There were eighteen of us. Women, all of us, all from the Valley. Kern County, Tulare County, Kings. Most of them had done state time before. You could tell. They got on the bus like they were getting on a bus. I got on it like I was getting into a grave.

I sat by the window. The girl next to me was about thirty, white, with a neck tattoo of a name I couldn't read and teeth that had been through something. She looked at me once and said, "First time?" and I said yes and she said, "Damn," and went to sleep.

The guard in the cage at the front was named Ames.

I know because he told us. He told us a lot of things. He was a big pink man in his fifties with a gray buzz cut and a voice like a car salesman, and the whole drive up 99, two and a half hours, he talked. Not to anybody. To all of us. To the bus.

"Ladies, I'm gonna give you some advice, free of charge, because I like you. First thing: keep your head down. Don't look at nobody. You look at the wrong person, that's a problem."

Ten minutes later:

"Now, I'll tell you what, you get in there and somebody comes at you, you look 'em in the eye. Don't you look away. You look away, you're done. Square up. Don't back down."

Twenty minutes later:

"Don't share nothing. Not your food, not your business, not your name. Nothing. Don't care about nobody."

Ten minutes after that:

"You gotta have friends in there, though, ladies. You gotta. Find you a crew. Nobody does it alone."

Every piece of advice there is, and its opposite. *Head down. Look 'em in the eye. Don't stare. Don't look away. Do your time. Don't let it do you. Say nothing. Say the right thing.* By Delano I'd stopped listening. By Tulare I'd figured it out: none of it meant anything. He didn't know. He'd never been on our side of the cage. He was just filling up the silence so he wouldn't have to sit in it, so he wouldn't have to think about what he was driving eighteen women to, and that he was going to drive home tonight and have dinner.

Be brave, he said, last thing, when we pulled through the gate. *Be brave, ladies.*

Words are empty when the gate closes. You learn that the first day.

* * *

Central California Women's Facility is in Chowchilla, which is in Madera County, which is in the middle of nothing. Farm fields in every direction, flat as a table. Almond orchards. Dairy. The smell of cows comes in through the vents. There are two women's prisons there, right across the road from each other, and CCWF is the bigger one, and when you see it from the bus it doesn't look like anything. Low buildings. Gray. Fences. The fences are what you look at. Two rows of them, with coils of razor wire on top, and between the rows a strip of raked dirt, and the light on the razor wire is the only thing out there that shines.

Receiving is a big room with a concrete floor and benches. They take your chains off. They take everything else off too. They strip you. They search you. I'm not going to describe it. They give you a set of clothes, blue, and a pair of shoes that don't fit, and a bedroll, and a number.

My number had seven digits. I'm not going to tell you what it was. I'll tell you this: for three years, every time someone wanted me, that's what they

said. Not my name. The number. It was on everything. It was on the pocket of my shirt.

They gave me a number. Took my name off the wall.

* * *

Then there's intake. You sit in a plastic chair across a desk from a CO with a computer, and the CO reads off your paperwork. Name. DOB. County. Charge. Sentence.

The CO at my desk was a young woman, maybe twenty-five, with her hair in a tight bun and fake eyelashes. She read it off flat, like a grocery list.

"Pruitt, Felicia Rae. Date of birth three, fourteen, oh-four. Kern County. Penal Code one ninety- three A, voluntary manslaughter. Three years."

There was a line of women waiting behind me. Sitting on a bench against the wall, waiting their turn. And at the end of the bench, closest to the desk, there was an older woman. Fifties. Latina. Heavy-set, with gray hair pulled back hard, and reading glasses she'd pushed up on her head. She had the kind of face that had stopped moving a long time ago. She'd been listening. Everybody was listening. It's not like there's anything else to do.

When the CO said *voluntary manslaughter*, the old woman leaned forward.

She looked at me. Up and down. Eighteen years old, a hundred and twenty-two pounds, freckles, in clothes that didn't fit, with my hands in my lap.

"Manslaughter?" she said. Not to the CO. To me. "You?"

I didn't say anything.

"What are you, twelve?"

"Eighteen."

"Eighteen." She shook her head slowly. She looked at the CO's screen, which she couldn't see from where she was. She looked back at me. "Look at you," she said. "Look at this little thing. Felony."

That's all. *Felony.* Like she was naming a stray dog.

The women on the bench laughed.

* * *

I didn't know that was going to stick. You never know. Inside, a name happens to you. You don't pick it. Somebody says something, and it's funny, or

it's mean, or it's both, and somebody else repeats it, and by the next morning that's who you are. There was a girl named Biscuit because she'd stolen a biscuit from somebody's tray her first week. There was a girl named Mom who was twenty-three. There was a girl named Static because she talked to herself.

By the time they'd walked me to my unit that afternoon, three women had already called me Felony. By breakfast the next morning, it was everybody. COs too.

And I let it.

I want to be clear about that. I could have fought it. You can fight a name. You fight it hard enough, early enough, sometimes it goes away. But I thought about it, lying on that bunk the first night under the bolts, and I thought: what's the other one? What do they call me if I don't let them call me Felony?

They call me Felicia.

They call me what the clerk typed and the judge read out. They call me the name that was on the paper before I ever got to say it. They call me the girl on the curb outside the Valley Star, the girl with the Juilliard letter, the girl who held doors.

Felony was better. Felony was a thing I did. Felicia was a thing I was, and I wasn't her anymore.

So I let it.

* * *

The first day I got jumped.

I knew it was coming. Everybody knows. It's not personal. It's how they find out what you are. Three women from the unit came into my cell during dayroom while my cellie was out. A big one, a skinny one, and one with a ring. The one with the ring was named Precious. I found that out later.

"Felony," Precious said. Smiling. "Little Felony. Welcome home."

I'm not going to tell you the whole thing. I'll tell you I lost. Of course I lost. There were three of them and they'd done this before and I was eighteen and I'd never been in a real fight in a small room where you can't run. I got the ring in my eyebrow, which is the scar I've got now. I got my head into the bunk rail. I got kicked when I went down.

But here's the thing. I'll tell you this part because it matters.

I didn't stay down.

Every time I went down I got up. I don't know why. I wasn't brave. I was so scared I couldn't feel my legs. But I'd been doing it since I was thirteen, on the playground at North Chester Middle, in the alley behind the Valley Star, and my body had learned something my head hadn't: *you get up*. You get up or they keep coming. You get up or that's what you are.

So I got up. Four times. And the fifth time, when I got up, I had the skinny one's hair in my fist and I didn't let go, and she screamed, and Precious said "Okay, okay, *okay*," and they left.

I sat on the floor of the cell with blood in my eye. My cellie came back from dayroom and looked at me and stepped over my legs and got on her bunk and opened a magazine.

That night at chow, an old woman sat down across from me. The one from intake. Gray hair, reading glasses on her head, the face that didn't move. She set down her tray. She looked at the cut through my eyebrow, and the swelling, and the way I was holding my fork with my left hand because my right was shaking.

"Five times," she said. "I heard you got up five times."

"Four."

"They said five."

"It was four."

She almost smiled. Almost. The face didn't really do it. "Okay, Felony," she said. "Four."

She ate a while.

"You're gonna get hit again," she said. "Tomorrow. Next week. You know that."

"Yeah."

"You keep getting up like that, somebody's gonna stop hitting you. Or somebody's gonna kill you." She shrugged. "One or the other. Depends on you."

"How does it depend on me?"

She looked at me for a long time over her tray. She had black eyes, very dark, so dark you couldn't see where the pupil stopped.

"Your hands," she said. "Let me see."

I didn't know what to do. I put my hands on the table. She looked at them. Turned them over, the way Mr. Ruiz used to. Felt the fingertips with

her thumb, where the calluses had been, still hard, a little, from four months ago.

"You play something," she said. Not a question.

"Guitar."

"Hm." She let go. "My name's Inez. You're gonna want to stay alive in here, you're gonna want to listen to me. And you're gonna want to keep those"—she pointed at my hands with her fork —"out of it."

"Out of what?"

"The fights. You fight with your arms. Elbows, forearms, shoulders. You don't punch nobody with those hands in here. Not one time. You hear me?"

I didn't say anything. I thought about the Valley Star. The wheel stop. The sound.

"I already did," I said. "That's why I'm here."

Inez looked at me for a long time.

"Then you know," she said. "Then you already know."

She picked up her tray and left.

TEN

Whatever Ate You

MORNING · MARCH 2017

The Shovelhead woke her up.

She knew that engine better than her own heartbeat. She'd been falling asleep to it and waking up to it her whole life, the uneven *potato-potato* idle with no muffler, the cough when it was cold. She knew the sound of it coming up the street at two in the morning and the sound of it in the driveway warming up at noon. She knew it the way you know a voice.

It was 3:40 a.m. by the clock radio on her nightstand. A Tuesday. Twelve days after her thirteenth birthday.

She lay there and listened. The engine was running in the driveway. But it wasn't warming up. It was just idling, the way it did when he was about to go. And he never went anywhere at 3:40 in the morning. He came *home* at 3:40 in the morning.

She got up.

* * *

Her mother's door was shut. The radio was on in there, low, the Christian station, a preacher talking about the Book of Revelation in a soft Texas voice. Lish didn't knock. She went past it down the hall in her socks and her sleep shirt, which was an old Dust Kings T-shirt of Dale's that came down to her knees, and she opened the front door.

He was in the driveway on the bike. He had the saddlebags on, both of them, full. He had a duffel bag bungeed across the back of the seat. He had his cut on, DEACON over the heart, and his helmet on the handlebar, not on his head, and he was sitting there with the engine running and his hands on the grips, looking at the street.

He wasn't looking at the house.

"Daddy?"

He turned his head. He saw her in the doorway. And his face did something she'd never seen it do, which was fall. Just fall, all at once, like something had cut the strings.

"Go back to bed, Lish."

"Where are you going?"

"Just a run. Go back to bed."

"You don't go on runs at night."

"This one's at night." He turned back to the street. "Go on, baby."

She came down the step. The gravel was cold through her socks. March in Oildale isn't warm at night; it was maybe forty-five degrees, and she was in a T-shirt and her legs were bare, and she walked across the gravel to the bike anyway, and stood next to it, close enough to feel the heat coming off the engine.

"Daddy, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"You've got all your stuff."

He didn't say anything. He looked at the street. The engine idled. *Potato-potato-potato.* She could see his hands on the grips, and they were shaking, and Dale Pruitt's hands never shook. She'd seen him hold a socket wrench steady on a bolt with a broken finger.

"Daddy."

"Lish, I need you to go inside."

"Take me with you."

It came out before she knew it was there. She hadn't thought it. Her mouth just said it.

He shut his eyes.

"I can't, baby."

"Take me with you. I'll be good. I won't talk. I'll sit on the back. I don't need anything, I'll just—"

"Lish."

"Please." She grabbed his arm. Her hand wrapped halfway around it. "Please, Daddy, don't leave me here, take me with you, please, *please*—"

He took her hand off his arm. He did it gently. He held her hand in his for a second, both of them, his big oily hand with the shaking in it and her small hand that he didn't know could play Bach.

"I'm going to come back for you," he said. "I swear to God. I swear to God, Lish. I just gotta go fix something, and then I'll come back, and I'll come get you, and we'll go somewhere good. Okay? Somewhere better than this. You and me."

"When?"

"Soon."

"When, Daddy?"

"Soon. I promise. Daddy promises."

She knew. Even at thirteen. She knew exactly what Daddy promises meant. It meant the purple bike. It meant the toaster. It meant *I'll have it Friday, I swear to God.*

He let go of her hand. He put his helmet on. He looked at her one more time through the open face of it, and his eyes were wet, and he said, "You're the best thing I ever did, you know that? The only good thing." And then, like it was a joke, like it was the thing he always said: "Strong little hands on you."

He kicked the stand up.

She stood on the gravel in her socks and watched him roll down the driveway and turn left. She watched the taillight go up the street, red, getting smaller, and stop at the corner, and turn left again onto Chester, and go.

She listened until she couldn't hear it anymore. The Shovelhead had a sound you could hear for blocks. She stood there and listened to it go up Chester toward the river, toward the bridge, getting smaller and smaller, *potato-potato-potato*, until it was just a feeling in her ears, and then it wasn't even that.

Then she screamed.

* * *

She didn't know she was going to. It just came out of her, standing on the gravel at four in the morning in her father's T-shirt, a sound she'd never made

before and didn't know she had in her. Not a word. Not *Daddy*. Just a sound, high and long and cracked, like something tearing.

The neighbor's dog started barking. A light went on across the street.

Her mother's bedroom door opened. Lorna came down the hall in her nightgown and stood in the front doorway and looked out at her daughter standing alone on the gravel screaming at the empty street.

She didn't come down the step.

Lish turned around and saw her standing there. In the doorway. With the light behind her, so her face was dark. And Lish stopped screaming, because she was waiting, because surely now her mother would come down the step, across the gravel, and pick her up, and take her inside.

Lorna stood there.

Then she said, very quietly, "Come inside, baby. You'll wake the neighbors."

And she turned around and went back down the hall, and her door closed, and the radio came back on.

Lish stood on the gravel a long time.

Then she went inside and got Bunny off her bed and went into her closet and closed the door and sat in the dark on the floor next to the Yamaha in its trash bag, with Bunny against her face, and stayed there until it got light.

* * *

They came at noon. Four of them. Lish was home from school because she hadn't gone.

She heard the bikes first, all four together, coming up the street slow, and she went to the front window and looked through the gap in the curtain. Royce Voss. A big man with a red beard named Tiny. Two others she knew from the barbecues but didn't know their names. They parked in a row in front of the chain-link and got off and stood there a minute, looking at the house.

Lorna was at work. Lish was alone.

Royce came up the walk and knocked. Three knocks, slow, polite.

She didn't move.

"Lish," Royce said through the door. "I know you're in there, honey. I saw the curtain. Open up. Nobody's gonna hurt you."

She opened the door because she didn't know what else to do. She'd known Royce Voss her whole life. He'd given her quarters for the jukebox. He'd held her at arm's length when she was a baby and said *she's one of ours.*

He looked down at her from the step. He didn't come in.

"Where's your daddy, Lish?"

"I don't know."

"When'd he leave?"

"Last night."

"What time?"

"Three-forty."

He nodded slowly, like that was a number that meant something.

"He say where he was going?"

"He said a run."

Tiny laughed behind him. Royce didn't.

"He take anything with him? Bags? A box? Anything heavy?"

"His saddlebags. And a duffel."

"What color duffel?"

"Black."

Royce looked at Tiny. Tiny stopped laughing.

"Okay," Royce said. He crouched down on the step so he was looking up at her, which nobody did, ever, grown men didn't crouch down to look at you. He had gray eyes. Lish had never noticed before. Gray like a gun.

"Lish," he said. "Your daddy took something that didn't belong to him. Took it from the club. From me. From all of us. It was a lot. You understand?"

"Yes."

"I need it back. I need him back. If he calls, you call me. If he comes back, you call me. If you hear anything, from anybody, you call me. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Good girl." He stood up. His knees cracked. He looked over her head into the house, at the front room, at Lorna's rocking chair by the window, at the TV that wasn't there anymore because Dale had sold it.

"Tell your mama," he said, "we're gonna be talking about this. Me and her. Real soon. Because somebody's gotta make this right, Lish. And it's not gonna be him. Not if he's smart."

He turned around and walked back to the bikes. The others followed him. Halfway down the walk he stopped and looked back.

"Strong little hands on you, Deacon used to say," he said. "Remember that?"

She didn't say anything.

"Hope they're strong enough," said Royce Voss.

That night at the clubhouse, somebody took the picture down.

Lish didn't see it happen. Charlene Voss told her about it, years later, in the only conversation they'd ever have about any of this. The picture of baby Lish wrapped in the DEACON vest that had hung behind the bar for thirteen years, next to the founders. Royce took it off the wall himself. He didn't throw it out. He took it into the back room, the room where she'd been born, and he put it face down on the cot.

Then he went back out to the bar and told the club that Deacon Pruitt was no longer a member, that he'd taken eleven thousand four hundred dollars of the club's money, the run money, and that any member who saw him should call Royce first and do whatever came to mind second.

"And the family?" somebody asked.

Royce thought about it.

"The family owes," he said.

* * *

Brandi didn't call that night. Or the next day.

Lish waited. She sat by the phone in the kitchen, the old wall phone with the curly cord, and waited for it to ring, because Brandi called her every day, every single day of their lives since they were old enough to dial, and she'd call now. She'd know. Her dad would have told her. And she'd call, and she'd say *Lish, oh my God, are you okay*, and she'd come over, and they'd sit in Lish's room, and Brandi would decide what they were going to do about it, because Brandi always decided.

The phone didn't ring.

On Thursday, Lish went to school. Seventh grade, North Chester Middle. She walked in the front doors and down the main hallway to her locker, and she knew before she got there.

The hallway went quiet when she walked by. Not all of it. Just the part near her. Like a ripple. Kids she'd known since kindergarten looked at her and

then looked away and then looked at each other. Somebody laughed. She heard a word. She didn't hear what.

Brandi was at her locker. Three lockers down from Lish's. With four other girls around her, her girls, the ones who followed her everywhere. Brandi was talking. She stopped when Lish came up.

Lish stood there. She waited.

Brandi looked at her. Up and down. She had a look on her face Lish had seen before. On other girls. On girls who wore the wrong shoes. She'd never seen it pointed at her.

"Oh," said Brandi Voss. "Hi."

"Hi."

"How's your dad?"

The girls laughed.

"Brandi—"

"I mean, I'm just asking. Because my dad wants to know. Because your dad's a *thief*." She said it loud. She said it so the whole hallway could hear. "Your dad stole eleven thousand dollars from my family and ran away like a little bitch. So I'm just asking. How is he?"

Lish didn't say anything. She couldn't. She stood there with her backpack on one shoulder and her face burning.

"My dad says your whole family owes us," Brandi said. "Your mom. You. Everybody. He says you're a debt." She tilted her head. The gap between her front teeth. The same gap. "That's what you are now, Lish. You're a debt somebody handed us."

Then she smiled.

And it was the smile from under the picnic table. The same exact smile. The one from *we're getting married, dummy, there's nobody else good enough*. The one from *pull one of mine, then we match*.

That's what Lish would never get over. Not the words. The smile. It was the same smile. It just meant something else now.

"Come on," Brandi said to her girls. "It stinks over here."

They walked off down the hall.

Lish stood at her locker. She didn't open it. She didn't move. And she understood, standing there, at thirteen, something she'd understand over and over for the rest of her life in different ways: that whatever had happened to her father had happened long before her. Before her name. Something had

eaten him from the inside a long time ago, and she'd never known what it was and never would, and she was the one standing here. She hadn't broken the window. She hadn't lit the match.

She was just the one still standing in the gravel.

At lunch, a girl named Kaylee from Brandi's group walked past her table and knocked her tray onto the floor. Lish looked at the mess of corn and chicken nuggets on the linoleum. Then she looked up at Kaylee.

And she stood up.

She'd never been in a fight. She didn't know how to make a fist. She found out it doesn't matter, that your body knows, that something comes up out of you from wherever the scream came from on the gravel, and you just go.

She got suspended for one day. The incident report, typed by the vice principal, Mr. Danner, said: *Student struck another student in the cafeteria without apparent provocation. Student has no prior disciplinary history. Recommend counseling. Sudden change in attitude noted by staff.*

Kaylee's name was in the report. Brandi's wasn't.

It never would be. Not in any report, at any school, in any year. Lish would get suspended four more times before she was fifteen, and Brandi Voss would be standing somewhere nearby every time, and her name would never be on the paper.

That was the first thing Lish learned about paper. It wasn't the last.

ELEVEN

Count the Doors

NOON · JULY 26, 2025

The man in Room 13 banged on the wall at eleven-fifteen at night.

I'd been playing for four hours. Scales mostly. Slow, quiet, the way I'd learned in my closet when I was twelve, so soft the sound barely got past the guitar. But the walls at the Sundowner are made of cardboard and spit, and I guess four hours of C major scales at sixty beats a minute does something to a person, even quiet.

Bang bang bang.

"Some of us," he said through the wall, "are trying to fucking SLEEP."

I stopped. I sat there with my hand flat on the strings.

Inside, if someone bangs on your wall, you've got a decision to make. Fast. And whatever you decide, everybody hears about it by breakfast. You go quiet, you're soft. You bang back, you're starting something. You go next door and handle it, you're handling it, and then you're in the hole for sixty days and you lose a month of credit.

I'd done all three, at different times. I'd been in the hole four times. I'd lost a hundred and eighty days of credit, total. That's six months I could have been out early, and I spent every one of them inside because somebody banged on my wall, or looked at me wrong in chow, or put their hands on me in the shower line, and I decided.

I put the guitar down on the bed.

I sat there and listened to the man in Room 13 cough and turn over and turn on his TV.

Then I put my shoes on and went outside, because there's a fourth thing you can do that you can't do inside, and it's leave.

* * *

I didn't go far. The Sundowner has a pool. It's in a little fenced square in the middle of the parking lot, with a sign that says POOL HOURS 9AM–9PM and NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY and SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK. The water was green. There was a plastic chair by the fence with one leg shorter than the others.

I sat in it with the guitar. Midnight. Still eighty-five degrees. The neon of the Sundowner sign buzzing over the street. Union Avenue trucks going by. A woman in a short skirt standing at the corner by the bus stop, not waiting for a bus.

I played the Tárrega, real soft. "Lágrima." It means *teardrop*. It's short, it's one of the first real pieces he gave me, and I've always played it when I can't sleep.

Nobody banged on anything. The woman at the bus stop looked over once and then looked away.

I'm going to tell you about the guitar room now. I've been not telling you about it. I've been thinking about it since I sat down in this chair.

* * *

Chowchilla has an arts program. People don't know that. They think prison is just a cage. But CCWF has Arts in Corrections, which is real, it's a state thing, and they bring in teachers from outside: painting, writing, theater, music. And there's a room for it in the education building on the far side of the yard from my unit, with a window that faces the yard.

In that room, on a rack against the wall, there are guitars.

I saw them my second week. I was walking the track at yard time, ten in the morning, the sun straight up over the fence the way it always is at ten, and I looked over at the education building and saw them through the window. Six guitars on a rack. Acoustic. Cheap ones, I could tell even from across the yard, steel-string, the kind of guitar Mr. Ruiz would have called *furniture*.

But they were guitars.

I stopped walking. I stood on the track and looked at them through the window across two hundred yards of dirt. Somebody bumped into me from

behind and said *move, bitch*, and I moved. I kept walking. But I looked every lap. Every lap for three years, I looked at that window.

I never went in.

Not because I didn't want to. Because I couldn't. You have to earn programs. You have to have a clean record, no write-ups, no fights, no hole time, for a certain number of days before they'll put you on the list. And the list is long. There are three thousand women at CCWF and maybe forty slots in the music class and a waiting list longer than your sentence.

I got my first write-up on day one. Precious. The ring. Fighting, even though I didn't start it, because they write up everybody. Day thirty-one, my second. A girl named Tasha took my tray in chow and I took it back. Day sixty-eight, the shower line. I'm not going to tell you about the shower line. Day one hundred and twelve, the hole, thirty days, for a fight in the yard that I absolutely started and would start again.

And every time, the clock reset. You need X days clean. You get to X minus four. Somebody bangs on your wall.

I could have done it. That's the part that kills me. Other girls did. Girls with worse records than mine. They kept their heads down, and they didn't look up, and they didn't hit back, and they got their days, and they got on the list, and one day they walked into that room and picked up one of those garbage guitars and played "Wonderwall" on it badly while I watched them through the window from the track.

I hated them. I'm not going to lie. I'd have traded them anything.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't keep my head down. Every time somebody came at me, something came up out of me from wherever it came from on the gravel when I was thirteen, and I went.

Inez told me once, my second year: "You could get in that room if you wanted."

"I want."

"No, you don't. You want to be the one nobody touches more than you want the room." She shrugged. "It's okay. I'm just telling you. Know what you want."

I thought about that for a long time. I'm still thinking about it.

* * *

So I made my own room.

The fretboard first. I traded a soup and two stamps at commissary for a golf pencil and a pad of paper. I drew it on the back of a commissary slip, the long way. Nineteen frets, measured with a piece of thread so the spacing was right, getting closer together as they went up the neck the way they do on a real one. Six strings. I labeled every note on every fret in letters so small I had to squint. Then I taped it to the underside of the top bunk, so it was right over my face when I lay down.

Every night after lights out I lay there with my left hand up in the air, on the paper, and my right hand on my stomach, and I played.

Paper frets. Pillow drum. Practiced air.

You'd think it would be useless. It's not. I want to tell people that. It's not as good as the real thing, nothing is as good as the real thing, but your hands remember. The left hand learns the shapes, and where the frets are, and how far to stretch. The right hand learns the patterns, *p-i- m-a*, over and over, on your own stomach, under a blanket, so quiet even your cellie can't hear. And your head does the rest. Your head hears it. Every note. You play the Bach in your head with your hands on paper and air, and in your head it's perfect, because in your head it's always perfect.

That was the problem, it turned out. In your head it's always perfect. Out here, the first night, on a thirty-two-dollar guitar, I missed twice in sixteen bars.

But I only missed twice. After three years of nothing. Twice.

Mr. Ruiz would have said *again*. And then he would have taken off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt for a long time.

* * *

The hole is the other thing. I should tell you about the hole.

They call it Administrative Segregation, Ad Seg. Everybody calls it the hole. It's a cell by yourself, smaller than a regular cell, nine feet by four. Concrete bunk. Steel toilet. A slot in the door for food. A window the width of your hand, up high, that shows you a strip of sky. Twenty-three hours a day in there. One hour out, alone, in a cage in the yard, a chain-link box the size of a dog run.

I did four stretches. A hundred and four days total.

People think the hole would be the worst part. And it's bad. I'm not going to say it's not. People go crazy in there. You can hear them. You lie there at

night and the woman in the next cell is talking to somebody who isn't there, in a calm, normal voice, like it's a phone call, for six hours.

But here's the thing I'll tell you, that I never told anybody inside.

The hole was where I practiced best.

Nobody there. No cellie. No dayroom. No noise you have to sort. Just you and the concrete and a strip of sky. And I'd lie on that concrete bunk and play the whole Bach Lute Suite in E minor, all six movements, on air, eyes closed, with every note perfect, and for those twenty minutes I wasn't anywhere. I wasn't in Chowchilla. I wasn't in Oildale. I wasn't Felony and I wasn't Felicia. I was a girl in a high plaster room with a good sound that nobody knew about, playing for the one person she wanted to listen.

Nine-by-four. That's where Felony got made. Not the yard. The hole.

* * *

I visited him today. I should tell you that too.

Graciela told me where he was. Hillcrest Memorial Park, on the east side, past Fairfax. A big green lawn with flat headstones set into the grass so the mowers can go over them. His was in a row near a big oak. A bronze plate, flat on the ground.

ABELARDO RUIZ MORENO
1951 – 2022
MAESTRO

Somebody had left flowers. Plastic ones, in a little bronze cup built into the plate. Graciela, probably. Or the grandkids.

I sat down in the grass next to him. It was four in the afternoon and a hundred and two degrees, and the sprinklers had been on, so the grass was wet, and I didn't care.

I'd brought the guitar. I don't know if that's allowed. Nobody stopped me.

I didn't say anything for a while. I'd thought I would. I'd had three years to figure out what to say. I'd lain on that concrete bunk in the hole and practiced it, the way I practiced the Bach. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your guitar. I'm sorry I didn't go to New York. I'm sorry I wasn't there when you died. I'm sorry about everything you saw in me that I wasted in one second in a parking lot.*

I didn't say any of it.

I took the guitar out and put my foot up on the edge of his headstone, because I didn't have a footstool and I figured he wouldn't mind, and I tuned it, low E first.

And I played him the waltz. His waltz. *Vals para Lish.*

Sixteen bars, E minor, three-four. The rising line, E up to B. The C that falls back to B, like a sigh, like somebody reaching for something and not quite getting it. The climb in the second half up to the high G. And then home. Back to E. Resolved. It knows where home is.

I didn't miss.

When I finished I sat there with my hand flat on the strings, the way he used to, to stop them ringing.

Nobody clapped. A groundskeeper on a riding mower forty yards away kept mowing. A woman two rows over, kneeling at a grave with a bouquet, looked up for a second and then looked back down.

I counted to ten. Slowly. Sixty beats a minute.

That was good, I thought. *I know it was good.*

I put my hand flat on the bronze plate. It was hot from the sun.

"I still got the hands," I said. "I'm working on the rest."

Then I got up and went back to the truck, and the Virgin of Guadalupe was swinging from the key, and Bunny was on the passenger seat with her one eye, looking out the windshield.

It's one in the morning now. I'm in the plastic chair by the green pool. The woman at the bus stop is gone. The man in Room 13 has his TV on so loud I can hear it from here. Some show where people yell at each other on a stage.

I'm going to play "Lágrima" one more time. Then I'm going to go to bed.

Inez used to say: *Count the doors, not the days.* I didn't understand it for a long time. I thought it was about getting out, that you should count the doors between you and the gate instead of the days until your date, because the doors are real and the days are just numbers.

That's not what she meant.

She meant that every day you count is a day they own. But a door, you can walk through. And then it's behind you, and it doesn't matter anymore how many there were.

Seven doors between the room with the drain and the gate. I counted them going out.

They're behind me now. I don't need to count them anymore.

I just keep doing it anyway.

TWELVE

Ugly

MORNING · 2017–2019

NORTH CHESTER MIDDLE SCHOOL — INCIDENT REPORT

Student: PRUITT, FELICIA R. Grade: 8

Date: 10/04/2017

Description: Student was observed in a physical altercation with another student (BRATCHER, K.) in the east hallway during passing period. Student refused to explain the cause of the altercation. Student used profanity toward staff (Mr. Danner) when separated.

Action: 3-day suspension. Parent contact attempted (no answer). Second attempt: message left.

Notes: This is the student's third referral this semester. Counseling referral made 3/17; student did not attend. Staff concern regarding hygiene and attendance.

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* * *

It started with the word.

Brandi didn't invent it. Lish would find that out later. A boy named Tyler Hamm said it first, in eighth-grade PE, when Lish came out of the locker room in the same gray sweatshirt she'd worn four days in a row. *Damn, Pruitt, you're ugly as hell today.* That was all. It was nothing. Boys said things like that all day to everybody.

But Brandi heard it. And Brandi picked it up the way she picked up everything she wanted, and carried it to the lunchroom, and by Friday it was everywhere.

Ugly.

They didn't say it like an insult. That was the clever part. They said it like a name. *Hey, Ugly. Morning, Ugly. Ugly, can I borrow a pencil?* Sweet. Friendly. So that when Lish turned around and swung, which she did, three times that fall, it looked like she'd gone crazy over nothing. *We were just saying hi. She just snapped. I don't know what her problem is.*

The teachers heard *hey, Ugly* and thought it was a joke between friends. The teachers heard Lish say *fuck you* and wrote it down.

* * *

It wasn't all words.

Brandi had promised, under the picnic table, with their pinkies hooked. *Queen's honor.* She kept that promise until the March her father lost eleven thousand dollars and the queen stopped having honor to spare. Then she told everybody.

Ugly plays guitar. Like, classical guitar. Like, old-people music. The Mexican janitor at her mom's church teaches her. At night. Alone. In the dark. She'd make a face when she said that last part, and the girls would shriek.

So now it was known. And with Dale gone, there wasn't any reason to hide the Yamaha anymore. Nobody at home was going to sell it. Lish started carrying it openly, on her back, in the soft black gig bag, everywhere. To church. To the strip mall. To the bench outside the senior center on Norris where she sat sometimes after school because it was quiet.

In November of eighth grade, four of them caught her on the canal path behind the middle school.

Brandi didn't touch her. Brandi never touched her, not once in five years. Brandi stood back on the path with her arms crossed and watched while Kaylee and Tasha Holt held Lish's arms and Kaylee's brother Cody, who was fifteen and scared and didn't want to be there, took the gig bag off her back.

"Open it," Brandi said.

Cody opened it.

"Now the strings."

Cody had a box cutter. He looked at Brandi. He looked at Lish. Lish would remember that look, years later, on a hot night in a parking lot. The look of a boy who was going to do what he was told and hate himself for it.

He cut the strings. All six. They went *ping ping ping ping ping ping*, one after the other, curling up off the guitar like something alive.

"Now this," Brandi said, and held out a two-liter of Mountain Dew.

Cody poured it into the gig bag. Over the guitar. Into the sound hole.

Then they let her go and walked off down the canal path, laughing, all except Cody, who was looking at his shoes.

Lish sat on the canal bank with the guitar in her lap, sticky and green and dripping, with six cut strings curling off it like hair, and she didn't cry. She'd stopped doing that in March, on the gravel. She'd screamed it all out. There wasn't anything left.

She carried it to the Lighthouse Tabernacle at nine-thirty that night and knocked on the glass. Mr. Ruiz opened the door. He looked at her. He looked at the guitar.

He didn't say anything. He took it from her very gently and carried it to the front pew and laid it down and got a towel from the closet and started drying it, the inside first, through the sound hole, carefully, the way you'd dry a baby.

"Who?" he said, after a long time.

She didn't answer.

He didn't ask again. He dried the guitar for an hour. Then he took a new set of strings out of his own case, his good strings, the expensive ones he ordered from a catalog, and put them on the Yamaha one by one, and tuned it, and handed it back.

"Play," he said.

"I don't want to."

"I know. Play anyway."

She played the waltz. Badly. Her hands were shaking.

"Again," he said.

NORTH KERN HIGH SCHOOL — ATTENDANCE NOTICE
Student: PRUITT, FELICIA R. Grade: 9
Date: 05/22/2019
This notice is to inform the parent/guardian that the above student has accumulated 41 unexcused absences during the 2018–2019 academic year. The student is currently failing Physical Education and Algebra I. Continued absences may result in referral to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB).
Delivered by: U.S. Mail
Returned: No

* * *

High school was worse, and also easier, because it was bigger.

North Kern High had eighteen hundred students. You could disappear in it if you wanted. Lish wanted. She learned the building the way she learned a piece: where every hallway went, which bathrooms had locks that worked, which doors the security guard didn't watch. She learned that if you came in late through the shop door by the parking lot you missed homeroom and nobody marked you tardy, just absent, and absent was a letter home, and nobody at home opened letters.

Lorna didn't open anything anymore.

She'd started shrinking the week Dale left. Lish watched it happen. Her mother had always been small, quiet, *a mouse* Dale called her, but now she got smaller every month, like something was letting the air out of her. She went to work. She came home. She went to church. Three times a week became five, then every night there was anything happening at the Lighthouse Tabernacle. Bible study. Prayer meeting. Women's fellowship. Choir practice, where she didn't sing, just sat in the back and listened.

At home she went into her room and shut the door and turned on the radio.

Royce had come to see her the month after Dale left. Lish wasn't there for it. She came home from school and Royce's bike was in front of the chain-link and her mother was sitting at the kitchen table with her hands flat on it and her face the color of paper, and Royce was standing by the sink drinking a glass of water like he lived there.

"Your mama and me came to an understanding," Royce said. He set the glass in the sink. "Didn't we, Lorna?"

Lorna nodded without looking up.

Lish found out later what the understanding was. Two hundred dollars a month. Out of Lorna's cleaning money, which was nine hundred on a good month. Until Dale's eleven thousand four hundred was paid off. Royce had done the math for her on a napkin. Fifty-seven months. Almost five years.

The family owes.

Lorna paid it. Every month, on the first, in cash, in an envelope she left in the mailbox for Tiny to pick up. She never missed. She didn't tell Lish about it. Lish found out from Brandi, who found out from her father, and who said it in the cafeteria loud enough for everybody to hear: *Ugly's mom pays my dad rent. On her daughter. Like a lease.*

That was the fight that got Lish her second suspension in ninth grade. She broke Tasha Holt's nose. Tasha had only laughed. It didn't matter.

* * *

Here's what nobody understood. Not the vice principals, not the counselors, not the attendance board that sent letters nobody opened.

She wasn't lazy.

She didn't go to algebra, but she practiced four hours a night. Every night. At the church from nine-thirty to eleven, and before that at home, in her room, from the time she got home until her mother's door shut. Scales. Arpeggios. Etudes. She'd play one Villa-Lobos étude four hundred times until it was clean. Four hundred times. She kept count in pencil marks on the inside of her closet door.

She failed PE because she wouldn't dress out, because the locker room was where Brandi's girls could get to her. She failed algebra because she never went, because it was first period, because first period was when she slept, because she'd been up until two playing the Bach.

And she refused to join band.

That was the thing that got the most attention, weirdly. Mr. Corliss, the band director, a sweaty man with a goatee who'd been a trumpet player in the Marine Corps, heard about her somehow. Somebody told him there was a girl in the freshman class who played classical guitar, real classical, like at a conser-

vatory. So he called her into the band room one afternoon and asked her to play something.

She played him the Bach.

He listened with his arms crossed and his face getting slowly redder. When she was done he said, "Okay. That was really good, actually. So here's what I'm thinking. We don't have a guitar part in marching band, but we've got jazz band, and they need somebody to do rhythm."

"I don't play jazz."

"You'd learn."

"I don't want to learn jazz."

"Well," Mr. Corliss said, "this is high school band, Felicia, not Carnegie Hall. You'd do what the program needs."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"No," she said. "I don't march. I don't play rhythm guitar for a jazz band. I don't do what the program needs. I have a teacher. I'm going to Juilliard."

Mr. Corliss laughed. He actually laughed. "Juilliard," he said. "Okay. Well, you know you have to be able to read ensemble music for Juilliard, right? Sight-read? You can't just play your one Bach piece."

"I can read."

"Sure you can." He was still smiling. "Tell you what. When you're ready to play with other people, my door's open."

That night he typed something into the student information system. It would be in her file for the rest of high school, and her counselor would read it three years later and laugh until she had to put her head down on the desk.

> *Student declined to participate in instrumental music program. Student appears to have private instruction in a limited repertoire but cannot read ensemble music. Student's attitude toward collaborative instruction is concerning.*

She could read better than he could. She could sight-read a Sor study she'd never seen before at tempo. She just wouldn't do it for him.

* * *

She stopped washing her hair that winter.

Not on purpose. She just stopped. There wasn't anybody at home to say anything. Lorna was at church. The water heater was broken and nobody fixed it, because fixing it cost money and the money went in an envelope on the first of every month. So showers were cold, and in December in Oildale a cold shower in a house with no heat is a thing you do once and then don't, and she started wearing a beanie, and then she just wore the beanie all the time.

Ugly.

She looked in the bathroom mirror one morning that winter, at fourteen, with her hair flat and dark under the beanie and circles under her eyes from practicing until two, and her skin bad, and the same gray sweatshirt from Goodwill that she'd now worn for six days. And she thought: *okay. That's fair.*

She wasn't the nicest kid on the block anymore. She knew that. She'd broken Tasha Holt's nose. She'd told the vice principal to go fuck himself in front of the whole front office. She'd stopped holding doors. She'd stopped saying please. The old women at the Lighthouse Tabernacle didn't say *that child* anymore. They said *that girl*, and they said it in a different voice, and they moved their purses to the other side when she sat down.

She was the ugliest kid on the block. That was just true.

And she didn't care. That was the part that surprised her. She thought she'd care. She looked at her face in the mirror and waited to care, and it didn't come. What came instead was something cold and flat and very calm, like the surface of a lake.

You can call me anything you want, she thought, at the mirror, at Brandi, at all of them. *You can call me Ugly. You can call me a debt. You can cut my strings. I'll play anyway.*

I'll play anyway, and someday I'll be gone, and you'll still be here.

* * *

There was one more thing that happened that year, and it's small, and she almost forgot it.

It was the spring choir concert. North Kern High gym. Lish only went because the senior center had asked Mr. Ruiz to drive three of the old ladies, and he'd asked Lish to come help with the wheelchairs, and she couldn't say

no to him. So she was there, at the end of the bleachers, next to Mrs. Albright in her chair.

Brandi had the solo.

"Over the Rainbow," again. She'd had it in middle school too. She came out to the front of the risers in a black dress with her blond hair curled, and she was beautiful, and she knew it, and Royce Voss was in the third row of the bleachers in his cut with half the club around him, and they whooped when she stepped up.

She sang it fine. She sang it well. She sang it the way a lot of good singers sing it, with feeling and in tune, and she went for the big note at the end and almost got there.

Almost.

She was a quarter tone flat on the high note. Just a hair. Nobody in that gym could hear it except Lish, who could hear the right note sitting in the air like a shape, and could hear Brandi reaching for it and not quite getting there.

Brandi held the note. The gym went crazy. Royce stood up and whistled through his fingers. The club was stomping on the bleachers.

And then, while they were still clapping, Brandi looked up.

Into the bleachers. Past her father. Past the club. All the way to the end, where Lish was sitting next to Mrs. Albright's wheelchair in her beanie and her gray sweatshirt.

Their eyes met. For one second.

And Lish saw that Brandi knew. That she'd felt it. That she'd reached for the note and missed it by a hair and heard herself miss it. And that the first person she'd looked for, when she heard it, was the one person in the building who'd know.

Brandi looked away fast.

Lish sat there while everybody clapped and she didn't clap. Not to be mean. She just didn't. And she thought, for the first time since the gravel, about the picnic table.

There's nobody else good enough.

Mrs. Albright, in her wheelchair, with her hands knotted in her lap, leaned over to her.

"She was flat," Mrs. Albright whispered. "At the end. Wasn't she?"

Lish looked at her.

"A little," Lish said.

Mrs. Albright nodded. “You’d have got it,” she said. “You’d have hit that note right in the middle.” And then she patted Lish’s hand with her twisted one and went back to watching the stage.

It was the nicest thing anybody said to her that year.

THIRTEEN

Blue Under My Skin

NOON · JULY 28, 2025

The box said MIDNIGHT CHERRY and it had a woman on it with hair the color of wine, shiny as a car, laughing at something off to the side like the color had just told her a joke.

I bought two of them at the Walgreens on Union. And one box of bleach, a cheap kit, the kind with the little plastic cap with the holes that you pull your hair through with a crochet hook. Nineteen dollars and forty cents, all together. I had eleven dollars from the gate money left, plus twenty from Graciela, who'd slipped it in my bag without telling me, folded in a note that said *for gas*.

It wasn't for gas.

I'm not going to pretend it was a big decision. It wasn't. I was standing in the bathroom at the Sundowner on my seventh day out, looking at myself in the cracked mirror, forty watts, and my hair was the same as it was in the yard. Long and dark and dead at the ends, pulled back with a rubber band. And I thought: everybody in Oildale who sees me is going to see the same girl they saw three years ago. The girl in the paper. The girl in the mugshot on KGET. The girl on the curb.

I didn't want to be her when they saw me.

So I went to Walgreens.

* * *

Inside, if you want to change how you look, you have three options. You can cut your hair, with a razor blade out of a disposable or with a pair of nail clippers, one chunk at a time. You can dye it, with Kool-Aid or coffee or the ink out of a pen. Or you can ink your skin.

Everybody does at least one. It's not vanity. Or it's not just vanity. It's that inside, you're a number. Same clothes as everybody. Same shoes. Same bunk, same tray, same hour on the yard. The only thing that's yours is your body. And the only way to tell anybody anything with it is to write on it.

I'll tell you about Inez now.

* * *

Inez Calderón had been in Chowchilla since 1999. Twenty-three years when I met her. Second- degree murder, fifteen to life, and she'd been denied parole six times, and she didn't talk about what she'd done and nobody asked her.

She was the best tattoo artist in the prison. Everybody knew that. Women came to her from every yard. She'd done portraits of people's kids from photos, roses, rosaries, names, dates, a Virgin of Guadalupe on a girl's whole back that took eleven months. And she did all of it with a machine she'd built herself, out of a motor from a Walkman, a ballpoint pen barrel, a toothbrush handle, and a needle she'd made from a guitar string.

A guitar string. I couldn't believe it when she told me. Where'd she get a guitar string?

"Arts program," she said. "Girl in there owed me. She took the high E off one of their guitars and said it broke. They got a whole box of new ones. Nobody counts."

I thought about that for a week.

The ink was ballpoint ink. Or soot, from burning baby oil, mixed with shampoo. Ballpoint is easier but it comes out blue. Not black. Blue. A deep, kind of washed-out blue, like denim, like a bruise healing. Every tattoo in that place was blue. You could tell a prison tattoo from across a room because of it.

"You want something?" she asked me. It was my fourth month. We'd been eating chow together for twelve weeks by then. She never asked me anything personal. I never asked her. That's why it worked.

"Yeah."

"What?"

I'd been thinking about it. I'd been thinking about it since day one, since Precious and the ring and getting up four times. Since Inez asked to see my hands.

"Bones," I said.

She looked at me. The face that didn't move.

"Bones."

"Down my arms. Like in a science book. The bones that are under there. Humerus, radius, ulna. All the way down."

"Why?"

I thought about how to say it.

"So they see what's under me," I said. "Before they get to me. So they know. Before they hit me, they know there's something under here that doesn't break."

Inez looked at me for a long time. Then something happened in the face. I'd never seen it do that before. It wasn't a smile. It was the thing before a smile, that goes away before the smile gets there.

"Okay, Felony," she said. "Bones."

It took nine months.

You can't do it fast inside. You need time when the COs aren't looking, which is not often. You need a cell where the cellie won't snitch. You need ink, which is contraband, and a machine, which is contraband, and if they find either one it's a write-up for both of you and thirty days in the hole and they take the machine. Inez had lost eleven machines in twenty-three years. She built a new one every time.

So we did it an hour at a time. Sometimes twenty minutes. Sometimes we'd go two weeks without a session because the unit was on lockdown or there'd been a shakedown or a new CO was on who actually walked the tier.

She started on my left shoulder. The head of the humerus, the round knob of it, where it fits into the socket. She drew it on first with a pen, free-hand, no stencil, looking at a diagram she'd torn out of a library anatomy book. Then the machine. It sounded like a bee in a jar.

It hurt. Of course it hurt. I'm not going to make it sound like it didn't hurt. A homemade machine with a sharpened guitar string for a needle hurts a lot more than whatever they use at a shop on the outside, because it doesn't go in clean, it goes in ragged, and it goes in over and over in the same spot, and Inez wasn't gentle. Inez was never gentle about anything.

"Stop moving."

"I'm not moving."

"You're breathing."

"I have to breathe."

"Breathe less."

I breathed less.

She worked for an hour that first night and got the head of the humerus and the first inch of the shaft. I looked at it after, in the steel mirror, a blurry blue shape on my shoulder, swollen and leaking, and I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen on myself.

* * *

She talked while she worked. Not a lot. Not about herself. About me.

"Who taught you guitar?"

"A man named Ruiz."

"Mexican?"

"Yeah. From Mexico City. He played at the conservatory there."

"Hm." The bee in the jar. "Where is he now?"

"Dead."

"When?"

"Two months before."

"Before what you did."

"Yeah."

She worked a while. The shaft of the humerus going down toward my elbow, line by line.

"He'd be disappointed," she said. "In you."

I didn't say anything.

"He'd be disappointed, and then he'd be over it," she said. "That's what teachers do. My mother was a teacher. Elementary. In Fresno. You know what she said when I got sentenced? She said, *Inez, you were the smartest girl in my class, and you're the dumbest woman I ever met.* And then she visited me every month for nineteen years until she died."

The bee in the jar.

"He'd be over it," Inez said. "Trust me. Stop crying, you're making my lines wet."

I wasn't crying. My eyes were just doing something.

* * *

When she got to my left elbow, I asked her about my hands.

"Do the knuckles too."

The machine stopped.

"No."

"Just the knuckles. Small. Like the joints. The phalanges. So it goes all the way down."

"No."

"Inez—"

"*No.*" She put the machine down on the bunk. She looked at me with those black eyes, so dark you couldn't see the pupil. "Listen to me, mija. One time. I'm only going to say it one time."

I listened.

"Hands are for the work," she said. "You understand? You want to tell the world what you are, you tell it with your arms. Your arms are for them. Let them look. Let them see the bones and be scared. Good. But your hands—" She took my left hand and turned it over and put her thumb on the fingertips, where the calluses used to be. "Your hands, you keep for the thing. Whatever the thing is. The guitar. You keep them clean. You keep them yours. You never let nobody write on them. Not me. Not a judge. Not nobody."

"Why?"

"Because someday you're going to get out of here," she said, "and you're going to stand up somewhere in front of people and play, and when you do, the first thing they're going to look at is your hands. And I want them to see a musician's hands. Not a convict's. You understand? Your arms can say Felony. Your hands say something else."

"What?"

She let go of my hand.

"That's for you to find out," she said. "I'm not doing your whole life for you." And she picked the machine back up and went back to the radius.

She stopped at the wrist. Both arms. A clean line, right where the hand starts, like a cuff. Like a border.

She never touched my hands.

* * *

Here's how I did it in the motel bathroom. I'm going to tell you exactly, because I want you to know I did it myself.

Bleach first. I put on the plastic cap with the holes and pulled thin pieces of hair through with the little crochet hook, the way the instructions said. Twenty pieces, maybe. All around my face and down the sides. My arms were tired by the end of it. I painted the bleach on the pieces sticking out of the cap. It burned my scalp where it touched. I didn't care. I'd had a guitar string in my arm for nine months. A little bleach.

Forty minutes. I sat on the edge of the bathtub and played the Tárrega on the guitar while I waited, which is hard to do in a plastic cap with bleach dripping down your neck. I didn't miss.

When I rinsed it, the streaks came out the color of straw. Then the toner, and they went to almost white. Platinum. Like frost on a windshield.

Then the Midnight Cherry. Both boxes. Everywhere except the streaks, which I'd wrapped in strips of foil from a Taco Bell burrito I'd eaten for lunch. Thirty minutes.

When I rinsed it in the shower and came out and wiped the steam off the mirror with my hand, there was somebody standing there I'd never seen before.

Wine. Dark wine, burgundy, almost black in the shadows and red where the forty-watt light hit it. And through it, around my face, down the sides, streaks of white, sharp as frost. Frosted. That's the word I thought, looking at it. Frosted. Like something left out in the cold overnight that came back harder.

The freckles. The cobalt eyes. The scar through the eyebrow from Precious's ring. The jaw that wasn't the jaw I left with.

And the bones. All the way down. Blue under my skin. Shoulders to wrists. Both sides.

And then my hands. On the edge of the sink. Clean.

I looked at all of it for a long time.

Where did I go?

I didn't know. I still don't know. But for the first time I looked at whoever it was in that cracked mirror and I didn't go looking for the girl on the curb. I didn't look for Felicia.

I looked at her and I thought: *okay. That one. That one I can work with.*

* * *

Inez is still in there.

I wrote her on my first day out, from the motel, on Sundowner stationery. I told her I was out. I told her I got a guitar, thirty-two dollars. I told her Bunny. I told her I'd seen him, at the cemetery, and played the waltz.

I didn't tell her about the hair. I'll tell her when it's done right.

She wrote back fast. Her letter came on day nine. One page. Her handwriting is big and square, all capitals, like a sign.

FELONY —

GOOD. THIRTY-TWO DOLLARS IS ENOUGH. MY BROTHER TOMAS HAS A BAR IN HAMTRAMCK MICHIGAN. THE STATIC ROOM. JOSEPH CAMPAU AVE. HE HAS MUSIC ON FRIDAYS. WHEN YOU ARE OUT AND STUPID AND YOU NEED SOMEWHERE TO GO, GO THERE. TELL HIM I SAID.

DON'T COME BACK HERE. NOT TO VISIT. NOT FOR NOTHING. I MEAN IT.

KEEP YOUR HANDS CLEAN.

— I.C.

I put it in the Ziploc with Graciela's letters.

I don't know where Hamtramck is. I looked it up on the library computer. It's in Michigan, inside Detroit, like a city inside a city. It's two thousand three hundred miles away. It snows there.

I've never seen snow.

FOURTEEN

A Debt Somebody Handed You

MORNING · 2019

Lorna got the flu in October of tenth grade, the bad kind, the kind where she couldn't get out of bed, and on the first of the month the envelope wasn't in the mailbox.

Lish didn't know about the envelope. Not really. She knew what Brandi said in the cafeteria. *Ugly's mom pays my dad rent.* She knew there was something on the first of every month because her mother got quiet on the thirtieth and quieter on the thirty-first. But nobody had ever told her, and she'd never asked, because asking was how you found things out, and she'd learned that finding things out never helped.

On the second of the month at four in the afternoon, Tiny came to the door.

Lish opened it. Tiny filled the doorway. He was six-four and three hundred pounds with a red beard down to his chest and a cut so old the leather had gone gray, and he'd known her since she was born. He used to pretend to steal her nose. He'd hold his thumb between his fingers and say *got it* and she'd scream.

"Where's your mama, Lish?"

"Sick."

"How sick?"

"She can't get up."

Tiny looked over her head down the hall at the closed bedroom door. He breathed through his nose for a while.

"There's supposed to be something in the mailbox," he said. "On the first. You know about that?"

"No."

"Your mama didn't tell you?"

"No."

He rubbed his face. He looked tired, Lish thought. Older than she remembered. He had a gray streak in the red beard now.

"Okay," he said. "Look. I gotta tell Royce it wasn't there. You understand? I don't got a choice. It's not me."

"How much is it?"

He looked at her.

"How much is supposed to be in the mailbox?" she said.

He thought about whether to tell her. She watched him think about it. Then he said, "Two hundred," and she said, "For what," and he said, "For your daddy," and she understood. All of it. All at once. Standing in the doorway. The thirtieth and the thirty-first. Her mother's chapped hands. The water heater nobody fixed. Brandi in the cafeteria.

"How long?" she said.

"Till it's paid."

"How much is left?"

Tiny actually had it written down. He took a folded piece of paper out of his cut, a napkin, soft from being folded so many times, with numbers on it in pencil in Royce's handwriting. He looked at it.

"Eight thousand two hundred," he said.

Lish did the math. She couldn't do algebra but she could do this. Forty-one more months. Three and a half years. She'd be eighteen.

"Okay," she said. "Wait here."

* * *

She had sixty-three dollars. It was in a coffee can in her closet, behind the Yamaha. She'd been saving it for a year, from the senior center, where they'd started paying her twenty dollars to play Musical Hour once a month, and from a wedding Mr. Ruiz had gotten her, a cousin of Graciela's in Lamont, where she'd played the "Ave Maria" during the vows and an uncle had pressed forty dollars into her hand afterward and cried.

It was supposed to be for strings. Good strings, the catalog ones, like Mr. Ruiz's. And for New York someday. For a bus ticket, or a plane, or whatever it took.

She brought the coffee can to the door and gave it to Tiny.

He looked down at it. Sixty-three dollars in ones and fives and a twenty, and some quarters.

"What's this?"

"It's what I have."

"Lish—"

"Tell him it's from me. Tell him it's sixty-three. Tell him I'll get the rest by the end of the month."

Tiny stood there holding the coffee can. He didn't move for a long time. Then he did something she'd never forget, which was nothing. He just stood there, holding it, looking at her, with something going on behind the red beard. And then he took out the money and folded it and put it in his cut, and handed her back the empty can.

"Okay," he said. "I'll tell him."

He went down the walk and got on his bike and sat there for a minute without starting it. Then he started it and went.

* * *

She got a hundred and thirty-seven dollars in three weeks.

She did it busking. That's when it started. Outside the Valley Star, because that's where the foot traffic was in Oildale, people going in for beer and cigarettes and lottery tickets and coming out again, and because Mr. Hollis let her. She asked him first. She went in and stood at the counter and asked if she could play on the sidewalk out front, and he looked at her for a long time.

"How old are you now?"

"Fifteen."

"Your daddy still owes me three-forty."

"I know."

He thought about it.

"You can play," he said. "Not on the doorstep. Over there, by the ice machine. Don't block anybody. And if anybody bothers you, you come inside."

"Thank you."

"And you don't pay me back the three-forty," he said. "You hear me? That's his. Not yours."

She sat on an upside-down milk crate by the ice machine every day after school with the Yamaha and the gig bag open in front of her, and she played. Not the Bach. She figured out fast that people coming out of a liquor store at four in the afternoon in Oildale didn't want Bach. They wanted Merle. They wanted Johnny Cash. They wanted "Ring of Fire" and "Mama Tried" and "Folsom Prison Blues" and, God help her, "Sweet Home Alabama."

So she learned them. On nylon strings, with classical technique, fingerpicked, which made them sound like something else, something old and strange and sad, "Folsom Prison Blues" played like a Spanish lament. People stopped. They didn't always know why. They'd come out with their twelve-pack and their Marlboros and stop dead on the sidewalk and stand there and listen to a fifteen-year-old girl in a beanie playing Johnny Cash like it was a funeral in Seville.

They put money in the bag. Ones, mostly. Sometimes a five. Once, a man in a suit who'd pulled in for gas came over and stood for three whole songs and put in a fifty and said *what the hell are you doing in Oildale* and walked away before she could answer.

A hundred and thirty-seven dollars. She put it in the coffee can and on the last day of the month she put the coffee can in the mailbox, with a note on a piece of notebook paper:

$137. From Lish Pruitt. For Deacon.

* * *

Royce came himself the next day.

Lorna was up by then. Still gray in the face, still weak, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea she wasn't drinking. Royce knocked, and Lorna went to the door, and he said he wanted to talk to Lish.

"She's fifteen," Lorna said.

"I know how old she is, Lorna. I was there."

He came in. He sat at the kitchen table across from Lish, who'd been doing homework, or pretending to. He had the coffee can. He set it on the table between them, and inside it there was her note, and nothing else.

"This was real thoughtful," he said.

Lish didn't say anything.

"I mean it. I'm not being smart. A hundred and thirty-seven dollars, plus Tiny says another sixty-three. Two hundred. That's the whole month. You did your mama's whole month." He looked at her with the gray eyes. "How'd you do it?"

"Playing."

"Playing what?"

"Guitar."

"Where?"

"The Valley Star."

He sat back. He rubbed his beard. He looked at Lorna by the sink, and then back at Lish, and something was happening in his face, some kind of math.

"Brandi says you're good," he said. "Real good. She don't like saying it but she says it. Says you play like—what'd she say. Like somebody on the radio."

Lish didn't say anything.

"So here's what I'm thinking," Royce said. "I'm thinking you come play at the clubhouse. Saturday nights. Like you used to sing 'Okie from Muskogee' on the jukebox, remember? Everybody loved that. Except now you play. Three hours. And whatever the tips are, whatever the boys put in your jar, that goes to the debt. And I'll knock off fifty a night on top of it. For the entertainment."

He smiled. It wasn't a bad smile. That was the worst part. It was the smile he used to give her with the jukebox quarters.

"You'd have it paid off in a year," he said. "And your mama could quit sending envelopes. And you'd be back home. With us. Where you belong."

"No," said Lorna.

They both looked at her.

She was standing at the sink with her back to the counter and her hands gripping the edge of it behind her, and she was shaking. Lish could see it from across the room. Her whole body.

"No," Lorna said again. "She's not going to play there. She's not going to play for you."

Royce looked at her for a long time.

"Lorna," he said. Gently. "Honey. I'm offering her a way out. I'm offering you a way out."

"I know what you're offering."

"I don't think you do."

"I know *exactly* what you're offering," Lorna said, and her voice cracked in the middle, and Lish had never heard her mother's voice do that, not once, not in fifteen years, not even on the gravel. "I know what a girl playing three hours on a Saturday night in that room is. I know what the boys put in her jar. I know what you knock off and what you don't. I was nineteen in that room, Royce. I know."

The kitchen was very quiet.

Royce stood up. Slowly. He picked up the coffee can and looked at it and set it back down on the table.

"Okay," he said. "That's fair. That's your call, Lorna. You're her mama." He went to the door. He stopped there and looked back at Lish. "Offer stands, though. Whenever you want it. You're gonna be eighteen someday, and then it's not her call anymore."

He left.

Lorna stood at the sink and didn't move for a long time. Lish sat at the table and didn't move either. Then Lorna went into her bedroom and shut the door and turned on the radio, and Lish heard her crying under the radio, the faucet trick, the preacher talking about Revelation over it.

Lish went and knocked on the door.

She'd never done that. Not once since the gravel.

The crying stopped. The radio didn't.

"Mama?"

Nothing.

"Mama. Thank you."

Nothing. Then, after a long time, through the door, under the radio, very quietly:

"Don't ever let him put you in that room, baby. Promise me."

"I promise."

"Promise me you'll get out."

"I'm going to New York, Mama."

The radio played. The preacher said something about the seventh seal.

"Good," Lorna said. "Good. Go as far as you can. Don't look back."

It was the most her mother had said to her in two years. Lish stood there with her forehead against the door and her hand flat on it.

Six months later, her mother would follow her own advice.

* * *

She found out about the picture that winter.

Charlene Voss told her. It was at the Food Maxx. Lish was in the canned goods aisle buying soup, and Charlene was there with a cart, and they almost walked past each other the way they'd walked past each other for two and a half years. Charlene was sixty now, heavy, with her hair dyed a hard flat black and her face lined from cigarettes. She'd delivered Lish on a cot in a back room. She'd never said one word to her since Dale left.

She stopped her cart.

"Lish."

Lish stopped.

Charlene looked up and down the aisle like she was checking who was there. Then she said, fast, low, "Royce took the picture down. Of you. In Deacon's vest. You know the one."

"Yeah."

"He didn't throw it out. He put it in the back room. On the cot. Face down. It's still there." She looked at Lish. "I just thought you should know it's still there. That he didn't throw it out."

"Why?"

Charlene shook her head. "I don't know, honey. I don't know why he does anything." She looked like she wanted to say something else. Then she said, "Brandi misses you, you know. She'd never say it. She'll never say it. But I'm her mama and I know."

Lish didn't say anything.

"She cries sometimes," Charlene said. "In her room. And she won't tell me why. And one time I heard her say your name."

Then Charlene pushed her cart away down the aisle, fast, and turned at the end, and was gone.

Lish stood in the canned goods aisle at the Food Maxx with a can of chicken noodle soup in her hand for a long time.

She went home and told Bunny about it. She was fifteen. She was too old to talk to a stuffed rabbit and she knew it. She did it anyway, sitting on the bed in the dark with the Yamaha across her knees.

"She misses me," Lish said.

Bunny looked at her with both eyes. She still had both eyes then.

"Then why does she do it?"

Bunny didn't know. Lish didn't either. She wouldn't know for three more years, and when she did, it would be too late to matter, the way most true things are.

FIFTEEN

Twenty-One Candles

NOON · JULY 30, 2025

Sundays were visiting days.

Saturdays and Sundays, actually, but Sunday was the big one. You'd hear it start Saturday night, in the unit, the women getting ready. Somebody'd have traded for a little eyeliner, somebody'd be doing somebody's braids, somebody'd be ironing her blues by laying them under her mattress all night to press the creases in. Everybody quieter than usual. Everybody thinking about a face.

Sunday morning, the COs would start calling names over the speaker. *Martinez, visiting. Johnson, visiting. Okafor, visiting.* And the women would get up off their bunks and walk to the door, and you could see it in how they walked. Some of them fast. Some of them slow, like they were scared. One girl in my unit, Teresa, would throw up every Sunday morning before her mom came. Every single Sunday. Then she'd wipe her mouth and fix her hair and go.

They never called Pruitt.

Not once. Three years. A hundred and fifty-six Sundays. I counted. You know I counted.

I'm not saying that so you feel sorry for me. I knew they wouldn't. I knew it before I got there. My mother was in Oklahoma. My father was wherever my father was. Mr. Ruiz was dead. Graciela was seventy-two, then seventy-three, then seventy-four, and Chowchilla is two hours from Bakersfield on a

highway she doesn't drive, and I wrote her my first month and told her not to try, and she listened, because she's a woman who listens.

Ms. Haney wrote twice. My counselor from North Kern. Two letters, my first year. Then she retired and moved to Arizona, and I didn't hear from her again. That's okay. She'd done more than anybody.

So nobody came. That was just a fact, like the fence.

But I'll tell you what Sundays did to me anyway.

* * *

Every Sunday, when they started calling names, I'd lie on my bunk with my face to the wall and my hand up on the paper fretboard, and I'd play.

Not the Bach. Not the Villa-Lobos. Sundays I played everything I knew, start to finish, in order, from the first thing he ever taught me. The open E, rest stroke. Then C major, one octave. Then the waltz. Then Sor. Then Tárrega. Then all of it, every piece, in the order I learned them, nine years of lessons, from age nine to eighteen, on paper and air, lying on my side facing a concrete wall while women walked past my cell to go see their mothers.

It took about four hours.

By the time I got to the Bach Lute Suite, the last thing he gave me, the visiting hours were over. They'd be coming back. I'd hear them in the dayroom, some of them crying, some of them laughing, most of them quiet. Teresa would go straight to her bunk and pull the blanket over her head.

And I'd be done. I'd have played my whole life through. Every lesson. And nobody would know I'd done it, because from the outside it just looked like a girl lying on a bunk with her hand in the air.

Three years of Sundays. Three years of somebody's mother in the visiting hall. Nobody drove that far for me.

I played anyway.

* * *

My twenty-first birthday was a Friday. March 14th, 2025.

You don't get a cake inside. You don't get anything. Your birthday's just a date on your paperwork, and if the COs notice it, it's because they're checking how long until you're out, not because they care. But the women notice. Women always notice. I don't know how. Nobody told anybody. I didn't. But that morning at chow there was a honey bun on my tray. A commissary

honey bun, the kind in plastic, a dollar fifteen. And nobody would say who put it there.

That night in the dayroom, Inez came over with something in her hand.

It was a candle. Sort of. You can't have candles inside, obviously. It was a little piece of a toilet paper roll stuffed with a twist of tissue soaked in hair grease, which burns, if you light it with the spark from a battery and a gum wrapper, which Inez could do in about four seconds. She'd stuck it in the honey bun, which she'd taken from my bunk without asking.

She set it on the table in front of me. Lit.

Then she set down another one. And another. A girl named Shay brought one. Teresa brought one. Biscuit brought one. Women from my unit, from the tier, from B-yard. Women I'd fought. Precious, from the first day, with the ring, came over and set one down and walked away without looking at me. One after another until there was a little crowd of them on the steel table, little greasy toilet-paper candles, flickering, smoking, stinking like burnt hair.

I counted them. Twenty-one.

Twenty-one candles in a nine-by-four hall.

Nobody sang. You can't sing in the dayroom; the COs would be on you in a second. So nobody sang. They just stood around the table, maybe fifteen women, and looked at me, and looked at the candles. And I sat there with the honey bun.

Inez said, "Make a wish, Felony. Fast. Before the CO sees."

I didn't know what to wish for. I'd stopped wishing for things around age thirteen.

So I didn't wish. I looked at the candles and I thought, instead: *four months.* Four months from tonight, the gate. Three years exactly. Every day of it. I'd lost every credit they'd ever given me and I was going to walk out on the exact day the judge said, with the clothes I came in with.

I blew them out. All twenty-one. One breath.

The CO at the desk looked up at the smoke and said, "*What* is that smell," and the women scattered like birds, and Inez was already back at her own table with her reading glasses on, reading a magazine, like nothing had happened.

I ate the honey bun. It tasted like hair grease.

It was the best birthday I ever had. I want that on the record somewhere. I'm putting it here.

* * *

That's all past now. This is now.

I drove to the Valley Star today.

* * *

I'd been putting it off. You know that. I'd driven past it three times. I'd looked at the road. I'd kept my hands at ten and two.

Today I turned in.

It was four in the afternoon. A hundred and three. The neon sign wasn't on yet, it doesn't come on till dusk, but I could see the tubes of it over the door, VALLEY STAR LIQUOR & MARKET in letters that used to be red and white and were now red and a kind of tired pink where the white had burned out.

Three parking spaces in front. The same three. The concrete wheel stops at the head of each one, gray, a little chipped. Somebody had painted the middle one yellow at some point, and most of the yellow had worn off.

I parked in the space on the left. Not the middle one.

I sat in the truck with the engine running and the AC on and looked at the middle wheel stop through the windshield for a long time.

It's just concrete. I want to tell you something about it, something big, and I can't, because it's just concrete. A block of it, gray, the size of a loaf of bread, with two rusty rebar stubs sticking out of the top where it's pinned to the asphalt. There are millions of them. There's one in front of every parking space in America. Nobody looks at them. They're there to stop your tires.

That's all it was there to do.

I turned off the engine. I got out of the truck. I walked around the front of it and stood on the asphalt next to the middle space and looked down at it.

No stain. Of course there was no stain. Three years of sun. Three years of cars. Somebody probably hosed it the next morning. Mr. Hollis, probably. I hadn't thought about that before. Him coming out the next morning, early, before he opened, with a hose.

I didn't kneel down. I didn't touch it. I just stood there.

And I didn't feel anything. That's what I want to tell you. I'd been afraid of that wheel stop for three years. I'd been afraid of this whole lot. I'd seen it every night on the bunk, every time I closed my eyes in the hole. And now I

was standing on it in the middle of the afternoon with the sun straight up and no shadow anywhere and a car going by on Chester with the bass turned up so loud it rattled the store window, and I didn't feel a thing.

That's not true.

I felt one thing. I felt the heat coming up off the asphalt through the worn-out heel of my left Van. Same shoe. Same heel. Same asphalt.

It was soft that night. The asphalt. It was ninety-one degrees at eleven at night and the asphalt was still soft from the day.

I remember that.

* * *

"You."

I turned around.

Mr. Hollis was in the doorway of the store. He was older. Of course he was older. He'd been sixty-something when I was a kid and he was seventy-something now, with a cane, and his face had gone loose and spotted, and he was wearing the same kind of short-sleeved plaid shirt he always wore, with a pen in the pocket.

He was looking at me. At my hair. At my arms. At my face.

"Mr. Hollis," I said.

He didn't say anything for a long time. Then he said, "You did something to your hair."

"Yeah."

"It's red."

"It's wine."

"Hm," Mr. Hollis said. He looked at the hair some more. Then he looked down at the wheel stop I'd been standing over, and then back at me, and something went over his face.

"I hosed it," he said. "The next morning. Six a.m. Before I opened. I didn't know what else to do."

I didn't say anything.

"Took a long time," he said.

We stood there.

Then Mr. Hollis said, "It's a hundred and three degrees, Lish. Come inside before you fall down. I got water."

And he turned around and went back in, leaning on the cane, and left the door open behind him.

He called me Lish.

I stood in the parking lot of the Valley Star and listened to that for a minute. Nobody had called me that in three years. Not Graciela, who calls me *mija*. Not Inez, who calls me Felony. Not Marcy Delgado with her brain-shaped stress ball, who calls me Felicia because that's what's on the paper.

He called me Lish.

I went inside. He gave me a water out of the cooler. It was so cold it hurt my teeth.

"You want a job?" he said.

I looked at him.

"I can't pay much," he said. "Stocking. Mopping. Nights, mostly. My nephew quit. I can't do the ladder anymore with this." He tapped the cane on the floor.

"You'd hire me."

"I'm asking, aren't I?"

"After—" I looked out the window. At the parking lot. At the middle space.

Mr. Hollis followed my look. He looked out there for a long time.

"I knew Brandi Voss since she was born," he said. "I knew you since you were born. I knew your daddy, God help me, and her daddy. I know what that parking lot is." He looked back at me. "I also know who sat out front of my store every day for three years playing Johnny Cash on a milk crate and never once stole a candy bar. And I know who was standing over there when it happened, because I saw it on the news, and I saw who was in the car."

"Wade."

"Wade," said Mr. Hollis. "And the Bratcher boy." He shook his head. "I don't know what happened that night. Camera only gets the register. I been sorry about that camera for three years. But I knew those two boys, and I knew you, and I made up my own mind a long time ago."

He took a ring of keys out of his pocket and set it on the counter between us.

"Nine-dollar-sixty an hour, under the table," he said. "Ten to two a.m., Thursday through Sunday. You can play out front before your shift if you want. By the ice machine. Like before."

I looked at the keys.

Your parole agent says you have thirty days to get a real job. Under the table isn't a real job. I'd have to figure that out.

I picked up the keys anyway.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me," said Mr. Hollis. "Just don't block the door."

SIXTEEN

Juilliard Calling

MORNING · FEBRUARY 2020

The Central Valley Young Artists Competition was held every February in a recital hall at Fresno State, and Mr. Ruiz had been talking about it for a year.

"Not to win," he said. "I don't care about winning. To be heard. There are judges who come down from San Francisco, from Los Angeles. Sometimes from New York. People who know people. You play for them. They hear you. Then we know where we are."

"Where we are for what?"

He looked at her like she was being slow on purpose.

"For the word," he said.

* * *

They drove up in the truck the morning of. Two hours north on 99 in the dark, leaving Oildale at five-thirty a.m., the heater blowing, Mr. Ruiz in his one suit, a black one that was shiny at the elbows, and Lish in a black dress Graciela had bought her at the Ross on Ming Avenue, the first dress she'd worn since she was ten. It was too big in the shoulders. Graciela had pinned it.

She had the Paracho guitar on her lap. His guitar. He'd never let it out of the church before.

"You play this one today," he'd said, the night before, handing it to her in its case. "Not the Yamaha. The Yamaha is good for practice. This is for when it matters."

"What if I break it?"

"You won't break it."

"What if I do?"

"Then I'll make another one," he said, which she didn't understand until she was twenty-one and standing in his garage looking at the unfinished neck on his workbench.

She held the case on her lap the whole two hours. She didn't sleep. She watched the almond orchards go by in the dark, then in the gray, then in the first light, the rows flickering into tunnels and breaking apart, and she played the Bach in her head, and she counted the trucks.

* * *

There were thirty-one competitors in the senior division. Sixteen to eighteen. Pianists, mostly. Violinists. Two cellists. A flute. One other guitarist, a boy from Clovis in a bow tie whose father sat in the front row and filmed everything on an iPad.

The recital hall was the nicest room Lish had ever been in. Wood paneling, curved, going up to a high ceiling. Two hundred seats in rows, red velvet, sloping down to a stage with a black Steinway on it. The sound in there was clean and warm and came back to you a split second later from every wall, like the room was listening.

"It's a good room," Mr. Ruiz said, standing in the back with her while the first pianist played. "Almost as good as the church."

She looked at him to see if he was joking. He wasn't.

There were three judges at a table halfway up the hall. Two women and a man. The man was older, sixties, thin, with white hair cut very short and wire glasses and a scarf, indoors, in February in Fresno. He wrote on a pad the whole time. He didn't look up at the performers much. He listened with his head down, writing, like he was taking dictation.

"That one," Mr. Ruiz whispered. "The man. He's from New York."

"How do you know?"

"The scarf."

* * *

She was number twenty-two.

When they called her name, *Felicia Pruitt, guitar, Oildale*, there was a little ripple in the hall. She heard it. It wasn't loud. Just a few people in the audience turning to look at each other. *Oildale.* Nobody from Oildale ever played in the Central Valley Young Artists Competition. Oildale was where you got your tires changed on the way to somewhere else.

She walked out onto the stage in Graciela's pinned black dress with the Paracho guitar and her footstool, and she sat on the folding chair they'd put out, and she set her left foot on the stool, and she put the guitar on her left leg in the middle of her, not on the right, because the right is for cowboys.

She looked out at the hall. Two hundred red velvet seats, maybe sixty of them full. The judges' table. The man in the scarf, with his head down, writing.

She looked for Mr. Ruiz. He was in the back row, in the corner, in his shiny suit. He nodded. Once.

She tuned. Low E first. Every string from slightly wrong to exactly right. The room listened.

She played the Bach.

The first prelude from the Lute Suite in E minor, BWV 996. The one he'd taught her to play like there was a candle. Like it was night. Like the only person listening was the one person she wanted to listen. She played it slower than anybody else would have played it. She played it so quiet the people in the back had to lean forward. And the room did what that room did: it took every note and held it a split second and gave it back.

Halfway through, the man in the scarf stopped writing.

She didn't see it. She had her eyes closed. Mr. Ruiz saw it. He told her later. The man in the scarf put down his pen, and lifted his head, and took off his wire glasses, and sat there with them in his hand, looking at her, for the rest of the piece.

Then the Villa-Lobos. Étude Number One. The one she'd played four hundred times. Fast, the arpeggio pattern racing up and down the neck, every note cut clean as a blade from learning to play quiet in a closet. And then the Tárrega, "Recuerdos," the tremolo, the right hand going so fast on one string it sounded like water, like light on water, the melody low and slow and sad underneath, the first piece she ever heard him play, in the dark, from the back row, with Bunny in her lap.

When she finished, she put her hand flat on the strings to stop them.

The hall was silent.

Not like the senior center. Not asleep or not able. This silence was something else. Sixty people sitting completely still in red velvet seats, not breathing, for one second, two, three.

Then they clapped.

She'd never heard it before. Not really. Not for her. It came up at her from the hall like heat off asphalt, and some of them stood, the boy from Clovis's father stood up with his iPad, and an old woman in the third row was crying and clapping at the same time.

Lish stood up. She bowed. A small bow from the waist, one hand on the guitar's neck, the way he'd taught her.

And then she counted. To ten. Slowly. Sixty beats a minute.

I know it was good, she thought. *I don't need you to tell me.*

But she didn't mind that they did.

* * *

She didn't win.

The pianist from Fresno who played the Rachmaninoff won. Lish got second. A plaque and a check for three hundred dollars, which was more money than she'd ever held at one time, and which she gave to Mr. Ruiz in the parking lot to put in the account he'd opened at the Valley Credit Union with both their names on it, labeled in his small careful handwriting in the passbook: NEW YORK.

The man in the scarf found them in the lobby afterward.

He came straight across the room to Mr. Ruiz, not to her, and put out his hand. They shook. And then he said something in Spanish, and Mr. Ruiz looked startled and said something back, and they went back and forth for a minute, too fast for Lish to follow. She caught *conservatorio* and *México* and *hace mucho tiempo*, a long time ago. The man in the scarf was smiling. Mr. Ruiz wasn't. Mr. Ruiz looked like a man who'd just seen a ghost and was trying to be polite to it.

Then the man in the scarf turned to her.

"Miss Pruitt," he said. He had an accent she couldn't place. Not Spanish. Something else. "I teach in New York. At a school there. I think you know which one."

She didn't say anything. Her heart was going so hard she could feel it in her teeth.

"I've been coming to this competition for eleven years," he said, "because a friend of mine on the faculty at Fresno asks me to, and I come, and I hear very nice children play very nice music very nicely, and I go home." He looked at her. "Today I didn't hear a nice child."

She didn't know if that was good.

"Your Bach," he said. "Who taught you to play it that slowly?"

She looked at Mr. Ruiz.

"He did," she said.

The man in the scarf looked at Mr. Ruiz too. For a long time.

"Of course he did," he said. "I heard him play it once. In 1974. In Mexico City. He was twenty- three and I was twenty-four and I thought, *that man is going to be the greatest guitarist in Latin America.*" He looked back at Lish. "Did you know that?"

She didn't. She looked at Mr. Ruiz. He was looking at the floor.

"Life is long and strange," the man in the scarf said. "And here we are in Fresno." He took a card out of his jacket pocket and held it out to her. White. Embossed. A name she'd look up on the library computer that night and then sit back in the plastic chair, very still, for a long time. "You're how old?"

"Sixteen. Almost. In three weeks."

"Then you have time. Next year, in the fall, apply. Send a recording. If you play on the recording the way you played today, I'll see you in New York the following winter for the live audition." He paused. "I can't promise anything. That's not how it works. There's a committee. But I'll be in the room. And I'll know who you are."

She took the card. Her hand was shaking. She hoped he didn't see.

He saw.

"Keep your hands," he said. "Whatever happens between now and then. Keep your hands safe."

Then he shook Mr. Ruiz's hand again, longer this time, both hands, and said something else in Spanish, quieter, and walked away across the lobby with his scarf, and was gone.

* * *

They didn't talk for the first hour of the drive home.

It was dark again by the time they got on 99. Mr. Ruiz drove with both hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road, and Lish sat with the Paracho guitar on her lap and the plaque on top of it and the white card in the pocket of Graciela's black dress, and she held it there with her hand flat over it like it might fly away.

Somewhere past Tulare she said, "You never told me."

"Told you what?"

"Mexico City. That you were going to be the greatest guitarist in Latin America."

He laughed. It wasn't a happy laugh.

"He was being kind," Mr. Ruiz said. "Or he remembers wrong. I was good. I was very good. I was not the greatest anything."

"What happened?"

He drove for a long time.

"My father got sick," he said. "Then my mother. Then there was no money. Then I met Graciela, and she was pregnant, and we came here, because her brother was here and there was work. And I put the guitar in the case and I picked up a broom." He shrugged. "That's all. That's the whole story. It's not a sad story. It's the most normal story in the world. Ask anybody in Oildale."

"Do you miss it?"

"Every day," he said. "Every single day of my life."

They drove past Delano. The lights of the town off to the left, then gone.

"That's why," he said, after a long time. "You understand? That's why. With you. Not because I didn't get to. I'm not doing it so I can get to through you. That's not it." He was quiet. "It's because I know what it is when life puts its hand on you. And I want—just once—I want to see somebody get out from under the hand."

She didn't say anything. She held the card.

"Next year," he said. "Fall. We send the recording. The year after, winter, New York. You'll be seventeen. The next fall, you go. You'll be eighteen."

"Two and a half years."

"Two and a half years," he said. "One brick. One brick. Nothing stops you. You promised me."

"I know."

"Say it."

"Nothing stops me."

"Good."

They crossed the Kern River at ten-forty that night. The water was high. February rains. She could see it under the bridge in the headlights, brown and fast. And on the other side, Oildale. The bail bonds place. The Dairy Queen. The Valley Star, with its red sign buzzing.

The world had just heard of a virus in a city in China. It was on the radio, on the drive home, a short piece on the news, between the weather and a commercial for a personal injury lawyer. Neither of them paid any attention.

Three weeks later, she turned sixteen.

Three weeks after that, the schools closed.

Two weeks after that, her mother put a bag by the door.

SEVENTEEN

Making Music in the Streets

NOON · JULY 31, 2025

The milk crate was still there.

I don't know how. It couldn't have been the same milk crate. Three years, a hundred and fifty- six Sundays, five hundred nights of somebody's kid kicking it into the street. But there was a milk crate by the ice machine at the Valley Star, blue, upside down, in the same spot, like it had been waiting.

Mr. Hollis said, "I keep one there. People sit on it to smoke."

"Since when?"

He didn't answer.

* * *

My first shift was Thursday. Ten at night to two in the morning. Before that I had four hours, and I spent them on the milk crate.

I want to tell you I was nervous. I was. My hands were sweating so bad I had to wipe them on my jeans between every song. But it wasn't the kind of nervous I'd been at Fresno State in Graciela's pinned black dress. That was nervous like flying. This was nervous like a fight. Like the first day. You know it's coming, you know it's going to happen, you just don't know who's going to swing first.

Six o'clock in the evening, a hundred and one degrees, sun still high. People coming in and out of the Valley Star. Twelve-packs. Cigarettes. Lottery. Slurpees for the kids in the back seat.

I sat on the milk crate with the thirty-two-dollar guitar and opened the soft case Graciela gave me, a cheap black one her grandson had from a semester of lessons in seventh grade, and laid it on the sidewalk in front of me. Empty. I'd put two of my own dollars in it, because Mr. Ruiz used to say *nobody wants to be the first one*.

Then I didn't play.

I sat there.

People went by. A man in a Carhartt jacket in a hundred and one degrees. A girl with a baby. Two boys on bikes. They looked at me. At the arms. At the hair. Some of them looked longer than others. One woman, older, with a cart, looked at my face and stopped walking for a second and then kept going faster.

She knew. I could see it. She'd seen the news three years ago, or her sister had, or she went to the Lighthouse Tabernacle, or she was just from Oildale, where everybody knows everything eventually. The Pruitt girl. The Voss girl. The parking lot.

Right there. Twenty feet from the milk crate.

I put my hand flat on the strings.

What do you play? That's what I sat there trying to figure out. What do you play, the first time, in front of the parking lot where you killed somebody, for the people who knew her?

Not the Bach. The Bach was for him. Not the waltz. The waltz was mine.

Not Johnny Cash. I'd played "Folsom Prison Blues" on this exact milk crate when I was fifteen because people liked it and I thought it was a cool sad song about a train. I'd never play it again. I know what it's about now.

I sat there a long time.

Then I played "Lágrima."

* * *

Tárrega wrote it in 1891. It means *teardrop*. It's two minutes long. The first half is in E major and it's sweet and simple, almost like a lullaby. Then it goes to E minor, the second half, and the melody falls, and falls, and it sounds exactly like what it's called. And then it goes back to the major again, back to the beginning, and it's sweet again, and simple again, but you've heard the minor now and you can't unhear it.

It's quiet. You can't play it loud. There's no way.

I played it on a milk crate in front of the Valley Star with the traffic on Chester going by and a car in the lot playing banda and the ice machine humming behind me. I played it so quiet nobody more than ten feet away could have heard it.

When I finished, nobody clapped.

I counted to ten.

Then I played it again.

* * *

By the fourth time through, a man had stopped.

He was maybe sixty, Latino, in a straw cowboy hat and a work shirt with sweat stains under the arms, carrying a twelve-pack of Tecate. He just stopped on the sidewalk, ten feet away, and stood there holding the twelve-pack, listening.

When I finished, he said, "Tárrega."

I looked at him.

"Lágrima," he said. "My father used to play it. In Jalisco." He set the twelve-pack down on the sidewalk. He took out his wallet. He took out a five. He came over and leaned down and put it in the case, very carefully, next to my two ones, like he was putting something in an offering plate. "You play it right," he said. "Slow. Most people play it too fast. They want to get to the sad part." He picked up his twelve-pack. "You don't want to get to the sad part. You want to be in the sweet part as long as you can. Because you know it's coming."

He walked to his truck.

I sat there and looked at the five dollars.

That's the first money I made as a free person, playing guitar. A five from a man in a straw hat whose father played Tárrega in Jalisco. I'm telling you so it's written down somewhere. I still have it. I didn't spend it. It's in the Ziploc with the letters.

* * *

I played for three and a half hours.

I played everything. Sor. Giuliani. Carcassi. The Villa-Lobos preludes. Some Bach, the bourrée, which is the one everybody knows because Jethro Tull stole it. I played "Recuerdos" with the tremolo, which on a thirty-two-

dollar plywood guitar with old strings sounds like water going through a garden hose instead of light on a fountain, but people stopped anyway.

A lot of people stopped.

That's the thing I didn't expect. I'd been afraid of the looks. And there were looks, some of them, the woman with the cart, a man in a truck who rolled his window down and stared and rolled it back up. A teenage boy who said something to his friend and they both laughed. But mostly what happened was what happened when I was fifteen on this same crate playing Johnny Cash for Royce's debt. People came out of the store with their beer and stopped on the sidewalk. And they didn't know what it was, and they didn't know why they'd stopped, and they stood there anyway.

A little girl, maybe six, came and sat down on the sidewalk right in front of me, cross-legged, with a Slurpee, and watched my hands for twenty minutes, until her mom came out and said *Mia, let's go*, and she said *one more*, and her mom stood there and let her have one more.

I played her the waltz. *Vals para Lish.* I didn't plan to. I just looked at her, sitting there cross- legged with her mouth open and her eyes on my hands, and I played it.

When I finished, she said, "That one was sad."

"A little."

"Why'd you make it sad?"

I looked at her. I looked at her for a long time.

"I didn't," I said. "Somebody made it for me. Because I was a little sad."

"Are you still sad?"

Her mom said, "*Mia.*"

"It's okay," I said. I looked at the kid. "Yeah. A little. But listen to the end. See? It goes home. It comes back to the first note. That means no matter how far it goes, it knows where home is."

She thought about that seriously.

"Where's your home?" she said.

Her mom took her hand and said, "Okay, that's enough, say thank you," and the kid said *thank you* and got pulled away toward a minivan, still looking back at me over her shoulder.

I didn't answer her. I couldn't have.

Then I played "Lágrima" again.

* * *

By nine-thirty the case had sixty-one dollars in it.

Sixty-one dollars. Plus the five, which I'd taken out and put in my pocket. Sixty-one dollars in three and a half hours on a milk crate. That's more than I'd made in a month at Chowchilla working in the kitchen at eight cents an hour.

I sat there looking at it. Then I looked up.

And a girl was filming me.

She was standing by the gas pump across the lot, maybe twenty, white, with her hair in a claw clip and her phone held up sideways, and she'd been filming for I don't know how long. When she saw me look, she lowered it a little, but she didn't stop.

I stopped playing.

She lowered it the rest of the way. She looked embarrassed, a little. She came over.

"Sorry," she said. "I just—sorry. You're really good."

I didn't say anything.

"Like, *really* good," she said. "Like, what are you doing in Oildale good."

"I live here."

"Okay. Yeah. Sorry." She looked at my arms. At the bones. "Can I post it?"

"No."

"Okay." She didn't look like she understood why. "Can I ask your name, at least? Like, if people ask?"

I thought about it. I thought about all of them. The one the clerk typed. The one Mr. Hollis called me in the doorway. The one Inez gave me on the first day, reading over a CO's shoulder.

"Felony," I said.

She laughed. Then she saw my face and stopped laughing.

"Like—"

"Like that."

"Okay," she said. "Felony." She put her phone in her back pocket. "Well. You're really good, Felony." She put a ten in the case and walked back to her car.

I watched her go. I watched her get in her car, a little silver Honda, and sit there in the driver's seat with the dome light on, looking at her phone, her thumbs moving.

She was posting it. I knew she was. I'd said no and she was posting it anyway, because that's what people do now. Three years and that hadn't changed. If anything it was worse. Everybody's always filming everything, and nobody asks, and if they ask, they don't listen.

I didn't go over there. What was I going to do? Take her phone? That's a robbery. That's a parole violation. That's back in the bus with Officer Ames telling me to keep my head down and look 'em in the eye.

I put my hand flat on the strings.

* * *

At ten I went inside for my shift.

Mr. Hollis showed me where the mop was. Where the ladder was. Where the cases of beer came in on the truck at the back, Thursdays and Mondays, and where they went in the walk-in cooler, which was the coldest place I'd been in three years and I stood in it for a full minute with my eyes closed before I started stacking.

The register. The lottery machine. The button under the counter that called the sheriff. The camera over the register, a little black dome in the ceiling, that I'd thought about every night for three years. It was the same one. He'd never replaced it. He'd never moved it. It still pointed straight down at the register and nowhere else.

"I know," Mr. Hollis said, seeing me look at it. "I know."

At midnight, he went home. He trusted me with the store. Me. He left me the keys and the register and the button under the counter and went home to his wife.

So I was alone in the Valley Star at one-fifteen in the morning, mopping the floor by the coolers, when the car pulled in.

I heard it before I saw it. A V6 with a bad exhaust, a hole in the muffler somewhere, a deep throaty rumble that rattled the glass of the front window.

I knew that sound.

I stopped mopping.

I didn't look up right away. I stood there by the beer cooler with the mop in my hands, and I listened to the car pull into the lot, slow, and not stop at the pump, and not stop in one of the three spaces, but just roll, slow, across the front of the store, past the window, past the door, past the ice machine where the milk crate was.

Then I looked.

It was a Buick LeSabre. Older. Early 2000s. Purple, a dark purple, almost black, the paint gone dull and blotchy across the hood and roof from too many summers.

The color of a bruise.

The windows were tinted. I couldn't see who was driving. But I didn't need to.

It rolled past the window slowly. It got to the end of the lot. And it stopped, just for a second, with the engine rumbling, right in front of the middle space. Right in front of the middle wheel stop.

Then it pulled out onto Chester and was gone.

I stood there with the mop until I couldn't hear it anymore.

Then I finished the floor.

EIGHTEEN

Bag by the Door

MORNING · APRIL 2020

The schools closed on a Friday.

Lish heard about it in fourth period, Mr. Corliss's band room, from a kid named Devon who had it on his phone. Two weeks, the announcement said. Two weeks of remote learning while they figured it out. Everybody cheered. Lish didn't cheer. She sat in the back of the band room with the trumpet case she'd never once opened and thought about Mr. Ruiz's church, and whether the Lighthouse Holiness Tabernacle counted as essential.

It didn't. Pastor Gentry moved services to Facebook Live. He sat in front of the plywood cross with a ring light and preached to a phone propped on the pulpit, and thirty-eight people watched, and Mrs. Tackett typed AMEN in the comments every time he took a breath.

Mr. Ruiz still had the key.

"Nobody is in there," he said, on the phone, the first night. "Nobody comes to clean. Nobody comes to pray. It's only us." A pause. "Six feet apart. I'll sit in the back."

"You always sit in the back."

"Then nothing changes," he said.

* * *

Two weeks became a month.

The house on Roberts Lane got smaller every day. Lorna's houses in Rosedale stopped calling. People didn't want a cleaning lady in their kitchen breathing on their granite. One by one, the jobs went, and then there were no jobs, and Lorna sat at the kitchen table with her phone face up in front of her, waiting for it to ring, and it didn't.

The envelope still went in the mailbox on the first. Two hundred dollars. Lish didn't know where it came from that month. She didn't ask.

Lorna started going to church again.

Not the Lighthouse. A new one. A big one on Olive Drive with a parking lot full of trucks and a sign out front that said NO MASKS NO FEAR NO KING BUT JESUS. They held services in the parking lot, at first, people in lawn chairs in the beds of their pickups, and then they moved inside, and nobody stopped them.

Lorna started going three times a week. Then four. She came home with her face different. Lighter. Like somebody had taken a rock off her chest.

She came home talking about Brother Gene.

Brother Gene Tolliver was a deacon there. A real deacon, Lorna said, and Lish heard the joke in it even if her mother didn't. He was fifty-one. A widower. He'd worked thirty years at the Chevron refinery and retired early with a pension and a bad back, and he had a brother in Oklahoma who owned forty acres outside Muskogee, and a double-wide on it, and he'd been praying, he told Lorna, he'd been praying for a long time about whether God wanted him to go.

"He's a good man," Lorna said. She was standing at the sink. It was the first week of April. "He doesn't drink. He doesn't smoke. He's never laid a hand on a woman in his life."

Lish was at the kitchen table with her laptop open. A school laptop, a Chromebook with a cracked hinge, that she'd signed for in the North Kern High parking lot in a line of cars. The screen showed the Google Classroom page for English 10. She had eleven missing assignments.

"Okay," Lish said.

"He wants to meet you."

"Okay."

"Sunday. After service. He's going to take us to lunch."

"Okay."

Lorna turned around from the sink. She looked at her daughter. She had a dish towel in her hands and she was twisting it.

"Can you say something other than okay?"

Lish closed the laptop.

"Is he going to pay Royce?"

Lorna's face went white.

"That's not—" she said. "That's not his—"

"Is he?"

"That's not his business. That's ours. That's between me and—" Lorna stopped. She put the dish towel down on the counter. "He doesn't know about that."

"About Daddy?"

"He knows about your daddy. He doesn't know about the money."

Lish looked at her mother for a long time.

"Okay," she said.

* * *

Brother Gene Tolliver took them to lunch at the Black Angus on Stockdale Highway, which had just reopened for indoor dining with every other booth taped off.

He was a big soft man with a gray mustache and big soft hands, and he said grace over the cheese bread for a long time, holding Lorna's hand on one side and reaching across the table for Lish's on the other. She let him hold it. His palm was damp. He prayed for the sick and the dying and the president and for the Lord to open the hearts of the lost, and he squeezed her hand on *lost*, gently, like it was a secret between them.

He asked her about school. She said fine. He asked her about her friends. She said fine. He asked her about the guitar.

She looked at her mother.

"Lorna tells me you play," Brother Gene said. "Real good."

Lorna had never once heard her play. Not really. Not a whole piece. Through the closet door, maybe. Through the wall. Lish had played at Fresno State in front of sixty people and a man from New York, and her mother had been cleaning a house in Rosedale that day and had said, that night, *how'd it go,* and Lish had said *second,* and her mother had said *well, that's good,* and gone to bed.

"I play," Lish said.

"You ever play for the Lord?"

"Every night," she said. "In a church."

Brother Gene beamed. He squeezed Lorna's hand. "Well, praise God," he said. "What church?"

"Lighthouse Holiness. On Chester."

Something went across his face. He knew it. Everybody on Olive Drive knew the Lighthouse. It was where the people went who couldn't afford a church with a parking lot.

"Well," he said. "God hears it wherever."

* * *

Lorna told her on a Wednesday.

April 22, 2020. Lish would remember the date because it was written on the calendar on the refrigerator, the free one from the Valley Credit Union with a picture of a lighthouse on it for April, and because Lorna had circled the date in red pen weeks before and never said why.

Lish came home from the church at eleven at night and her mother was sitting at the kitchen table in the dark.

Not the TV. There was no TV. Not the radio. Just sitting there, with her hands folded on the table in front of her, in the dark, like she was waiting to be called on.

Lish turned on the light.

Lorna squinted. She didn't get up.

"Sit down, baby," she said.

Lish didn't sit down.

"Gene's leaving for Oklahoma on Saturday," Lorna said. "His brother's place. He's got the U-Haul reserved. He asked me to come with him."

Lish stood there in the doorway with the Yamaha on her back in its case.

"Okay," she said.

"Lish."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to—" Lorna stopped. She looked at her hands. "He asked me to marry him. Once we get there. At his brother's church. He's going to take care of me. Of us." She looked up. "He said us."

"Us."

"You. You can come. He wants you to come. He said it, he said, *Lorna, that girl is welcome in my house as long as she needs.*"

"In Oklahoma."

"Muskogee. It's pretty, baby. I've seen the pictures. There's trees. There's a creek. There's no oil, no—" She waved her hand at the window. At Oildale. At all of it. "No *Royce*."

Lish set the guitar down. She leaned it against the wall by the door, very carefully, the way he'd taught her. Neck up. Away from the heater.

"I can't go to Oklahoma," she said.

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"The guitar? Baby, they have guitars in Oklahoma. They have teachers. Gene says there's a college right there in Tahlequah—"

"*Mr. Ruiz,*" Lish said.

Her mother stopped.

"I have a plan," Lish said. "We have a plan. Two years. Next fall I send the recording. The winter after that I go to New York. A man from the school heard me. He gave me a card. He said he'd be in the room." She was talking faster now. "You don't even know. You never asked. You never once asked me what happened in Fresno."

"You said second."

"I said second because you didn't want to know."

Lorna looked at her. Her face was doing something. It was working, all the muscles in it going at once, trying to land on one thing.

"I can't stay here, Lish," she said. "I can't. You don't know. I've been in this house seventeen years. Fourteen years with your daddy and he sold everything in it including my mother's ring off my *hand*, practically, and then three more years of him gone, and Royce's envelope every month, every single month, two hundred dollars, I've paid that man seven thousand four hundred dollars since your daddy left and I still owe him four thousand, and you know what he said to me last month? You know what he said?"

Lish didn't answer.

"He said, *Lorna, there's another way to pay this.*" Lorna's voice broke. "He said, *there's always been another way. You know what I'm talking about. The girl plays guitar. Saturday nights. Here.* He said it like it was nothing. He said it like it was a *favor* to me."

"I know," Lish said. "He said it to me too."

Her mother stared at her.

"When?"

"Last year. At the Valley Star."

"You never told me."

"You never asked," Lish said.

Lorna put her face in her hands.

They stayed like that for a long time. The refrigerator hummed. Outside, somewhere on Roberts Lane, a dog barked and somebody yelled at it.

"Then come," Lorna said, through her hands. "Come with us. Get out. That's what I've been telling you since you were born. *Go as far as you can.* Isn't that what I said? Through the door that night? Go as far as you can and don't look back?"

"New York is far."

"New York is two years," Lorna said. "Oklahoma is Saturday."

* * *

Saturday was April 25.

Brother Gene came at six in the morning in a white Silverado with a U-Haul trailer hitched to the back. It was barely light. Lish heard the truck from her room. She'd been awake all night. She'd been awake all night sitting on the floor of her closet with the Yamaha across her knees, not playing it, just holding it, the way you hold something when you're trying to decide whether you're going to have to fight for it.

She came out of her room.

There was a bag by the door.

Her mother's bag. The big black duffel from the closet in the hall, the one that had been her father's, that he'd left behind because it had a broken zipper. Lorna had fixed the zipper with a safety pin. It was packed so full it was round. It was sitting on the floor by the front door, next to the hook where the keys went.

The keys weren't on the hook.

Lorna was in her bedroom. Lish could hear her in there, opening and closing drawers. Not packing anymore. Just opening and closing them. Checking. Like you check the stove when you leave.

There was only one bag by the door.

Lish looked at it for a long time.

Then she went to the front door and opened it and stood behind the screen and looked out.

Brother Gene's Silverado was in the yard, on the gravel, with the engine running. White exhaust in the cold morning. Brother Gene in the driver's seat with a travel mug, looking at his phone. The radio was on, a Christian station, a man singing about how he was a sinner but he was saved. Lish could hear it through the screen.

Behind her, her mother came out of the bedroom.

She had her purse on her shoulder and her keys in her fist. Her hand was closed around them so tight Lish could see her knuckles. She had on her church dress, the blue one, and her good shoes, and she'd done her makeup, which she never did. She'd done it carefully. She looked pretty. She looked like a woman going somewhere.

She stopped in the hall when she saw Lish at the door.

They looked at each other.

"Where's your bag, baby?" Lorna said.

Lish didn't answer.

"Lish. Where's your bag? Gene's waiting. We've got to get to Barstow by —"

"I'm not going," Lish said.

"Yes, you are."

"No."

"Felicia Rae—"

"I'm *not going*." She turned around. Her back was against the screen. She could feel the mesh through her shirt. "And you knew that. You've known that for a week. That's why there's one bag."

Lorna's face did the thing again.

"I packed for you," she said. "It's in the truck. Gene put it in last night. Your clothes. Your—"

"My guitar?"

Lorna didn't answer.

"Did you pack my guitar?"

Her mother looked at the closet door down the hall. Lish's door. The trash bag.

"I didn't know where—"

"You didn't know where it was," Lish said. "Four years. You didn't know where it was."

Out in the yard, the truck horn tapped. Once. Polite. Brother Gene, looking up from his phone.

Lorna flinched.

"Baby," she said. "Please. I can't—I can't stay. I *can't*. If I stay here one more month I'm going to die in this house. I'm going to die on that kitchen floor and Royce Voss is going to come and collect the envelope off my body." She was crying now. The makeup was going. "Please come. Please. I'm begging you. I'm your mother and I'm begging you."

And Lish looked at her mother, standing there in the hall in her blue church dress with her keys in her fist, and she saw it. She saw all of it at once, the way you see a whole room when the lights come on. The Dairy Queen on Chester. The black Shovelhead. Eighteen years old. The uncle and the closed door, whatever that was, whatever Lorna had never said. Nineteen years old in the back room of the clubhouse on a cot with a baby coming. The TV and the ring and the bike and the toaster. Thirteen-year-old Lish on the gravel screaming and her mother saying *come inside, you'll wake the neighbors*. The envelope. The envelope. The envelope.

Her mother had been on her own her whole life.

Same as her.

"Don't leave me behind," Lish said.

Lorna went still.

"That's what you want me to say, right?" Lish said. "That's what you're waiting for. You want me to beg you to stay. Like I did with him." She shook her head. "I'm not going to. I'm sixteen. I'm already on my own. I've been on my own since I was nine years old in the back row of that church."

"Lish—"

"And so are you," Lish said. "I've seen your eyes. You are too. You've always been. He's not going to fix it." She looked out at the truck. At Brother Gene with his travel mug. "He's just a different room."

Her mother stood there.

She opened her mouth.

Lish waited.

She would wait for that answer for the rest of her life. On the bus to Chowchilla. On the bunk. In the hole, in the nine-by-four, with her back

against the cinderblock. She'd think about that hall, and the blue dress, and her mother's mouth open, and the truck horn, and she'd try to imagine what her mother was about to say.

Come with me. Or *I'm sorry.* Or *I love you.* Or *you're right.* Or *I know.*

The truck horn tapped again. Twice this time.

Her mother closed her mouth.

She picked up the bag.

She walked to the door. Lish stepped aside. She didn't decide to. Her body did it. The same way it had stepped aside for Royce Voss in the doorway at thirteen. She stepped aside and held the screen door open, and her mother went past her, close enough to touch, smelling like Jergens and hairspray and the inside of the closet, and down the two concrete steps, and across the gravel, with the bag hitting her leg.

Brother Gene got out and took the bag from her and put it in the trailer.

He looked up at the house. At Lish behind the screen. He raised one big soft hand.

Lish didn't raise hers.

Her mother got in the truck. She didn't look back. She'd told Lish never to look back, and she didn't. She sat in the passenger seat with her face forward and her hands in her lap, still holding the keys, the house keys, the ones that went to this door, and she didn't look back.

The truck pulled out onto Roberts Lane. The U-Haul trailer bumped over the edge of the gravel. The Christian station went faint, and fainter, and gone.

Lish stood behind the screen for a long time.

Then she went to the kitchen and looked at the refrigerator. At the Valley Credit Union calendar. At the red circle around April 22, when her mother had told her, and the red circle around April 25, today, that she hadn't noticed before.

Under the calendar, held by a magnet shaped like a strawberry, there was an envelope.

Not the mailbox envelope. A different one. With LISH written on it in her mother's handwriting.

Inside there were three hundred and forty dollars in twenties and a note on a page torn out of a church bulletin.

Baby,

The rent is paid through May. After that I don't know.
Your bag is in the truck. If you want it call me and I'll mail it.
I'm sorry.
Go as far as you can.

* * *

Mama

Three hundred and forty dollars. The exact amount her father owed Mr. Hollis. Lish didn't know if that meant anything. She'd decide later that it didn't. That it was just what was left.

She never called about the bag.

* * *

That night, the power was still on, and she sat on the kitchen floor with her back against the refrigerator, in the exact spot where her mother had always said she'd die, and she played.

Not the Bach. Not the Villa-Lobos.

She played the waltz. *Vals para Lish.* Sixteen bars. E minor. Three-four time. Over and over. She played it until two in the morning, and somewhere around midnight she stopped resolving it. She just stopped at the end of bar fifteen. Didn't go home to the first note. Left it hanging there in the kitchen, unfinished, the last chord ringing out over the linoleum, into the hall, past the place by the door where the bag had been, and out through the screen into the yard where the gravel still had tire marks in it.

She didn't call Mr. Ruiz that night. She didn't call anybody.

Nobody called her.

NINETEEN

You Looked Me Up

NOON · AUGUST 6, 2025

The clip had forty thousand views by Monday.

I didn't see it. I don't have a phone with the internet on it. I have a forty-dollar flip phone from the Walmart on Panama Lane that Marcy Delgado made me buy so she could call me, and it has nine numbers in it, and one of them is the Sundowner front desk.

Mr. Hollis saw it. His grandson showed him.

"You're on the TikTok," he said, Monday night, when I came in for my shift. He said it the way you'd tell somebody they had something on their shirt.

"I know."

"You know?"

"A girl filmed me. Thursday. I told her not to post it."

"Well, she posted it." He held up his phone, an old Samsung with a cracked screen, and squinted at it with his glasses pushed up on his forehead. "Forty-one thousand. That's a lot, my grandson says. Forty-one thousand people." He looked at the screen like the people were in there. "That's more than live in Oildale."

He turned it around so I could see.

It was me. On the milk crate by the ice machine, at night, the red Valley Star sign buzzing over my head and throwing the color down on my hair. Midnight Cherry. My arms out of the black tank top, the bones blue under

the red light. My head down. My hands on the strings. "Recuerdos," the tremolo, the right hand going like water.

She'd filmed it sideways and then cropped it. The sound was bad. You could hear the ice machine. You could hear a car door. But you could hear the guitar too, and you could see my hands, and over the bottom of the screen in white letters she'd typed:

found her playing outside a liquor store in oildale ca. she says her name is felony. WHO IS SHE

There were nine thousand comments.

"I don't want to read them," I said.

"I wasn't going to make you," said Mr. Hollis. He put the phone back in his pocket. "Most of them are nice. My grandson read me some. People asking where you're from. A man in Nashville wants to know who your teacher was." He looked at me. "Some of them aren't nice."

"I know."

"Some of them knew. From before."

"I know."

He nodded. He went and got the mop and handed it to me.

"There's a puddle by the Slurpee machine," he said.

* * *

Here's what I learned in the next five days, from Mr. Hollis's grandson, who was fourteen and who decided after the TikTok that I was the most interesting thing that had ever happened in his life, and who came by the Valley Star every night at nine to report.

His name was Adrian. He had braces and a skateboard and he called me Felony with total seriousness, like it was my actual name, and I never corrected him.

"Ninety-six thousand," he said Tuesday.

"Okay."

"Somebody found the news story," he said Wednesday, quieter. "From before. The—" He looked out at the parking lot. "They put it in the comments. Now there's like two sides."

"What are the sides?"

"Like, one side is like, *she did her time, let her play,* and the other side is like—" He stopped.

"Go ahead."

"The other side is like Brandi's family. Her cousins and stuff. They're commenting a lot." He looked at his skateboard. "They're saying stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Like that you're a murderer and you should've got life. And that—" He stopped again. "And that the Dust Kings know where you are."

"Everybody knows where I am, Adrian. I'm in a video outside the Valley Star."

He thought that was funny. Then he decided it wasn't.

"Two hundred and twelve thousand," he said Thursday. "And a guy did a reaction. A guitar guy. He has like a million followers. He slowed it down and showed your hands. He said your right- hand technique is—hold on—" He pulled out his phone. "He said, *this is conservatory-level tremolo on a guitar that looks like it cost thirty bucks.*"

"Thirty-two."

"He said, *whoever taught her knew exactly what they were doing.*"

I didn't say anything to that. I went and stacked the Coors Light.

* * *

Friday, I went to see Marcy Delgado.

She had seen it. Of course she had. She had her laptop open on the desk when I came in and the video was paused on it, me on the milk crate in the red light.

"So this is fun," she said.

I sat down.

"I'm not mad," she said. "Let's start there. Busking's legal. Playing guitar in front of a store with the owner's permission is legal. Being on TikTok is legal." She squeezed the brain. "Being on TikTok under the name *Felony* is not illegal, but I have to tell you, from a parole perspective, it's a choice."

"Somebody else picked it."

"I know. I read your file. Inez Calderón." She looked at me over the brain. "Good woman?"

I thought about it.

"No," I said. "But she was good to me."

Marcy Delgado nodded like that was an answer she'd heard before.

"The other thing," she said. "And this is the part I'm actually here to talk to you about. We got a call. At the office. From a woman who identified herself as Brandi Voss's aunt. She wanted to know if your parole conditions prohibit you from being within a certain distance of the place where her niece died."

I didn't say anything.

"They don't," Marcy Delgado said. "I checked. There's no stay-away on the location. There's a no- contact with the Voss family, which you know about. The store isn't the family. But." She put the brain down. "Felicia. You understand how this looks."

"Don't call me that."

"*Ms. Pruitt.* You understand how it looks. You're playing guitar twenty feet from the spot. Every night. And now two hundred thousand people know it."

"It's the only place I know how to play," I said.

She looked at me for a long time.

"I believe you," she said. "That's the problem. I believe you, and I've been doing this nineteen years, and the ones I believe are the ones who end up back in the van." She closed the laptop. "Be careful. That's not an order. That's just me."

* * *

He came on Saturday.

August 9. Saturday night. I'd been on the milk crate since six. It was a hundred and four degrees at six and ninety-eight at eight-thirty and the asphalt in the lot was soft enough that the tires of the cars coming in made a sound on it, a sticky sound, like tape coming off.

There were people. That was new. Since the video. Not a crowd, not like that, but people who'd come on purpose. A couple from Bakersfield who'd driven out because of the TikTok and stood by their car eating Hot Cheetos. Two guys with a real camera, a big one, who asked first, and when I said no, put it away and just listened. Adrian on his skateboard. A woman from the Lighthouse I sort of recognized, who stood far back by the street and didn't come any closer.

I was playing the Villa-Lobos. Prelude Number One. The one I'd played for Brandi when she was twelve, in the church, the day she pinky-swore.

I don't know why I picked it. Maybe because it was Saturday. Maybe because I'd been thinking about her since the aunt called Marcy Delgado. Maybe because I knew.

I heard the exhaust first.

That V6. That hole in the muffler.

I didn't stop playing.

The Buick came into the lot slowly, off Chester, and this time it didn't roll past. It pulled into the middle space. The middle one. Right up to the wheel stop. The front tires touched the concrete and stopped.

The engine ran for a while. Rumbling. The couple from Bakersfield looked at it. Adrian stopped his skateboard.

Then the engine cut.

The driver's door opened.

Wade Voss got out.

* * *

He was twenty-five. He looked forty.

He'd been big in high school. A lineman at North Kern. Thick neck and a crew cut and a letter jacket he wore until he was twenty. He was still big, but it had all gone soft and gone down, into his gut, under a black T-shirt that said VOSS TIRE & WHEEL on the back in faded white. His face was puffy. Red. A beard that didn't grow in right on one side. His eyes were his father's. Gray. But they didn't do what Royce's did. Royce's eyes looked at you like you were a number. Wade's looked at you like you were a mirror and he hated what was in it.

He stood by the door of the Buick and looked at me.

I kept playing.

He walked across the lot. Not fast. Kind of careful. Like the ground wasn't flat. When he got close I could smell it on him, and it wasn't beer. It was the brown stuff. Jim Beam, maybe. Something cheap and hot. He stopped about eight feet away, in front of the guitar case, in front of the money, and stood there.

Behind him, in the passenger seat of the Buick, there was somebody else. I couldn't see who through the tint. Just a shape.

I finished the prelude.

I put my hand flat on the strings.

Nobody in the lot said anything. The couple from Bakersfield had stopped eating their Cheetos. Adrian was holding his skateboard against his chest like a shield. The woman from the Lighthouse was gone.

"Felony," Wade said.

He said it like it was a joke he'd heard and didn't get.

"Wade."

"That's what you're calling yourself."

"That's what they called me."

"Who's *they*?"

"People in prison," I said.

He laughed. It didn't sound like laughing.

"Two hundred thousand people," he said. "You know that? Two hundred thousand people watching you play your little guitar. In front of *here*." He pointed at the lot without looking at it. At the middle space. At his own car. "My aunt Sherry called me crying. My *dad* seen it. You know what my dad said?"

I didn't answer.

"Nothing," Wade said. "He didn't say nothing. He watched it like four times and then he put the phone face down on the bar." He took a step closer. "Face down. Like the picture."

I knew what picture. The one behind the bar. Charlene holding me wrapped in the cut, twelve hours old. The one Royce put face down on the cot in the back room the week my daddy ran.

"I didn't post it," I said.

"I don't care who posted it."

"Then what do you want?"

He looked at me. He looked at my arms. At the bones. He looked at my hands on the guitar. He looked at them for a long time.

"You came back here," he said. "Out of everywhere. You could've gone anywhere. Fresno. LA. *New York*." He said New York like it was a word that tasted bad. "And you came back *here*. To *this*. To the exact—" His voice broke. He swallowed it. "You looked me up."

"I didn't look you up, Wade."

"You came all this way."

"I live here," I said. "I've always lived here. You know where I live. My parole agent has me at the Sundowner on Union. I work here. Mr. Hollis gave me a job." I looked at him steady. "Where else was I supposed to go?"

"*Anywhere,*" Wade said. "Anywhere else. Anywhere I didn't have to drive by and see your fucking —" He stopped. He was breathing hard. "Every day. You know that? Every day for three years I drive down Chester to the shop and I go past this lot. Every day. And every day I look at that spot. Every single day."

"I know," I said. "So do I."

He looked at me like I'd hit him.

Nobody moved. In the passenger seat of the Buick the shape didn't move either.

"You don't know nothing about it," Wade said, very quiet.

"I know what happened."

"You don't *know*—"

"I was there, Wade."

He took one more step. Six feet. Close enough that I could see his hands. They were shaking. Not a lot. A little. A drinking shake. His right hand went to his back, toward his waistband, toward the hem of the black T-shirt, and stopped there, and hung.

Adrian made a sound behind him.

I didn't move. I didn't stand up. I didn't put the guitar down. I sat on the milk crate with the thirty-two-dollar guitar across my body and my left hand on the neck and my right hand flat on the strings and I looked at Wade Voss.

I'd learned this. In Chowchilla. Day one, Precious, the ring. You don't stand up for somebody who wants you to stand up. Standing up is a yes.

"You want to tell it," I said. "Go ahead. Tell it. Right here. In front of these people. Tell them what happened."

His hand stayed at his back.

"Tell them what you told Officer Pike," I said. "Tell them she was just teasing me."

He looked at me.

For one second, one, something came up in his face. I'd seen it before. Three years before, at 11:04 p.m., over the hood of his car. Something that wasn't anger. Something underneath it, holding it up, like a floor under a room.

Then it was gone.

His hand came away from his back. Empty.

"You stay away from my family," he said.

"There's a court order says I have to."

"You stay *away*." He pointed at me. His finger was shaking. "You stay away from my dad. You stay away from the clubhouse. You stay away from my aunt. And you stay away from *here*. This is—" He looked at the middle space. "This is hers. You hear me? This is *hers*."

He turned around and walked back to the Buick.

He didn't get in right away. He stood by the driver's door with his hand on the roof, and his head down, for a long time. Long enough that the couple from Bakersfield started to get back in their car. Long enough that Adrian put his skateboard down.

Then he opened the door.

The dome light came on.

And I saw who was in the passenger seat.

Cody Bratcher. Twenty-four now. Thinner than I remembered. A ball cap pulled down low. His face in the dome light, turned toward me through the windshield, white.

He was looking at me the way he looked at me on the canal path when he was fifteen with a box cutter in his hand. The look of a boy who was going to do what he was told and hate himself for it.

The door shut. The light went out.

The Buick backed out of the middle space. The front tires rolled off the wheel stop with a little bump. The exhaust rumbled. It pulled out onto Chester and went north, toward Roberts Lane, toward the clubhouse, and was gone.

I sat there.

My hands weren't shaking. I want you to know that. I checked. I held them out in front of me, palms down, in the red light of the Valley Star sign, and they were still. Still as Mrs. Albright's never were.

The couple from Bakersfield had driven away. The guys with the camera were gone. It was just me and Adrian.

"Felony," Adrian said. His voice was small. "Was that him? Was that the brother?"

"Go home, Adrian."

"Are you okay?"

"Go home. Tell your grandpa I'll be in at ten."

He went.

I looked at the guitar case on the sidewalk in front of me. Seventy-three dollars in it. Somebody had put a twenty in while Wade was talking. I don't know who.

I looked at the middle space. At the wheel stop. Concrete. Gray. A crack running through the middle of it that hadn't been there before, or maybe it had. A dark spot on the asphalt in front of it where something had dripped from the Buick's engine.

This is hers.

I put my hand flat on the strings.

Then I played "Lágrima." Twice.

Then I went inside and clocked in.

TWENTY

Scales in the Dark

MORNING · MAY–AUGUST 2020

The power went off on the eleventh of May.

Not the whole street. Just the house. Lish was in the kitchen at four in the afternoon heating a can of Campbell's on the stove and the burner clicked off, and the refrigerator stopped humming, and the clock on the microwave went black, and the quiet came into the house all at once like water into a boat.

She stood there with the wooden spoon in her hand.

She called the number on the PG&E bill stuck to the refrigerator under the strawberry magnet. She waited forty minutes on hold listening to a recording tell her that during these unprecedented times PG&E was committed to keeping customers connected. When a woman finally came on, she was nice about it. She looked it up.

"I'm showing that service at that address was closed at the account holder's request," the woman said. "Lorna Pruitt. Effective today. She called it in on—let me see—April twenty-fourth. Moving out of state."

The day before the bag.

"Can I open a new one?"

"Sure, hon. Are you eighteen?"

Lish looked at the dead microwave.

"Yeah," she said.

"I'll just need a Social and a photo ID and a deposit—"

Lish hung up.

* * *

The rent was paid through May. Lorna's note had said so. After that I don't know.

The landlord was a man named Mr. Pettibone who lived in Visalia and owned eleven houses in Oildale and came by once a year to look at the roof. Lish had seen him three times in her life. The first of June came and the rent didn't go and nothing happened. The first of July came. Nothing.

She found out later, from Ms. Haney, who knew things like this, that the governor had stopped evictions. Some emergency order. Nobody could be put out of a house for not paying while the virus was going. Mr. Pettibone was probably sitting in Visalia with a list of eleven houses and no rent coming from four of them and nothing he could do about it.

So she stayed.

In the dark.

* * *

Here's what the house was, that summer.

The front door, locked. The screen door, latched. The windows closed in the day to keep the heat out, which didn't work, and open at night to let the cool in, which didn't come. A hundred and six in the kitchen at three in the afternoon. She learned to sleep in the bathtub, in the day, with the cold tap running a little bit, because the water still came. The water was Oildale Mutual and the bill was in Mr. Pettibone's name and he paid it from Visalia without thinking.

The refrigerator, open, empty, with the door propped so it wouldn't mold. She cleaned it out the first night. She threw away the milk and the butter and Lorna's coffee creamer and a Tupperware of macaroni salad from Brother Gene's church.

The Chromebook, dead after the second day. She charged it at the library, when the library reopened for curbside, by sitting on the concrete outside with the cord run under the door. Then she stopped going. Google Classroom said she had thirty-one missing assignments in English 10. Then forty. Then she didn't look anymore.

She found out later that North Kern High had her down for the whole spring and the whole fall as zero logins. Zero. Not one. The vice principal sent three emails to Lorna's address. Nobody read them.

The phone. A prepaid Tracfone she bought at the Dollar General with forty dollars of the three hundred and forty. She charged it at the Valley Star. Mr. Hollis let her plug it in behind the counter and didn't ask why.

And the closet.

The closet was where she lived.

* * *

She practiced in the dark.

That's not a metaphor. She'd lie awake later, in the nine-by-four, and think about that summer, and think that people would say it like a metaphor. *She practiced in the dark.* Like a movie. Like it was beautiful. It wasn't beautiful. It was a closet in a house with no power in the Central Valley in July with the door shut so the neighbors wouldn't hear, and it was a hundred degrees in there at midnight, and the sweat ran down her arms onto the strings until they rusted.

She had candles. Church candles. Mr. Ruiz brought them from the Lighthouse, a box of the tall white ones in glass with the Virgin on the side that nobody bought anymore because nobody came. She set one on the floor of the closet next to her foot. It gave enough light to see the fretboard. Barely. The flame stood up straight in the dead air and didn't move.

She did scales first. Every night. Like he taught her. Segovia scales, the major and the minor, all twelve keys, two octaves, three octaves, slow to fast with the wind-up metronome he'd given her, sixty, eighty, a hundred, a hundred and twenty, a hundred and forty, tick tick tick in the dark like a heart.

Then arpeggios. Giuliani's hundred and twenty. Every one. Every night.

Then the Bach.

Then the Villa-Lobos. Then the Sor. Then whatever he'd assigned her that week, written out in his small careful hand on staff paper she'd read by candle.

Then the waltz.

Five hours, six, some nights eight. She didn't have anywhere to be. There was no school. There was no mother. There was no TV and no light and no fan and no reason to go to sleep except that the candle burned down, and

when the candle burned down, she kept playing anyway, because she didn't need to see the fretboard anymore. She knew where everything was.

That's what the dark taught her. That she didn't need to see.

* * *

Her fingertips split in June.

Calluses on a guitarist's left hand are supposed to be hard. Thick. Smooth. After seven years hers were. But she was playing six and eight hours in the heat and the sweat, and the calluses got soft, and then they got too hard, and then they cracked. Down the middle. Like dry mud. On the first three fingers of her left hand, a split right down the center of each tip, and when she pressed a string, the split opened, and it bled.

She played anyway.

She played until the strings were brown with it. Then she wrapped the fingers in Scotch tape and played some more. Then the tape slipped and it was worse. Then she stopped for one night and sat in the closet with her hand in her lap and cried, for the first time since the bag, not about the bag, but about the fingers. About the stupid fingers. Because they were all she had, and she was wrecking them, and she couldn't stop.

Mr. Ruiz saw them the next day.

He came by the house every three days. He'd been doing it since the second week of May. He'd park the truck on Roberts Lane, not in the yard, so it wouldn't look like anything, and come up the gravel with two Food 4 Less bags and knock on the screen door, three knocks, and say *Felicia, it's me*, and she'd let him in.

Rice. Beans. Peanut butter. Bread. Bananas. Canned tuna, canned chicken, canned peaches. Gatorade, a whole case of it, because he said she'd die in that heat without salts. Ice, a bag of it every time, that melted in the cooler on the kitchen floor in a day. Tortillas from Graciela. Tamales, once, at the end of June, wrapped in foil, still warm, that Lish ate standing at the counter with her hands.

He didn't come inside past the kitchen. He'd set the bags on the counter. He'd stand in the doorway with his arms crossed. He wouldn't sit. Lish asked him why, once, and he said, *because I'm an old man coming to the house of a young girl whose mother is gone, and Oildale has eyes.*

That day, the day after she cried, she put her hand out to take the bag and he saw the fingers.

He took her hand. He turned it over. He looked at the tips. The splits. The tape, half-peeled. The rust-brown on the edges where the strings had been.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"How many hours?" he said.

"I don't know."

"*Felicia*."

"Eight. Sometimes eight."

"In there?" He looked down the hall at the closet door. "In this heat?"

"There's nothing else to do."

He let go of her hand. He went to the counter and stood there with his back to her and his hands flat on the Formica.

"I made a mistake," he said.

"What?"

"I made a mistake with you. I taught you that if you work hard enough, nothing can stop you." He didn't turn around. "That's not true. I knew it wasn't true when I said it. Things can stop you. Your own hands can stop you. If you break them now, at sixteen, from working too hard, then everything is—" He stopped. "One brick at a time. Not all the bricks in one night. You understand? You put all the bricks on at once, the wall falls down."

She didn't say anything.

"Four hours," he said. "No more. Not in the heat. Not with these." He turned around. "Promise me."

"I can't stop."

"I'm not asking you to stop. I'm asking you to *rest*." He looked at her, and his face was doing something she'd never seen it do. "Rest is part of the music. You know this. The rest is a note too. You taught me that, the second week. You remember? You said, *Mr. Ruiz, why do they write the silence down?*"

She did remember.

"Because it's part of it," she said.

"Because it's part of it," he said.

He took a jar out of one of the bags. A little round tin. Bag Balm. The green tin with the red clover on it, for cow udders, that the ranchers' wives used on their hands. He set it on the counter.

"Every night," he said. "On the fingers. Before you sleep. And you sleep. In the bed. Not in the closet. Not in the bathtub."

"It's a hundred degrees in the bedroom."

He looked at her for a long time.

"I know," he said. "I'm working on it."

* * *

She started marking the days on the wall.

In the closet. On the drywall to the left of the door, under the place where the four hundred times were, the hash marks from eighth grade, the Villa-Lobos étude. Her old marks were in pencil, neat, in fives, with the slash across. She used the same pencil. A yellow Ticonderoga worn down to two inches. She made a mark for every day without power, starting with May 11. Four lines and a slash. Four lines and a slash.

She told herself she'd stop when the lights came back.

She didn't know when that would be. She didn't know how. She didn't have a Social Security card. She didn't have a photo ID. She didn't have a deposit. She didn't have an adult.

She had a closet and a candle and a pencil.

Four lines and a slash.

* * *

The lights came back on the eleventh of August.

Four o'clock in the afternoon. She was asleep in the bathtub. She woke up because the refrigerator started humming. She lay there in the bathtub listening to it, the hum, the click of the compressor, like a dead thing breathing, and she didn't understand what she was hearing.

Then the microwave beeped. Three times. And started blinking 12:00.

She got out of the bathtub. She walked to the kitchen, dripping. She stood in front of the microwave and watched it blink.

12:00. 12:00. 12:00.

She found out from the PG&E bill that came a week later. The service at the address had been opened in the name of Abelardo Ruiz Moreno, with a mailing address on East Truxtun in east Bakersfield. He'd paid the deposit. He'd set up autopay from the Valley Credit Union account. Not the NEW YORK one. His own. The one he and Graciela used for the mortgage.

She called him.

"You didn't have to," she said.

"Yes I did."

"It's your name. On the bill. If somebody sees—"

"Then they see an old man paying the light for a girl who plays Bach in a closet." She could hear him smiling. "Let them see. I'm sixty-nine years old. What are they going to do, fire me? From the broom?"

She didn't say anything.

"Four hours," he said. "With the fan on now. And the Bag Balm. And you sleep in the bed."

"Okay."

"And Felicia."

"Yeah."

"Turn on every light in the house," he said. "Just once. Tonight. Every light. Then turn them off and go to sleep."

She did.

That night, after dark, she went through the house and turned on every light. The kitchen. The hall. The bathroom. The living room where the TV used to be. Her mother's bedroom, with the drawers still pulled half out. The porch light, the yellow bug bulb over the screen door that hadn't been on since her father left. Her own bedroom. The closet.

She stood in the middle of the house with every light on and it was so bright it hurt.

Then she went to the closet, and got the pencil, and counted the marks on the wall.

Ninety-two.

Ninety-two days. Eighteen sets of five and two more. Under the four hundred times.

She didn't erase them. She never erased them. They were still there five years later, she'd find out, when she came back to the house on Roberts Lane with Kern Valley Renovation tearing it apart, and Junior, the young one, said *there's some kind of tally on the wall in here, you want it?* and she went and looked. The four hundred. The ninety-two. In pencil, in fives, under a hundred and twelve degrees of dust.

She asked him not to paint over it.

He said it was coming down anyway. The whole wall. They were opening up the room.

She said okay.

That was the summer she was sixteen. Scales in the dark. She'd write a song about it someday, a long time later, in a city she'd never seen, and she'd call it that, and she'd play it with the lights all the way down, and nobody in the room would know it wasn't a metaphor.

TWENTY-ONE

Calling the Debt Due

NOON · AUGUST 14, 2025

Tiny came on a Thursday.

He came the way he always came. On foot. From the direction of Roberts Lane, walking down Chester on the shoulder in a hundred and two degrees, in jeans and engineer boots and the cut, the Dust Kings cut, the skull with the crown of oil derricks on the back. Like he was out for a stroll. Like it wasn't hot. Like he'd never once in his life driven anywhere he could walk to and make somebody watch him coming.

He was older. Everybody was older. His red beard had gone half white and he'd gotten wider through the middle and he walked with a little hitch in the left leg. But it was Tiny. Six-four. Hands like shovels. The man who used to come to the house on the first of the month when the envelope was late, and stand on the gravel, and not knock, just stand there, until Lorna came out.

I was on the milk crate. Six-fifteen. "Capricho Árabe." There were eleven people in the lot who'd come on purpose. Since the TikTok there were always people. Adrian said it was at three hundred and forty thousand now.

Tiny walked into the lot and through the people like they were weeds and stopped in front of the guitar case.

I finished the phrase. I didn't finish the piece. I put my hand flat on the strings.

"Lish," Tiny said.

Nobody'd called me that but Mr. Hollis since I got out. It sounded different in Tiny's mouth. It sounded like a door you used to live behind.

"Tiny."

"You got big."

"I got older."

"Same thing, around here." He looked at the people. At the couple by the ice machine. At Adrian on his skateboard. At a man with a phone up, filming, and Tiny looked at him for maybe two seconds, and the man put the phone down and got in his car and left.

"Royce wants to see you," Tiny said.

"I've got a no-contact order with the Voss family."

"I know."

"Then you know I can't."

"I know what the paper says." Tiny crouched down. Slow. His knees cracked. He crouched in front of the guitar case so his face was level with mine, and he put his elbows on his knees, and he looked at me with those small pale eyes in that big red-white face. "Royce ain't asking you to come see him. He knows about the paper. Royce has been around paper his whole life." He jerked his head toward the lot. "I'm just here to say what he would've said."

"Then say it."

"The family owes."

Same words. Twelve years old in the doorway of the house on Roberts Lane. Royce Voss in his sunglasses on the gravel. *The family owes.*

"I don't have a family," I said.

"That's not how it works," said Tiny. "You know that's not how it works. You were born in the back room. Charlene Voss pulled you out with her own two hands and your daddy wrapped you in his colors. That's family. You don't get to quit family." He spread his shovel hands. "Your daddy took eleven thousand four hundred dollars of run money and rode off to God knows. Your mama paid on it. Paid good, I'll give her that. Every month. Three years. And then she quit, and run off to Oklahoma with some church man, and it stopped."

"Then it's hers."

"She's in Oklahoma."

"Then go to Oklahoma."

Tiny almost smiled. "Royce ain't sending nobody to Oklahoma. There's no money in Oklahoma. And it ain't about the money anymore anyway." He looked at the lot. At the middle space. He didn't look at it long. "You know what it's about."

I didn't say anything.

"Royce lost his girl," Tiny said, quieter. "In this lot. To you. He went to that hearing every time. He sat in the back. He heard your lawyer tell the judge three years. Three years. You know what Royce said when he come out? He didn't say nothing. He got on his bike and he rode to Lake Isabella and back and didn't say one word for three days. Charlene said he didn't sleep."

"I know what I did."

"Do you?"

"Better than him."

Tiny looked at me for a long time.

"Here's what he said to tell you," he said. "He said, *there's a debt, and it's owed, and it's going to get paid one way or another, and the girl can pick how.*" He held up a finger. "One. Money. Eleven-four, plus interest, which on five years, Royce figures, is a round number, which is twenty." He held up another finger. "Two. The other way. The way he offered your mama when you was thirteen. Saturday nights. At the clubhouse. With that." He pointed at the guitar. "Every Saturday. As long as he says."

"How long does he say?"

Tiny didn't answer that.

"And three?" I said.

He didn't hold up a third finger. He just looked at me. Then he looked at my hands, on the guitar, the left one on the neck and the right one flat on the strings. He looked at them for a long time.

"Royce don't say three," he said. "Royce don't have to."

* * *

He stood up. His knees cracked again.

"He'll give you till the end of the month," Tiny said. "He's a fair man. You know he is."

"He put my picture face down on a cot."

Tiny stopped.

"Charlene told you that."

"When I was fifteen."

He looked down at me. And something happened in that big red face. Just for a second. A twitch, by the eye.

"Charlene shouldn't have told you that," he said. "But she ain't wrong." He put his hands in his pockets. "It's still there. Back room. On the cot. Three years ago he went back there after the funeral and picked it up. Looked at it. Put it down again. Face down." He shook his head. "Man's got a lot of pictures face down, Lish."

He walked out of the lot the way he came. On foot. North. Toward Roberts Lane. Through the people like weeds.

When he was gone, the couple by the ice machine came over and put a twenty in the case and said, *are you okay*, and I said *yes*, and they said *who was that*, and I said *a friend of the family*.

Then I played "Capricho Árabe" from the top.

* * *

I called Marcy Delgado that night from the flip phone.

She didn't answer. It was eleven at night. I left a message. I said, *this is Felicia Pruitt, I mean Lish, I mean—this is your Thursday. A man named Dwayne Teague, they call him Tiny, came to my work. He's with the Dust Kings. He said Royce Voss wants me to pay a debt. I don't know if that's contact. I'm telling you so it's on paper.*

Then I hung up and stood behind the counter of the Valley Star and looked at the camera.

The little black dome. Over the register. Pointing straight down.

Marcy called back the next morning at seven-thirty. She said, *that's not contact under the order, technically, because it's not Royce, but write it down, every time, dates and times, and if he threatens you, call 911, not me*. She said, *do you feel safe at the motel?* I said yes. She knew I was lying. She said, *okay*.

She said, *Ms. Pruitt, is there somewhere else you could go?*

I looked at Inez's letter on the nightstand in Room 14. The one with the Hamtramck address. *For when you're out and stupid.*

"No," I said.

* * *

I worked Friday. I worked Saturday. Nothing happened. I worked Sunday.

Sunday night, August 17, I was on the milk crate at eight-thirty. It was the first night it dipped under a hundred since I got out. Ninety-seven at eight. There was a breeze coming down off the bluffs from the oil fields, and it smelled like it always smelled, like hot metal and sulfur and somebody's barbecue, and it moved my hair.

There were more people than ever. Thirty, maybe. The TikTok had gone to six hundred thousand. Adrian said a guy from the *Bakersfield Californian* had called his grandpa. Mr. Hollis said no comment, which Adrian thought was the coolest thing he'd ever heard.

I was playing the waltz.

Vals para Lish. I'd started playing it at the end of every night. Last thing, before I went inside to clock in. Sixteen bars. E minor. Three-four. I played it clean. All the way through. I went home at the end, to the first note, every time.

I was on bar nine when I saw him.

He was standing at the back. By the street. Past the people. Under the streetlight on the corner of Chester and Roberts where the bus stop used to be.

He was standing very still.

I didn't stop playing. I want you to know that. My hands didn't stop. Bar ten. Bar eleven. The hands know where they're going even when the rest of you doesn't.

He was thinner. That's the first thing. He'd always been lean, rangy, all ropes and bones, a long- legged man with a long face, but now he was thin like something had been taken out of him.

His hair was long and gray and pulled back in a ponytail. His beard was gray. He had on jeans and boots and a black T-shirt and over it, the cut.

The Dust Kings cut. With the skull and the derricks.

And on the front, on the left side, over the heart, a patch. White letters on black, curved, stitched in a little arc.

DEACON.

Bar twelve. Bar thirteen.

He was looking at my hands.

Not at my face. Not at my hair. Not at the bones on my arms. At my hands. The way you'd look at a fire you'd started a long time ago and left, and come back, and found it still going.

Bar fourteen.

The last time I'd seen him, I was thirteen and twelve days old. It was three-forty in the morning and he was standing in the doorway of my bedroom with his bag over his shoulder and he said, *Daddy promises,* and *strong little hands on you.* And then I was on the gravel screaming and the Shovelhead was going away down Roberts Lane and my mother was saying *come inside, baby, you'll wake the neighbors.*

That was eight years ago. Eight years and five months.

Bar fifteen.

I stopped.

I didn't go home. I didn't play bar sixteen. I stopped at the end of fifteen, on the chord that leans, the chord that wants to go somewhere and can't. I left it ringing in the parking lot over the thirty people and the ice machine and the middle space.

I didn't put my hand flat on the strings. I let it ring all the way out.

The people clapped. They didn't know. They thought it was over.

He didn't clap.

He stood under the streetlight with his hands at his sides and his DEACON patch over his heart, and he looked at me, and he took a step forward, off the curb, into the lot.

And he smiled.

That smile. The one from the gravel. The one that sold the TV and the ring and the purple bike and the toaster. The one that held out a white bunny with pink ears and a blue ribbon on my fifth birthday and woke me up at two in the morning and said he'd won it in a claw machine at the Denny's on Rosedale.

"Hey, baby girl," my father said.

TWENTY-TWO

Most Feared Kid on the Block

MORNING · OCTOBER 2020

The story started going around in September. Lish never found out exactly who said it first. She didn't have to.

Her mama sold her.

That was the story. Lorna Pruitt ran off to Oklahoma with a church man, and before she went she made a deal with Royce Voss for what she owed, and the deal was the girl. That's why Lish was still in that house by herself. That's why the lights came back on. Somebody was paying for them. Everybody knew who paid for things on Roberts Lane.

It wasn't true. The lights were Mr. Ruiz. But Mr. Ruiz was an old Mexican janitor from east Bakersfield, and Royce Voss was Royce Voss, and you can guess which story people liked.

Lish heard it at the Valley Star from two boys buying Swishers. She heard it from a girl at the library, when the library opened up its computers again, who looked at her and then whispered to her friend and then they both laughed. She heard it, finally, from Mr. Hollis, who said it to her straight, behind the counter, on a Thursday night.

"People are saying things about you."

"I know."

"Saying your mama—"

"I know what they're saying."

He nodded. He rang up a pack of Marlboros for a man in a Chevron jumpsuit. When the man was gone, he said, "Brandi Voss was in here Tuesday

with the Holt girls. Laughing about it. Brandi said it out loud. In my store." He shook his head. "I asked her to leave."

Lish didn't say anything.

"She's not the girl she was," said Mr. Hollis.

"She's exactly the girl she was," Lish said. "She was always going to be this."

She didn't believe it when she said it. She was thinking about the picnic table. *Queen's honor.* A gap-toothed girl in a choir robe singing "Over the Rainbow" a quarter tone flat. But she said it anyway, because it was easier, and because she was sixteen, and because you can only carry so many versions of one person before your arms give out.

* * *

They came for her on October 17, a Saturday.

She was on the milk crate by the ice machine. Seven at night. Playing Merle, because it was Saturday and the Saturday people wanted Merle. "Mama Tried." She'd stopped finding that one funny a long time ago. She played it anyway. Eleven dollars in the case.

At eight she packed up. She went around the side of the building, the way she always did, to cut through the alley behind the Valley Star toward Roberts Lane. The alley ran between the back of the store and the chain-link of the empty lot behind it, where the dumpsters were and the grease bin from the closed-up Mexican bakery and a pile of pallets nobody ever took away. There was one light on the back of the building, over the delivery door, and it had been out since summer.

There were five of them.

Kaylee Bratcher. Tasha Holt, with her nose that never set right. Two older girls Lish didn't know, from Bakersfield High, one of them big, a softball girl with her hair in a tight bun. And a boy, back by the pallets, who wasn't going to do anything but film it. She could see the little red light of his phone.

And Brandi.

Brandi was standing at the far end of the alley, at the Roberts Lane end, with her arms crossed. Like always. Like the canal path. She was sixteen too. Six weeks older. She'd grown into her face. She was pretty, really pretty, blond hair down past her shoulders and a white crop top and jeans with holes in the

knees, and she was standing in the dark at the end of the alley like a girl waiting for a ride.

She didn't say anything. She never said anything. She just watched.

Lish stopped walking.

"Hey, Ugly," Kaylee said.

* * *

Here's the thing about Lish, at sixteen, that none of them knew.

She'd broken Tasha Holt's nose in ninth grade. Everybody knew that. One punch at North Kern, with her right hand, because Tasha laughed, and Tasha went down and the blood went everywhere and Lish got suspended for five days. And that night, in the church, Mr. Ruiz held her right hand in both of his and turned it over and looked at the split knuckle for a long time, and said:

"Never again."

"She laughed at me."

"I don't care if she laughed at you or spit on you," he said. "Never again with this hand. Never with either one. You understand? You want to fight, you fight with anything else. Your head. Your elbows. Your knees. Your teeth. But not these. These aren't yours to break. These belong to the music."

So she learned.

She learned it the way she learned everything. Brick by brick. She watched videos at the library on a Muay Thai channel, a skinny Thai man in a gym in Bangkok who didn't speak English, who just did it and did it and did it. Elbows. Knees. The clinch. She practiced on a pillow duct-taped to the closet door. She practiced on the trunk of the cottonwood in the yard until her elbows bled through her sleeves. She practiced it the same way she practiced scales. Slow, then fast. Two hours a night some nights, in the summer, in the dark, between the Bach and the Villa- Lobos.

She never told Mr. Ruiz about that part.

She kept her hands open. Always. When she fought, she kept her hands open, fingers loose, out in front of her like she was going to catch something. She'd never make a fist again. That was the rule.

* * *

The big softball girl came first.

That's always how it goes. The one who's never been hit comes first because she doesn't know.

She came in with her right hand back, telegraphing it from a mile away, and Lish stepped inside it, close, the way the man in Bangkok did, and grabbed the back of the girl's neck with both open hands, and pulled her head down, and brought her knee up.

The sound was like stepping on a grocery bag full of ice.

The softball girl went down on the asphalt holding her face and didn't get up.

Everybody stopped.

The boy by the pallets said, "*Oh shit*," and the little red light of his phone wobbled.

Then the other three came at once.

Lish didn't remember all of it. She'd remember pieces later, the way you remember a car accident. Tasha's hand in her hair, pulling. Somebody's nails down her cheek. Her own elbow coming around, backward, blind, connecting with something hard that turned out to be Kaylee Bratcher's cheekbone. A shoe in her ribs. The guitar case on her back, the cheap gig bag with the Yamaha in it, the strap pulled tight across her chest, somebody yanking on it to get her down, and her thinking, the whole time, more than about her face or her ribs: *not the guitar, not the guitar, not the guitar*.

She went down on one knee once. She got up.

She went down again, on her side, and somebody kicked her in the back, and she rolled, and caught an ankle with both hands, and pulled, and the other Bakersfield girl went over backward and hit the dumpster with the back of her head with a sound like a gong.

She got up.

Tasha Holt was the last one standing. Tasha, with her crooked nose. Tasha, who'd held her arm on the canal path in eighth grade while Cody cut her strings. Tasha was breathing hard and backing up, and her eyes were wide, and Lish walked toward her, open hands out, blood coming down her face from the scratches and into her mouth, and Tasha said, "*Brandi*—"

And turned to look for her.

And Lish hit her with her elbow. Across the jaw. A short hard horizontal elbow, the way the man in Bangkok threw it, from the shoulder, turning the

hip, all of her in it. Tasha's head went sideways and the rest of her followed it to the ground.

Lish stood in the alley.

Four girls on the asphalt. One not moving much. One crying. One holding her face and saying *my teeth, my teeth*. Tasha on her back, looking at the sky, blinking.

The boy with the phone was gone. She heard his feet going down the alley toward Chester.

She looked down the alley toward Roberts Lane.

Brandi was still there.

She hadn't moved. Arms crossed. In her white crop top in the dark. But her face had changed. Lish couldn't see it well, it was too dark, but she could see it had changed. Brandi was standing very still, the way you stand still when a dog you thought was on a chain turns out not to be.

Lish walked toward her.

Not fast. Just walked. Down the alley. Past the grease bin and the pallets. Her ribs hurt so much she couldn't breathe all the way. Her face was wet. Her hands were open, at her sides, fingers loose.

Brandi didn't run.

That's the thing Lish would think about, later. Brandi didn't run. She stood there with her arms crossed and let Lish walk all the way up to her, close, so close Lish could smell her shampoo, the same shampoo, the strawberry Suave, she'd used since she was six years old at the picnic table.

They looked at each other.

Lish could have done anything. She knew it and Brandi knew it.

"You told them my mama sold me," Lish said.

Brandi didn't say anything.

"She didn't," Lish said. "She just left. That's all. She just left. Same as my daddy. Same as everybody." She was crying, a little, she realized. It was mixing with the blood. "You know what that's like? You don't. You never had nobody leave."

Brandi's face did something.

"I had somebody leave," Brandi said. Very quiet.

Lish didn't understand. Not then. She'd understand later. In a cell, thinking about it. A girl at a picnic table with a gap tooth saying *there's nobody else good enough*. A girl in a church with her pinky out saying *queen's honor*. And

then a door that closed, a girl who went inside her own house and came out different, who started playing the guitar every night with a man who wasn't her father in a church that wasn't hers, who stopped coming to the picnic table, who didn't need anybody anymore. Who just left.

Lish didn't hit her.

She stood there for a long time. Then she stepped around Brandi Voss, close enough that their shoulders brushed, and walked out of the alley onto Roberts Lane, and went home.

* * *

The video was on Instagram by midnight.

The boy with the phone had gotten most of it. The softball girl and the knee. The elbow on Kaylee. The ankle and the dumpster. It was dark and shaking and you couldn't see much, but you could see enough. You could hear the sounds. And you could see, at the end, before he ran, one thin girl with a guitar on her back standing in the middle of four girls on the ground.

Nobody posted the part with Brandi. The boy was gone by then.

Somebody put a caption on it. Lish never found out who.

* * *

dont fuck with the pruitt girl

By Monday everybody in Oildale had seen it. By Wednesday everybody at North Kern had. Lish wasn't at North Kern; nobody was, it was still remote. But the remote kids saw it on their phones, and they texted it to the other remote kids, and the next time Lish went to the Valley Star, the two boys buying Swishers saw her coming and stopped talking and went out the other door.

The softball girl had a broken nose and a broken orbital bone. Kaylee Bratcher had a cracked cheekbone. The second Bakersfield girl had a concussion. Tasha Holt's jaw was wired shut for six weeks.

Lish had three cracked ribs, eleven scratches on her face, one of which would scar, a faint line under her left eye that the bone tattoos would go right past five years later, and a swollen left knee.

Her hands didn't have a mark on them.

Not one.

* * *

The district called a hearing in February, when they started bringing kids back to campus two days a week.

Kaylee's mother had pushed for it. Kaylee's mother was Cody Bratcher's mother too, and she was loud, and she knew a lady on the school board from church. It didn't matter that it happened off campus, on a Saturday, behind a liquor store. Kaylee's mother found a district policy about off-campus conduct that impacts the school environment, and she found the video, and she found the lady on the school board.

So in February 2021 Lish sat in a conference room at the district office on Norris Road in a mask, at a long table, across from an assistant superintendent and a hearing officer and a woman from the district's legal office, and next to her, because she was a minor and her mother was in Oklahoma and her father was nowhere and somebody had to, the counselor from North Kern.

Ms. Dolores Haney.

Lish had met her once. In ninth grade. For four minutes. About the forty-one absences. Ms. Haney was sixty-three, short and wide, with reading glasses on a beaded chain and gray hair cut like a helmet, and she wore a cardigan with a cardinal pin on it. North Kern's mascot. She was the kind of woman who'd been a counselor in the same building for thirty years and had seen everything twice.

She hadn't said a word to Lish in the parking lot. She'd just looked at her. At the scar under her eye. At her hands.

The hearing officer read the charges. Fighting. Causing serious physical injury. Off-campus conduct with substantial impact. The recommendation was expulsion.

Then he said, "The district will call its witnesses."

There were supposed to be five.

The softball girl's family had moved to Visalia over Christmas. They didn't respond to the letters.

The girl with the concussion was there in the hallway, with her mother, when Lish walked in. She was gone when the hearing officer sent somebody to get her. Her mother had taken her home. The hearing officer didn't know why. Lish didn't either, then.

Tasha Holt sent a statement through her mother saying she didn't remember what happened.

The boy with the phone said, through a lawyer his uncle paid for, that he'd found the video on a group chat and didn't know who took it.

And Kaylee Bratcher came into the room, with her mother, and sat down at the end of the table, and looked at Lish across it.

Her cheekbone had healed. There was a little dent in it, under the eye, if you looked.

The hearing officer asked her to describe what happened in the alley on October 17, 2020.

Kaylee looked at the table for a long time.

"I don't know," she said.

"You don't know?"

"I don't remember."

Her mother said, "*Kaylee.*"

"I don't remember, Mama." She looked up. She looked at Lish. She looked at her for a long time. "We were just walking. And then it was over."

The hearing officer put down his pen.

The woman from the legal office leaned over and said something to the assistant superintendent. The assistant superintendent sighed.

"Without witness testimony," the hearing officer said, "and with only an unauthenticated video of unclear provenance, the district is not in a position to—"

Kaylee's mother stood up so fast her chair tipped over. She said a lot of things. Some of them were about Lish and some of them were about Lorna and some of them were about the district and the school board lady and God. Then she took Kaylee by the arm and walked her out.

Kaylee looked back once. At the door. At Lish.

Lish didn't know what that look was. She'd find out three years later, in a parking lot, from Kaylee's little brother.

Brandi told her not to. That's what Cody would say. *Brandi told all of them. Don't testify. Brandi said, if anybody's going to finish it, it's going to be me.*

* * *

In the parking lot, after, Ms. Haney walked her to the Ranger. Mr. Ruiz was in the driver's seat. Ms. Haney looked at him through the window. He nodded. She nodded back. Two old people who'd been in a lot of parking lots.

Then she turned to Lish.

"That was luck," Ms. Haney said. "You know that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me. I'm not your grandma." She took her reading glasses off the chain and put them on and looked at Lish over them. "I pulled your transcript. Before I came. I wanted to know who I was sitting next to." She paused. "You know how many credits you have?"

Lish didn't.

"Ninety-five," said Ms. Haney. "Out of two-twenty. You're a junior. You should have a hundred and sixty. You had zero logins last spring and zero this fall. Zero. I didn't know a person could do that. Even the kids who get shot log in once." She took the glasses off. "In my professional opinion you are not going to graduate high school."

Lish looked at the ground.

"Your Mr. Ruiz called me last week," said Ms. Haney.

Lish looked up.

"Told me about Fresno. Told me about New York. Told me about some man in a scarf." Ms. Haney put the glasses back on the chain. "I said, Mr. Ruiz, I don't care if she plays the guitar like Jesus Christ himself, she's not getting into anywhere without a diploma. And he said, *that's why I'm calling you.*"

She looked at Lish for a long time.

"I'm retiring in a year and a half," she said. "I'd like to go out with one I'm proud of. You come to my office Monday at eight. Not eight-oh-five. Eight."

She walked back across the parking lot to her Buick. A tan one. Not purple.

Lish stood by the truck with three cracked ribs that had healed and one scar under her eye and two hands without a mark on them.

That was the winter she became the most feared kid on the block. Nobody stepped to her again. Not in the alley. Not at the Valley Star. Not on Roberts Lane. When she walked down Chester with her gig bag on her back, people moved over.

She liked it. She'd admit that, later, in Chowchilla, to Inez. She liked it more than she should have. Nobody had ever moved over for her before.

Inez said, *yeah. That's how it gets you.*

TWENTY-THREE

Not the Blood

NOON · AUGUST 17–21, 2025

"Hey, baby girl," my father said.

The thirty people in the lot were still clapping. They thought he was a fan. A long-haired old biker coming up to say how much he liked it. Some of them moved to let him through.

He came across the lot slowly. Not careful like Wade. Easy. Loose in the hips. The way he always walked, like the ground owed him money. He stopped in front of the guitar case and looked down at it, at the money, and then up at me.

Up close he was older than I thought. Fifty-two. His face had gone dark and creased from sun, from somewhere with more sun than here, and there was a scar through his left eyebrow I didn't remember and two teeth missing on the bottom. But the eyes were the same. Brown. Warm. Wet at the edges. The eyes that made my mother get on a Shovelhead at the Dairy Queen on Chester when she was eighteen years old. I don't have them. Mine came from nowhere. Nobody in either family has eyes like mine, and he used to wake me up at two in the morning to show them to strangers.

"Look at you," he said.

I didn't say anything.

"Look at *you*. Your hair. Them arms. Where'd you—" He laughed. "Prison, huh? They do that in there? Your old man's got some too. See?" He turned his forearm over. A faded blue spiderweb on the elbow. "Tucson. Pima County. Ninety days. Long time ago."

"What are you doing here."

He looked hurt. He was good at that. He'd always been good at that.

"What am I doing here? Baby. I came to see you. I seen you on the phone. On the TikTok. A buddy of mine in Tucson showed me, he says, Dale, ain't that your girl? And I looked at it. And I looked at it. And I said—" He put his hand on his chest, on the patch. "I said that's my baby. That's my Lish. Playing just like she did when she was a little thing. And I got on my bike."

"From Tucson."

"Nine hours."

"For a TikTok."

"For *you*."

I looked at him.

Eight years and five months. And he'd driven nine hours to stand in this lot, twenty feet from the middle space, and tell me it was for me.

The people in the lot had figured out something was wrong. They'd gotten quiet. Somebody whispered. Adrian, on his skateboard by the ice machine, was looking at me with his mouth open.

"I have to go to work," I said.

I put the guitar in the case. I picked up the money. Seventy-eight dollars. I stood up.

"Lish."

I walked past him.

"Baby girl. Come on. Lish. Five minutes."

I opened the door of the Valley Star. The bell rang.

"I talked to Royce," my father said.

I stopped.

* * *

Mr. Hollis let us use the back room. The stockroom, with the walk-in and the boxes of Takis and the mop sink. He didn't want to. He looked at my father across the counter for a long time, and my father smiled at him, and Mr. Hollis said, "Dale," and my father said, "Ray," and Mr. Hollis said, "You still owe me three hundred and forty dollars," and my father laughed like that was a joke.

"Leave the door open," Mr. Hollis said to me. Not to him.

I left it open.

My father leaned against the walk-in. I stood by the mop sink. Four feet between us. I kept my hands at my sides. Open.

"Here's the thing," my father said. "Here's the thing, baby. I know I did you wrong. I know that. Leaving like that. Your mama. All that." He shook his head. "I was in a bad way. I was in a real bad way. You don't know. I was into some people. Not just Royce. Other people. Worse people. And if I'd stayed, they'd have come to the house. You understand? I left to *protect* y'all."

"You took eleven thousand four hundred dollars."

"I *borrowed*—"

"From the club. And left Mama to pay it. Two hundred a month. In an envelope in the mailbox."

"I didn't know she was doing that."

"Yes you did."

He looked at me.

"Yeah," he said, after a while. "Yeah. I did." He rubbed his face. "I ain't gonna lie to you. I ain't gonna stand here and lie to you, Lish. I been lying my whole life and I'm tired. I'm fifty-two years old and I got a liver the size of a football and I'm tired."

I didn't believe him. I want to be clear about that. I didn't believe one word.

But I listened. Because he was my father, and I hadn't heard his voice in eight years and five months, and some part of me, some little part about the size of a five-year-old with a stuffed rabbit, was still standing on the gravel.

"I went to see Royce," he said. "Before I come here. Went to the clubhouse. First time in eight years. You know what that's like? Walking in that door? After what I did?" He shook his head. "Thought he'd kill me. Honest to God. Thought Tiny'd take me out back and that'd be it."

"Why didn't he?"

"'Cause I come to make it right." He pushed off the walk-in. Took a step. I didn't move. He stopped. "I told him, Royce, I'm back. I'm back for good. I'll pay it. Every dime. I'll work the shop. I'll do whatever you want. And Royce, he sat there, and he thought about it a long time. And then he said okay."

"Okay."

"Okay. He let me back in." He touched the patch. DEACON. "Gave me my cut back. He'd kept it. All this time. In the back room. Can you believe that?"

I could believe it. I'd been born in it.

"And here's the thing," my father said. "Here's the thing, baby, this is why I come. Royce told me about you. About Tiny coming by. About—" He looked at the floor. "About the debt. About Brandi." He shook his head. "God. That poor girl. That poor, poor girl. Me and Royce used to—when y'all was little—we'd sit at the picnic table and watch you two—"

"Don't."

He stopped.

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

He took something out of the back pocket of his jeans.

It was folded. Black. Leather. He unfolded it and held it up between us.

A vest. A small one. A woman's size. Black leather, new, still stiff, still smelling like the store. On the back, the skull with the crown of oil derricks. DUST KINGS in a curved rocker over the top. OILDALE in a curved rocker under it.

And on the front, on the left side, over the heart, a patch. White on black. Curved. Stitched in a little arc.

FELONY.

"Royce had it made," my father said. "For you. He seen the TikTok too. He liked the name."

I looked at it.

"Here's what it means," my father said. His voice had gone soft. The voice from the doorway at three-forty in the morning. *Daddy promises.* "It means you're in. It means you're family. Not like before. Not like your mama paying on an envelope. Family. You put this on, nobody touches you. Not Wade. Not the Holts. Not nobody in Kern County. You walk down Chester in this and people move over." He held it out. "Royce said to tell you. He said, the debt's done. He said, the girl puts this on, the debt is *done*. All of it. The money. Brandi. All of it. Done."

"And what do I do?"

"You play." He smiled. "That's it. That's all. You play. Saturday nights. At the clubhouse. Like he always wanted. People come from all over—Fresno, Visalia, Barstow—the Kings got chapters in six counties. You play for the fam-

ily. And you get paid. Real money. Not this—" He gestured at the store. "Not nine-sixty under the table. Real money. And a place to live. Royce has got a house on Woodrow he'll let you have. Two bedrooms. You get out of that motel."

"Forever?"

He blinked.

"What?"

"Saturday nights. For how long?"

He laughed. "Baby, it's family. Family ain't got a *how long*."

I looked at the vest. At the patch. FELONY. In white thread. Over the heart.

"It's not the blood," my father said. "I know you think it's the blood. That we're just—that it's some kind of thing where because you was born back there, you got to. It ain't that. It's not the blood. It's a choice. It's your choice. I'm asking you." He held it out further. "I'm asking you, baby. Come home."

I didn't take it.

I stood by the mop sink and looked at my father holding out a leather vest with my prison name on it, in the back of the Valley Star, between the Takis and the walk-in, and I thought about Inez. On the yard. At Chowchilla. Six months in. Telling me about the men she'd known before, the men who got her in there.

They always say it's your choice, Inez said. *That's how you know it ain't.*

"I have to go to work," I said.

His face changed.

Just for a second. Like Wade's in the lot. Something came up from under it. Something that wasn't warm, that wasn't wet at the edges. Then it was gone, and he was smiling again, and he folded the vest and put it back in his pocket.

"Think about it," he said. "That's all I'm asking. Think about it. Royce gave you till the end of the month. That's two weeks."

"Tiny told me."

"Then you know." He walked to the door. He stopped there, with his hand on the frame. He looked back. "I'm proud of you, baby. I want you to know that. Whatever you decide. I'm proud of you."

He went out through the store. The bell rang.

Mr. Hollis was standing behind the counter with both hands flat on it. He'd heard every word. The door was open.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Hollis said.

"For what?"

He didn't answer. He went and got the mop.

* * *

Cody found me on Thursday.

Not at the Valley Star. At the Sundowner. Two in the afternoon. I was in Room 14 with the curtains closed and the swamp cooler going, sitting on the bed with the pawn guitar, not playing. I'd been not playing since Sunday. I'd sit with it in my lap and my hand flat on the strings, for hours.

Somebody knocked.

Not hard. Three times, soft. I knew it wasn't Wade. Wade would've pounded. I knew it wasn't my father. My father would've called *baby girl* through the door.

I opened it with the chain on.

Cody Bratcher was standing on the walkway in a Voss Tire & Wheel work shirt with his name on a patch over the pocket. Not a club patch. A name patch. CODY. Sewn on by a uniform company. He had grease on his hands and a ball cap pulled low, and he was looking over his shoulder at the parking lot, at Union Avenue, at the cars.

"I can't be here," he said.

"Then go."

"I need five minutes."

"Everybody needs five minutes."

"Please," Cody said.

I'd never heard him say please. Not on the canal path with the box cutter. Not in the lot that night with the radio playing. Not in the courtroom at the preliminary hearing when he got on the stand and said, under oath, *she was just teasing her and Lish went crazy*.

I took the chain off.

He didn't come in. He stood in the doorway with the heat coming in around him, and he talked fast, looking at the parking lot the whole time.

"Your dad's lying to you," he said.

"I know."

"No. You don't. You don't know how." He swallowed. "I work at the shop. Royce's shop. Five years. I hear stuff. I was in the back Saturday when your dad came in. I was under a Tahoe on the lift. They didn't know I was there." He looked at me. "Your dad didn't come back to pay nothing. He didn't come back for you. Royce called him. Royce found him in Tucson. Royce found him in a motel in Tucson owing money to a lot worse people than Royce, and Royce made him a deal."

I didn't say anything.

"Royce said, I'll square you. Eleven-four. Gone. Plus whatever you owe them boys in Arizona, I'll handle it. You come home, you get your cut back, you're a King again." Cody's voice dropped. "If you bring me the girl."

The swamp cooler rattled.

"That's what the vest is," Cody said. "It ain't family. It's a receipt. You put that on, you're Royce's. Not the club's. *Royce's*. That's what he said. I heard him. He said, *I lost one girl in that lot and I'm owed one back, and I'll take it out of her every Saturday night for the rest of her life, with my name on her back, in front of everybody, until she's old*." Cody was shaking. "He said, *I want her to play for me like she played for that Mexican*. He said, *I want to watch her do it*."

I stood very still.

"And your dad said yes," said Cody. "Royce asked him. He said, *Dale, can you deliver?* And your dad said, *she's my baby girl, Royce. She'll do what I tell her.*"

He looked at me.

"It's a deal," he said. "It's not an offer. Your dad already took it. You're the payment."

* * *

I didn't say anything for a long time.

The heat was coming in the door. A truck went by on Union with its bass up and the window of Room 14 buzzed in the frame.

"Why are you telling me this," I said.

Cody looked at the ground. At his work boots, on the concrete of the walkway. He had his hands in his pockets.

"Because I been carrying something for three years," he said, "and it's heavy."

"Carry it somewhere else."

"I *can't*." His voice cracked. He looked up. His eyes were wet. "I can't, Lish. I been trying. I can't put it down. I see you on the phone, on that Tik-Tok, and every time I see your hands I—"

"Don't."

"—I see the—"

"*Cody.*"

He stopped.

We looked at each other in the doorway of Room 14. The canal path. The box cutter. The Mountain Dew going into the sound hole. The parking lot. 11:04 p.m. Ninety-one degrees. The trunk of the Buick. A radio playing something country.

"You said under oath she was just teasing me," I said.

"I know."

"You said I went crazy."

"I *know*."

"Three years, Cody."

"I know." He was crying now. Openly. In a Voss Tire & Wheel shirt with his name over the pocket, on the walkway of the Sundowner Motor Inn on Union Avenue at two in the afternoon. "I know. I know. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. I'll fix it. I'll go to the DA. I'll tell them. I'll tell them about the —"

"No."

He stared at me.

"Go back to work," I said. "Before somebody sees your truck."

"Lish—"

"I didn't ask you to fix it." I put my hand on the door. "Thank you for telling me about my father. Now go back to work."

He stood there a second longer. Then he wiped his face with the back of his hand, leaving a smear of grease across his cheek, and turned around and walked down the walkway to the stairs, and down, and across the lot to a gray Tacoma parked behind the ice machine where you couldn't see it from the street.

I closed the door.

I put the chain on.

I sat down on the bed with the pawn guitar across my knees and I put my hand flat on the strings.

It's not the blood, my father said. *It's a choice.*

He was right about one thing. It wasn't the blood. Blood would have meant something. Blood would have meant he couldn't help it.

He could help it. He just didn't.

I sat there till dark. Then I went to work.

TWENTY-FOUR

Ms. Haney's Math

MORNING · FEBRUARY–DECEMBER 2021

Ms. Haney's office was at the end of the counseling hallway at North Kern High, past the attendance window and the nurse, a room the size of a horse stall with no window and a poster on the wall of a kitten hanging from a branch that said HANG IN THERE. It had been there, Lish found out later, since 1994. Ms. Haney said she kept it as a warning.

"A warning of what?"

"Of what happens to people who think a poster is going to help."

Monday, eight a.m. Not eight-oh-five. Lish was there at seven-forty, sitting on the floor of the hallway with her back against the wall and her gig bag across her knees, because the school was mostly empty still, kids coming two days a week in shifts, and there was nowhere else to sit.

Ms. Haney came down the hall at seven fifty-eight with a travel mug and a canvas tote bag that said I'D RATHER BE READING and looked at her on the floor.

"Early," she said. "That's a start."

* * *

She had it on a legal pad. She'd done it by hand.

"Two hundred and twenty credits to graduate," she said. "You have ninety-five. You need a hundred and twenty-five. That's twenty-five classes, give or take, at five credits each. You have three semesters left. A normal stu-

dent takes six classes a semester. Eighteen classes. Ninety credits." She tapped the pad. "You're thirty-five short. Seven classes. Even if you pass every single thing you take from now until June of next year, which, based on the evidence, you won't, you're seven classes short."

Lish looked at the legal pad.

"So I can't."

"I didn't say that. I said the normal way doesn't work." Ms. Haney turned the pad around. Under the numbers she'd written, in a column, in blue ballpoint, a list. "This is the abnormal way."

CREDIT RECOVERY — ONLINE (EDGENUITY) — 5 cr ea.

English 9B. English 10A. English 10B. World History A. World History B. Biology A. Algebra 1B. Health.

"You take these on the computer. At your own speed. Each one has modules. Tests at the end of each module. You pass the test, you move on. You fail, you do it again. When you finish a course, you get the credits. Same as if you sat in the room." Ms. Haney took off her glasses. "It's not the same. Don't let anybody tell you it's the same. It's worse. It's lonelier. Most kids who start credit recovery don't finish. They sit there clicking. They let the videos play while they look at their phones. They guess on the tests. They take the tests over and over until they guess right." She looked at Lish. "That's not going to be you."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm going to sit next to you."

* * *

She meant it literally.

The Kern County library on Roberts Lane had reopened its computers in March, six of them, with plexiglass between the stations and a sign-up sheet. Ms. Haney signed up for two. Station five and station six. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, three-thirty to six-thirty, after school, which was after Ms. Haney's working day, which she was not getting paid for.

Lish sat at station five. Ms. Haney sat at station six. She brought her own things. A thermos of coffee. A paperback, always a mystery, always by a woman. A bag of almonds she ate one at a time.

She didn't read the mystery much. She watched Lish's screen through the plexiglass.

"Don't skip the video."

"I already know this."

"Then it won't hurt you to hear it again."

"Ms. Haney, it's a woman explaining what a noun is."

"And you're going to listen to her explain it," said Ms. Haney, "all the way to the end, because the test is written by the same people who made the video, and they're going to ask you what *she* said a noun is. Not what you think. What *she* said."

Lish listened to the woman explain what a noun is.

When she finished a module, she'd turn to the plexiglass. Ms. Haney would lean over and look at the score. If it was over eighty, she'd write it on the legal pad in the column next to the course and initial it. *D.H.* Every single one. If it was under eighty, she'd say, "Again." Just that. "Again." Like Mr. Ruiz with a scale.

"It's a seventy-eight. That's passing."

"Passing isn't the bar."

"What's the bar?"

"The bar is I'm proud of it," said Ms. Haney. "Again."

* * *

Here's what Lish learned that spring, in the library on Roberts Lane at station five.

She learned what a noun was, according to a woman in a video. She learned about the Treaty of Westphalia and photosynthesis and how to factor a quadratic. She learned that she was not stupid, which she had thought, quietly, since about the sixth grade, when the teachers stopped calling on her. She wasn't stupid. She'd just never been anywhere long enough to learn anything except the guitar.

She learned that the guitar had taught her how to learn. That it was the same thing. Brick by brick. One module. One test. Again. A fact was a scale. A chapter was an étude. A course was a piece. You don't learn a piece by playing it through once and hoping. You learn it measure by measure, slow, then faster, then slow again, until your hands know it without you.

She learned that Ms. Haney had been married for thirty-one years to a man named Earl who drove for Frito-Lay and who'd died in 2018 of a heart attack in his truck on the Grapevine. She learned that Ms. Haney had no chil-

dren. That she had a sister in Lake Havasu City who kept telling her to retire and come out there. That she'd been a counselor at North Kern since 1989, and that in thirty-two years she'd sent eleven kids to four-year universities, and could name every one, and where they were now.

"Eleven," Lish said.

"Out of about nine thousand."

"That's not a lot."

"No," said Ms. Haney. "It's not." She ate an almond. "This isn't a place that sends people places. This is a place people stay. You know that. Everybody here knows it. You know what my job was, mostly, for thirty-two years? Getting kids to graduate so they could go work at the refinery instead of the gas station. That was a win. That's what a win looked like." She looked at Lish over the plexiglass. "I'd like one more of the other kind. Before I go."

"Why me?"

Ms. Haney thought about it.

"Because when I walked into that hearing and sat down next to you," she said, "I looked at your hands. And there wasn't a mark on them. Four girls in the hospital and not a mark." She shook her head. "I've seen a lot of kids who could fight. I've never seen one who could fight like that and keep her hands clean. That's not a kid who's out of control. That's a kid who's in control of exactly one thing, and is willing to bleed for it." She went back to her mystery. "I can work with that."

* * *

She finished English 9B in three weeks. English 10A in four. World History A in five, because it was boring, and Ms. Haney made her retake the test on the Thirty Years' War three times.

By June she'd finished five courses. Twenty-five credits. She was at a hundred and twenty.

Ms. Haney wrote it on the legal pad and drew a box around it and initialed the box.

"Summer," she said.

"It's summer."

"Exactly," said Ms. Haney. "Summer."

* * *

That was also the summer she started drinking.

She'd never say it started for a reason. People always want a reason. It didn't start because of her mother, or her father, or the jump in the alley, or the ninety-two days. It started because she was seventeen and alone in a house on Roberts Lane, and she was tired, and the Valley Star sold Mike's Hard Lemonade, and Mr. Hollis's nephew, who worked the register on weekends that summer, didn't card.

At first it was one. After practice. At midnight. Sitting on the front step of the house with the porch light off, drinking a Mike's and watching the oilfield flares out past the bluffs, little orange flames on the horizon that burned all night and never went out.

Then it was two.

Then it was the nephew selling her Fireball in the little bottles, the airplane ones, five for ten dollars, and her drinking them on the milk crate between songs, sitting on the empties so nobody would see.

Mr. Hollis saw.

He didn't say anything. He'd give her water. A bottle of Arrowhead from the cooler, every night, at nine. He'd walk out and hand it to her and not look at the little bottles sticking out from under her and walk back in.

Mr. Ruiz saw too. He smelled it on her, one night in July, in the church. She'd come in late. She'd had three of the airplane bottles walking up Chester. She sat down in the front row and took out the Yamaha and started to tune and he came up from the back and stood over her and she could see him smell it.

He didn't say anything for a long time.

"Play the Bach," he said.

She played the Bach. It was fine. It was good. The Fireball loosened something in her shoulders, and the Bach came out easy, too easy, and it sounded beautiful, and she knew while she was playing it that it was wrong. It was too smooth. There was no candle in it. It was a nice child playing nice music nicely.

When she finished, he didn't say anything.

"It was good," she said.

"It was," he said. "It was very good. It was the best you ever played it." He sat down in the folding chair next to her. "And it was nobody."

She looked at him.

"I heard you play that piece three hundred times," he said. "In the dark. In the closet, on the phone, with your fingers bleeding. And every time, it was you. I could hear you in it. A girl who's alone in a house and is going to play anyway. Tonight it was very good and it was nobody." He looked at the floor. "My father drank. You know that? In Mexico. He was a good guitar player too. Not great. Good. He played in a cantina in Guadalajara. Every night. Very good. And by the end it was nobody."

She didn't say anything.

"I'm not going to tell you to stop," he said. "I'm seventy years old and nobody ever stopped drinking because an old man told them to. I'm just going to tell you what I heard." He stood up. "Go home. Come back tomorrow. Play it again."

She went home.

She didn't stop.

But she never drank before the church again. Only after. That was the deal she made with herself. The church was his. After was hers.

* * *

Ms. Haney didn't know about the drinking. Or she did and didn't say. Lish was never sure.

Summer was English 10B and Biology A. Fall was World History B and Algebra 1B and Health, on top of six regular classes, because school was back full-time, five days a week, masks, and Ms. Haney had built her schedule herself so that every class was in a room with a teacher Ms. Haney had personally called.

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them," said Ms. Haney, "that the girl in the third row is going to New York, and if she fails your class she won't, and I'll know whose fault it was."

"That's a lot of pressure for them."

"They'll live," said Ms. Haney. "They're teachers. They're used to it."

Lish went to every class. Every day. She sat in the third row with her gig bag between her feet. People moved over when she walked down the hall. Nobody said Ugly. Nobody said anything. She did the work. Not because she cared about the Treaty of Westphalia. Because she'd made a deal with a sixty-three-year-old woman in a cardinal cardigan, and because she'd learned from

Mr. Ruiz that if you make a deal with somebody who keeps theirs, you keep yours.

She got a C in Algebra. Ms. Haney took her to Denny's.

* * *

In December, they made the recording.

That was the other math. Juilliard's math. Mr. Ruiz had printed it off the school website in October on the library printer and brought it to the church in a manila folder and read it out loud to her in the front row, every word, like scripture.

Application due December first. Prescreening recording due with it. A video. Specific repertoire. A Baroque work. A work from the classical or romantic period. A twentieth-century work. Studies. Scales. Unedited. One continuous take for each piece. No splicing.

Unedited.

"That means," Mr. Ruiz said, "every note. Start to finish. If you miss, you start again."

"How many times can I start again?"

"As many as you need," he said. "But only one gets sent."

They did it in the church. Where else. The Lighthouse Holiness Tabernacle, North Chester, between the laundromat and the payday loan place, on a Saturday night in November when Pastor Gentry was at a revival in Shafter. They used a camera Ms. Haney borrowed from the North Kern yearbook room and a microphone Mr. Corliss lent them from the band room, a good one, a condenser, that he gave Lish in the hallway in a padded case without saying anything except, *don't drop it, it was three hundred dollars*.

Mr. Ruiz set it up. He'd watched videos at the library for a week about how. He put the camera on a tripod in the aisle. He put the microphone on a stand four feet in front of her, at the height of the sound hole. He turned off every light in the church but one. The one over the pulpit. A single bulb.

"Like a candle," he said.

She played on his guitar. The Paracho. She'd played it at Fresno and nowhere since.

"This is for when it matters," he said, handing it to her.

They started at eight o'clock at night.

The Bach. The first take, she missed a note in bar thirty-one. She stopped. Started again. The second take was clean and it was nobody, it was too careful, she could hear it. The third take was clean and it was her.

The Sor. Two takes.

The Villa-Lobos. Étude Number One. Seven takes. Seven. The right hand kept getting ahead of the left in the descending run. She'd played it four hundred times in a closet and eleven hundred times since, and in front of a camera with a red light, in the church, it kept slipping. Seven takes. On the seventh one she closed her eyes. She played it with her eyes shut, the way she'd played it in the dark that summer, the way the dark taught her. She didn't need to see.

It was clean.

Scales. One take. She'd been doing them every night of her life.

At one-fifteen in the morning they were done. Five hours. She was soaked. Her left hand was shaking. Mr. Ruiz was sitting in the back row, where he always sat, with his arms crossed and his eyes closed, and he didn't open them for a long time after she put her hand flat on the strings.

Then he got up and turned off the camera.

"That's it," he said.

"Was it good?"

"It was you," he said.

* * *

Ms. Haney helped her with the application. The forms. The essay. The financial aid, which took three weeks and four phone calls and a letter from Ms. Haney to the federal government explaining that the applicant's mother was in Oklahoma and the applicant's father was in the wind and the applicant had been living alone since April 2020 and would the government please accept this letter, signed by a school official, in place of a parent's tax return.

The government accepted it. Ms. Haney said that was the first time in thirty-two years that had worked.

The essay was five hundred words. *Tell us about yourself and why you want to study at Juilliard.* Lish wrote it nine times. She wrote about Mr. Ruiz. She wrote about the closet. She wrote about Fresno. She wrote one about the Bag Balm. Ms. Haney read every draft at station six with her glasses on and said, every time, *again*.

The ninth one was a hundred and eighty words. Ms. Haney read it twice. She took off her glasses.

"That's the one," she said.

"It's too short."

"It's exactly long enough."

Lish never kept a copy. She'd try to remember it, years later, in Chowchilla, and she could only get the first line and the last.

The first line was: *I learned to play the guitar in a church I wasn't allowed to be in, from a man who wasn't allowed to teach.*

The last line was: *I know what my hands are for.*

* * *

They submitted it on November 29, 2021, at the library on Roberts Lane, at station five, at four- fifteen in the afternoon. Ms. Haney at station six. Mr. Ruiz standing behind them, because there was no station seven, with his hand on the back of Lish's chair.

The button said SUBMIT.

Lish looked at it for a long time.

"It's just a button," said Ms. Haney.

"I know."

"Push the button, Felicia."

It was the only time Ms. Haney ever called her that. Lish didn't mind. She'd decide, later, that it was the only time it ever sounded like hers.

She pushed the button.

The screen went white. Then it said *Thank you. Your application has been received.*

Nobody said anything.

Then Ms. Haney took the legal pad out of her I'D RATHER BE READING bag and wrote, at the bottom of the column, under all the courses and the credits and the initials, *Juilliard — submitted 11/29/21*, and initialed it.

D.H.

Then she drew a box around it.

Then she put her face in her hands, at station six, behind the plexiglass, and cried, for about ten seconds, very quietly. Then she wiped her face and put her glasses back on and said, "Well. Let's get you something to eat," and they went to Denny's, all three of them, and Mr. Ruiz ordered pancakes at

five o'clock in the afternoon and didn't say one word the whole time, just sat there smiling at his plate like a man who'd heard something far away.

TWENTY-FIVE

Right Door, Wrong Day

NOON · AUGUST 28, 2025

He came at two in the morning.

I'd gotten off at the Valley Star at two and I was in the truck by two-oh-five and in Room 14 by two-eighteen. I know because I looked at the clock on the nightstand, the red digits, the way I look at every clock now. Counting. I can't stop. Three years of counts. Four a.m. count, six a.m. count, noon count, four p.m. count, nine p.m. count. You stand by your bunk. They look at you. They write you down.

Two-eighteen. I sat on the bed. I didn't turn on the light. I took off the Vans. The left heel's all the way through now. I can feel the carpet through it.

At two-forty I heard the exhaust.

That V6. That hole in the muffler. Coming down Union from the north, slow, and turning into the Sundowner lot, and the headlights sweeping across the curtains of Room 14 from left to right like a searchlight in a yard.

The engine didn't cut. It sat there. Rumbling. Right outside.

I didn't move.

I sat on the edge of the bed in the dark with my hands on my knees and listened to it idle. One minute. Two. Five. The swamp cooler rattling. Somebody's TV through the wall in Room 13, a man selling knives.

Then the engine cut.

A car door. Heavy. The Buick's doors are heavy, old American steel, they make a sound like a vault.

Boots on the stairs. Not fast. Uneven. One heavy, one light. Somebody holding the rail.

Boots on the walkway. Coming down. Room 11. Room 12. Room 13.

They stopped.

* * *

He didn't knock right away.

I could hear him breathing on the other side of the door. Hard. Through his mouth. The way you breathe when you've been drinking since noon and you climbed a flight of stairs.

Then he hit the door with the flat of his hand. Once. *Bang.* The chain jumped.

"*Felony.*"

I didn't answer.

Bang. "I know you're in there. Your truck's down there. Your old Mexican truck. *Felony.*"

Room 13's TV went quiet. Somebody listening.

Bang. Bang.

"Open the fucking door."

* * *

Here's what I knew.

I knew it was Wade. I knew he was drunk. I knew from the way he'd stood in the Valley Star lot two weeks before, with his right hand going to the back of his waistband and hanging there, that he'd brought something with him that night, and I knew he'd brought it tonight.

I knew I had a no-contact order. I knew I had a parole agent named Marcy Delgado who'd said *call 911, not me*. I knew I had the flip phone in the pocket of my jeans with nine numbers in it.

I knew that if I called 911, a Kern County sheriff's deputy would come, and he'd find a twenty- five-year-old white man with no record, the son of a local business owner, drunk outside the motel room of a twenty-one-year-old woman on parole for killing his sister. And I knew which one of us that deputy would put in the back of his car.

Maybe that's not fair. Maybe it'd be a good deputy. Maybe it'd be Officer Pike, three years older, still saying ma'am like it was a favor.

I knew I couldn't take that bet.

And I knew one more thing. The thing I'd known since the night in the lot, since he got out of the Buick, since his hand stopped at his back. The thing I'd learned on the yard at Chowchilla from a woman named Precious with a ring on her hand.

If somebody's coming for you, they're coming. The door's just wood.

* * *

I got up off the bed.

I didn't turn on the light. I walked to the door in the dark, in my socks, on the carpet. I stood on my side of it. I could see his shadow through the gap at the bottom, the light from the walkway lamp cut in two by his boots.

I put my hand on the chain.

"*Felony—*"

I took the chain off.

I turned the deadbolt.

I opened the door.

* * *

He was standing right there. Closer than I thought. His fist was up, raised to bang again, and when the door opened he stumbled forward half a step, into the doorway, and caught himself on the frame.

We looked at each other.

The walkway light was behind him. I couldn't see his face very well. I could see his size. His shoulders filling the door. The black Voss Tire & Wheel shirt. I could smell him. Jim Beam and sweat and cigarettes and the inside of a car that's been sitting in the sun.

And I could see his right hand, which had come down from the frame, and gone to his back, to his waistband, and stopped there.

I didn't swing.

I want to tell this right. I want to get it exactly. Because it's the only thing I'm proud of, maybe, from that whole summer. I stood in the doorway of Room 14 at the Sundowner Motor Inn at two forty-seven in the morning with my hands at my sides, open, fingers loose, the way I'd stood in the alley at sixteen and on the yard at eighteen, and I didn't swing. I didn't step back. I didn't step forward. I didn't put my hands up.

I just stood there. In the door. And let him look at me.

"You opened it," Wade said.

He sounded surprised. Like he'd been banging on a wall.

"You knocked."

"I—" He stopped. He stared at me. His hand was still at his back. "You opened the door."

"That's what doors are for, Wade."

* * *

He started talking.

I don't know if he planned to. I don't think he did. I think he'd come to do one thing, and he'd climbed the stairs and banged on the door expecting it to stay shut, and he'd built the whole night around it staying shut, and when it opened, there wasn't anything holding him up anymore. He just fell into the space where the door had been.

"You got any idea," he said. "You got any idea what it's like. Three years. Three years I been going in that shop. Every day. Every day my dad looking at me. Not saying nothing. Just looking. Like he's asking. Every day for three years like he's *asking*."

"Asking what?"

"*Why I didn't stop it.*" He hit the doorframe with his left hand. The whole frame shook. "Why I was standing right there. Six feet away. Why I didn't stop you. That's what he wants to know. He never says it. He don't have to. He's got Tiny for saying things. He just looks at me. And I look at him. And I can't—"

He stopped.

His face in the walkway light. Red. Wet. His mouth working.

"I can't tell him," Wade said.

I didn't say anything.

"You know why I can't tell him? You know why?" He took his hand off the frame. He pointed at me. His finger was shaking so bad it wobbled. "Because if I tell him, he'll *know*. He'll know what she was doing. He'll know it was *her idea*. He thinks his baby girl was teasing. That's what I told him. That's what I told the cop. That's what I told the judge. *She was just teasing.* Just playing around. Just being Brandi." He laughed. It was a horrible sound.

"And he believes it. He has to. She's dead. She's his dead little girl and he has to believe it."

"Wade—"

"She was only gonna do your *hands*!"

He screamed it.

On the walkway of the Sundowner. At two forty-eight in the morning. Room 13 heard it. Room 15 heard it. The man in the office, behind the bulletproof glass, heard it. Somebody's dog across Union Avenue heard it and started barking.

"She was only gonna do your *hands*," Wade said again, quieter, and his voice broke in half. "That's all. That's all she was gonna do. She wasn't gonna kill you. She just wanted your hands. She said, we'll just do the hands, Wade, hold her, just hold her arm, she won't be able to play no more, she won't go to New York, she'll have to stay here, like us, she'll have to stay. That's all. She just wanted you to stay." He was crying now. All the way. His big shoulders shaking in the doorway. "She just wanted you to stay. And you—you—"

He couldn't finish.

I stood there.

I'd known it. Of course I'd known it. I'd been there. *Now the hands.* I'd felt his weight on my arm across the hood of the Buick. I'd seen her coming around from the trunk with the tire iron.

But I'd never heard anybody say it.

Not the cop. Not the public defender. Not the judge. Not one person in three years had ever said it out loud. And I'd stopped saying it, because nobody believed it, because it was a Pruitt girl's word against two boys, and the tire iron was in the trunk, and the camera only got the register.

She was only gonna do your hands.

Like that was the small thing. Like that was the kind version.

* * *

Down in the lot, the passenger door of the Buick opened.

Neither of us looked. But I heard it. The heavy vault sound. And then I heard something else. Below us. In the dark. Coming up from the parking lot.

Somebody was crying.

Not like Wade. Not loud. Quieter than that. The kind of crying where you're trying not to and you can't and it comes out of you in pieces, like hiccups, like something breaking a little at a time.

Cody.

He'd been sitting in the Buick the whole time. He'd heard every word. The window must have been down. And now he was out of the car, standing in the lot under the one working light, with his hands over his face, crying.

Wade turned around and looked down at him.

He looked for a long time.

Then he turned back to me. His hand was still at his back. I watched it. He watched me watch it.

His hand came out.

It was empty.

He held it up between us. Open. Like he was showing me. Like *see*.

"I was gonna," he said. "I had it. In the car. I was gonna bring it up here. I had it in my hand, at the bottom of the stairs." He looked at his empty hand. "I left it on the seat."

"Why?"

He didn't answer for a long time.

"'Cause she wasn't gonna do it," Wade said. "That night. With the tire iron. She was standing there with it over her head. And she was crying. You didn't see. You were looking at your arm. She was crying. And I think—" He stopped. "I think she wasn't gonna do it. I think she was gonna stand there with it over her head until somebody stopped her. Until I stopped her. Or you. And I didn't. I just held you." He looked at me. "And you didn't wait to find out."

That's the thing I think about.

Not the hands. Not the tire iron. Not the plea. That. *You didn't wait to find out.*

I don't know if it's true. I'll never know. He doesn't either. He's just a drunk man in a doorway telling himself a story that hurts less than the other one.

But I think about it.

He left.

He didn't say anything else. He just turned around, and walked down the walkway, past Room 13, past Room 12, holding the rail, and down the stairs, one heavy, one light.

At the bottom, Cody was still standing under the light with his hands over his face.

Wade walked past him. Then he stopped. He came back. He put one hand on the back of Cody's neck, the way you'd do a little brother, and he held it there a second, and then he walked Cody to the passenger side of the Buick and opened the door and put him in.

He went around to the driver's side.

He looked up. At me. At the doorway of Room 14 with the light off behind me.

Then he got in.

The engine started. That V6. That hole in the muffler. The headlights swept across the front of the Sundowner from right to left. The Buick pulled out onto Union Avenue and went north, slow, and the sound got smaller, and smaller, and was gone.

* * *

I closed the door.

I put the chain on. I turned the deadbolt.

I didn't turn on the light. I sat down on the floor with my back against the door, the way I used to sit against the closet door on Roberts Lane, the way I sat against the cinderblock in the nine- by-four. My knees up. My arms on my knees. My hands hanging off the ends of them, open.

I looked at my hands in the dark.

Room 13's TV came back on. The man selling knives. *But wait. There's more.*

I sat there till the sky outside the curtains went gray.

I'll tell you what I learned that night, and then I won't talk about it anymore.

I answer the door. That's all I do. Somebody knocks, I open it. My mother's bag was by a door. My father went out a door at three-forty in the morning. Royce Voss stood in a door. Precious came through the door of a cell. The gate at Chowchilla is a door. Every bad thing in my life has come through one.

And I open it anyway. Every time. I don't know how to keep it shut. I never learned. Mr. Ruiz taught me scales and Ms. Haney taught me nouns and Inez taught me how to take a punch and get up, but nobody ever taught me how to just not answer.

So I answer the door.

That's all I do.

But I didn't swing.

At six a.m., I got up and turned on the light and took the pawn guitar out of the case and sat on the bed and played the waltz. All sixteen bars. I went home. I went all the way home, to the first note.

Then I called Marcy Delgado and told her a man had come to my door, and I gave her the time, and she asked me if I was hurt, and I said no, and she asked me who it was, and I said, *I don't know. It was dark.*

She knew I was lying.

She said *okay*.

TWENTY-SIX

Scholarship in Pocket

MORNING · JANUARY–APRIL 2022

The email came on January 14, 2022, at 9:02 in the morning, Pacific time, and Lish didn't see it until 3:40 in the afternoon because she didn't have the internet.

She read it at station five. Ms. Haney read it over her shoulder from station six. It was four sentences long. The second sentence had the word *invited* in it.

A live audition. In New York. The last week of February.

Ms. Haney read it twice. She took her glasses off. She put them back on. She read it a third time.

Then she picked up the library phone at the reference desk, which you weren't supposed to use, and dialed a number from memory, and when somebody answered she said, "Abelardo. It's Dolores. She's in," and held the phone out to Lish across the desk.

Lish took it.

On the other end there was nothing for a long time. Then breathing. Then a sound she'd never heard Mr. Ruiz make.

"Mr. Ruiz?"

"I'm here," he said. His voice was thick. "I'm here. I'm just—give me a minute. I'm in the hospital parking lot. I can't see very good right now."

She didn't ask why he was at the hospital. She'd find out in two days. She'd find out that he'd been at Kern Medical that morning for the third time since Christmas, and that this time they'd done the scan, and that the scan

had a word on it that Graciela wouldn't say out loud in the kitchen on East Truxtun, and that he'd been sitting in the Ranger in the parking lot for two hours with the results in a manila envelope on the seat next to him when Dolores Haney called.

He didn't tell her that day. That day he just said, "I knew it. I knew it, I knew it," over and over in the hospital parking lot, and then, "Come to the church tonight. We have six weeks. We have work to do."

* * *

Pancreas.

Graciela told her, on a Sunday, at the kitchen table on East Truxtun, with a pot of coffee between them and the TV on mute showing a Mexican game show. Mr. Ruiz was asleep in the next room. Graciela had sent him to lie down.

"Stage four," Graciela said. "It's everywhere. The liver. The—" She made a gesture over her own stomach. "The doctor says three months. Maybe six. He says if Abelardo had come in a year ago, maybe. But Abelardo doesn't come in. Abelardo has a little pain, he takes a Tylenol and goes to work."

Lish sat there with the coffee in front of her.

"Does he know?"

"Of course he knows."

"Then why—" She stopped. "Six weeks. He said we have six weeks. Like nothing—"

"Because he wants six weeks," said Graciela. "He wants six weeks of you in the church with the guitar. He doesn't want six weeks of me crying in the kitchen. He has thirty-nine years of me crying in the kitchen." She wiped her eyes with a paper napkin. "He told me, *Graciela, if you tell her to stop going to the church, I'll never forgive you.* So I'm not telling you to stop." She looked at Lish. "I'm telling you so you know. So you don't find out after. That's all."

Lish didn't go home that night. She went to the church.

He was there. In the back row. With his arms crossed and his eyes closed. He looked the same. Thinner, maybe. A little yellow around the eyes, under the one light. She'd thought, the last two months, that it was the light.

She sat down in the front row and took out the Paracho and tuned. Low E first.

"Graciela told you," he said, from the back, without opening his eyes.

"Yes."

"Okay." He was quiet. "Play the Bach."

"Mr. Ruiz—"

"*Felicia.*" He opened his eyes. "Six weeks. We have six weeks and then you go to New York and you play for that man in the scarf and his committee, and you get in, and then it doesn't matter what happens to me. You understand? It doesn't matter. That's the whole point. That's what all this was for. So that it doesn't matter what happens to me." He closed his eyes again. "Play the Bach."

She played the Bach.

* * *

Six weeks.

She went every night. Every single night. She left the Valley Star at ten and walked to the Lighthouse and he was there, every night, in the back row, until the first week of February, when he wasn't. When Graciela called and said he'd fallen in the bathroom and couldn't drive anymore. So Lish drove. She drove the Ranger, which she had no license for, from East Truxtun to North Chester with him in the passenger seat, every night, and helped him out of the truck and into the church, and he sat in the back row with a blanket over his knees, and she played.

He didn't say much anymore. He didn't have to. He'd say *again* or he'd say nothing, and the nothing was worse.

The Bach. The Sor. The Villa-Lobos étude, the seven-take one, until she could play it with her eyes shut every single time. The Tárrega. And the twentieth-century piece the committee wanted, the Britten, *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, eighteen minutes long and strange, that he'd assigned her the summer before and that she'd hated at first because it didn't sound like anything, it wandered, it got lost on purpose, and then one night it came apart in her hands in the closet and she understood it. It's a piece about not being able to sleep. About the dark. It wanders because that's what your mind does at three in the morning. And then at the very end, after eighteen minutes of being lost, it finds the Dowland song it's been circling the whole time, *Come, heavy sleep*, and plays it plain, once, and stops.

"That one," he said, the last week. From under the blanket. "That one, they'll remember."

* * *

He couldn't go to New York.

They both knew it. They didn't talk about it. Ms. Haney bought the plane ticket with a credit card and said she'd be reimbursed by the district, which Lish found out later wasn't true. A round trip from LAX to JFK. Leave Thursday. Audition Saturday. Come home Sunday. Ms. Haney booked a room for her at a YMCA on the Upper West Side, the cheapest thing she could find within walking distance of the school.

"I'd go with you," Ms. Haney said, "but I'm sixty-four years old and I've never been east of Phoenix, and I'd slow you down."

"You could come."

"I could. But you'd spend the whole weekend taking care of me." She shook her head. "You go. You go by yourself. You come back and tell me about it."

Lish had never been on a plane. She'd never been out of California. She'd been to Fresno for the competition, and to Los Angeles once when she was seven with her father, to a swap meet in Pomona, where he'd sold a carburetor he'd taken out of somebody else's truck. That was it.

Mr. Ruiz insisted on driving her to LAX.

"You can't drive."

"Then you drive," he said, "and I'll sit."

So on Thursday, February 24, 2022, at four o'clock in the morning, she drove the white Ranger with RUIZ JANITORIAL SERVICES on the door down 99 and over the Grapevine and down the 5 and onto the 405, with the Paracho guitar in its case in the bed under a tarp, and Mr. Ruiz in the passenger seat in his black suit, the shiny one, which hung on him now like it was somebody else's, with the Virgin of Guadalupe swinging from the key in the ignition.

He slept most of the way. He woke up on the Grapevine, at the top, at Tejon Pass, as the sun came up over the mountains, and he looked out the window at the light coming across the snow on the ridges, and he said, "Oh."

That's all. Just *oh*.

At LAX, she pulled into the drop-off lane at Terminal 2, and put the truck in park, and a man in a yellow vest immediately started waving at her to move.

Mr. Ruiz didn't get out. He couldn't.

She got the guitar out of the bed. She got her bag, a backpack Ms. Haney had loaned her. She came around to the passenger window.

He rolled it down. It took him a long time. The Ranger had crank windows.

"You have the papers?"

"Yes."

"The ticket?"

"On the phone. Ms. Haney put it on the phone."

"Okay." He looked at her. He looked at her for a long time. The man in the yellow vest was coming over. "Felicia. Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

"When you walk in the room," he said, "don't look at them. Don't look at the committee. Don't look at the man in the scarf. Look at the back of the room. The last row. The corner." He paused. "That's where I'll be."

She couldn't say anything.

"Play it like there's a candle," he said. "Play it for one person. Play it for me."

"Ma'am, you gotta move the vehicle—"

"Go," said Mr. Ruiz. "Go. I'll be fine. Graciela's nephew is coming to get me from the cell phone lot. Go."

She went.

She didn't look back. He'd never told her not to. It was her mother who told her that. But she didn't look back anyway, because if she looked back she wasn't going to get on the plane.

* * *

New York was cold.

That's what she remembered first. Not the buildings or the people or the noise. The cold. Twenty-eight degrees when she came out of the airport and got on the bus Ms. Haney had written down for her, in a hoodie, because she didn't own a coat, because she'd never in her life needed one. The wind came down the street and went straight through the hoodie and through her and out the other side.

A woman on the bus looked at her shaking and said, "Honey, where's your coat?"

"I'm from Bakersfield."

The woman nodded like that explained it. At the next stop she got off. Before she went, she took off her scarf, a big gray knit one, and handed it to Lish without a word.

Lish wore it for the rest of the trip. She'd still have it at Chowchilla, in the property room, in the bag with the arrest clothes. They'd give it back to her on July 22, 2025. She'd wear it in Hamtramck, the first winter.

* * *

The audition was Saturday morning at ten-forty.

She'd walked to the building on Friday, just to see it. It was on the corner of Broadway and 65th, a big modern building with glass on the front, and she stood across the street from it in the gray scarf and looked at it for a long time. People went in and out. Young people. Her age. Carrying cases. Violins, cellos, a harp on a dolly. Laughing. Talking to each other. One girl was crying on the steps and two other girls were holding her.

She didn't go in. She went back to the YMCA and sat on the bed in a room smaller than Room 14 and practiced the Britten until a man in the next room pounded on the wall.

Saturday she was there at nine-thirty. They put her in a warm-up room, a practice room the size of a closet. She almost laughed. A closet. A little room with no window and a piano and a chair and soundproofing on the walls. She sat in it and played scales for an hour.

At ten-thirty-five a student came and got her. A boy, maybe twenty, with a lanyard. He walked her down a hallway and opened a door and said, "They're ready for you," and she walked in.

* * *

It was a studio. Not a hall. A big rectangular room with wood floors and high windows looking out over the street, and gray winter light coming in through them. A chair in the middle. A footstool. A music stand, empty.

At a table along one wall, four people. Two women, two men. One of the men had white hair cut short and wire glasses and a scarf.

He looked up when she came in. He didn't smile. But he put down his pen.

She didn't look at them.

She walked to the chair and sat down and put her left foot on the stool and the Paracho guitar on her left leg in the middle of her, and she tuned, low E first, every string from slightly wrong to exactly right, and then she looked up.

At the back of the room.

There was no back row. There was no corner. There was a wall, and a window, and the gray light coming in.

She looked at the corner where the wall met the window.

That's where I'll be.

She played.

* * *

She'd never remember most of it. That's the strange part. She played for thirty-five minutes and she remembered almost none of it. She remembered the first chord of the Bach and how the room took it, different from Fresno, a dry room, a teaching room, no echo, nowhere to hide. She remembered a moment in the Villa-Lobos where her right hand started to get ahead, the old slip, and she closed her eyes, and it came back.

And she remembered the end of the Britten.

Eighteen minutes of wandering. Of not being able to sleep. And then the Dowland. *Come, heavy sleep.* Plain. Once. The simplest thing in the whole piece, a song four hundred years old that a man wrote for somebody who couldn't sleep, and she played it in that dry room with the gray light coming in the window and she was looking at the corner where the wall met the window the whole time, and she thought about the Ranger at Terminal 2, and the crank window, and the shiny suit hanging off him, and *oh* at the top of the Grapevine.

She played it plain. Once.

And stopped.

She put her hand flat on the strings.

Nobody said anything.

She didn't count to ten. She didn't need to. She knew it was good. She knew it the way you know your own name. She'd never known anything that well.

She looked at the committee for the first time.

One of the women was writing. The other woman wasn't. She was just sitting there, looking at Lish, with her hand over her mouth. One of the men was looking at the man in the scarf.

The man in the scarf had his glasses off. He was holding them in his hand. Same as Fresno.

"Thank you, Miss Pruitt," he said.

That was all.

She stood up. She bowed. Small, from the waist, one hand on the neck. She walked out. The boy with the lanyard was in the hall. He looked at her strangely. He'd been listening through the door.

"Dude," he said.

She walked out of the building onto Broadway into twenty-eight degrees and the gray scarf and stood on the sidewalk and shook for ten minutes, not from the cold.

Then she found a pay phone, which took her forty minutes, because there were almost no pay phones left in New York, and called the house on East Truxtun collect.

Graciela answered.

"It's me."

"How was it?"

"Can I talk to him?"

A pause. "He's sleeping, mija. He's very tired today. Can I tell him?"

Lish stood at the pay phone on a corner in Manhattan with the wind coming down the avenue.

"Tell him I looked at the corner," she said.

* * *

It came on April 1, 2022. A Friday.

She'd been checking every day. At station five. Ms. Haney at station six. Ms. Haney had stopped pretending to read her mystery. She just sat there with her hands folded on the desk and watched the plexiglass.

At 3:52 in the afternoon, the portal changed.

There was a letter. A PDF. Lish clicked it. It opened.

She didn't read it. She couldn't. Her eyes wouldn't do it. They kept going to the same place on the screen and sliding off.

Ms. Haney leaned over.

Ms. Haney read it.

"Dear Felicia," Ms. Haney read, out loud, very quietly, in the library on Roberts Lane, at station six, through the plexiglass. "On behalf of the faculty and the admissions committee, it is my great pleasure—"

She stopped.

She read the rest silently. Lish watched her eyes go down the page. Go down. Stop. Go back up. Read a part again.

"Scholarship," Ms. Haney said.

"What?"

"Full tuition." Ms. Haney took off her glasses. Her hands were shaking. "Full tuition, Felicia. And housing. There's a—" She put the glasses back on. "There's a named fund. A specific—it's a guitar scholarship. For—" She read it. "*For a student of exceptional promise from an underrepresented community.*" She looked at Lish. "That's Oildale, honey. That's you. Underrepresented community."

Lish looked at the screen.

It is my great pleasure.

"Print it," Ms. Haney said.

"I don't—"

"Print it. Print it right now. Print three. You don't trust a computer. You need it in your hand. You need it in your pocket. *Print it.*"

Lish printed three.

The printer was at the reference desk. She walked over there on legs that didn't feel like legs and stood by the printer while it hummed and the pages came out warm. She picked them up. She looked at the top one. The school's name at the top. Her name under it. *Dear Felicia.*

She folded one in half, and in half again, and in half again, until it was the size of a playing card. She put it in her back pocket.

It would stay there. Every day. For the next three and a half months. In her back pocket, folded, getting softer and softer at the creases, until the night of July 23, when it was in her back pocket in the Valley Star parking lot, and the next morning, when it was in a plastic property bag at the Kern County jail with her belt and her shoelaces, and three years after that, when a CO at Chowchilla handed her the bag, and she reached in, and found it, folded so many times it was coming apart, and couldn't take it out.

But that was later.

That afternoon, at 4:01, she stood at the reference desk of the library on Roberts Lane with a scholarship in her pocket, and Ms. Haney came up behind her and put both arms around her, and held on, a short wide sixty-four-year-old woman in a cardinal cardigan, holding on to a girl a foot taller than her, saying, "Eleven. Twelve. Twelve. That's twelve. That's twelve," into her shoulder.

And Lish said, "I have to go."

"Go where?"

"I have to tell him."

TWENTY-SEVEN

The One Who Stayed

MORNING · APRIL–JUNE 2022

He was in the bed they'd put in the living room.

A hospital bed. Rented. Hospice brought it the second week of March, when he couldn't do the stairs anymore, and they'd moved the couch out to the garage and put the bed where the couch had been, facing the front window, so he could see the street. East Truxtun. The lemon tree in the yard across the way. The kids going by after school.

Graciela opened the door before Lish knocked. She'd heard the truck.

She looked at Lish's face.

She didn't say anything. She just stepped back and let her in.

* * *

He was awake. Barely. The morphine made him drift, Graciela said. He'd come up and go down. He'd talk to people who weren't there. His mother, mostly. In Spanish. Once to a man named Teodoro, who Graciela said was a guitar teacher he'd had in Guadalajara when he was a boy, dead fifty years.

He was very small in the bed. That's what she remembered. He'd never been a big man but he'd always taken up the room, somehow, sitting in the back row with his arms crossed. Now he was small. The sheet barely rose over him. His hands were on top of it, on his chest. Those hands. Long fingers. The nails still trimmed short on the right and shorter on the left, the way a guitarist keeps them. Graciela had been doing it for him.

His eyes were closed.

Lish stood by the bed.

"Abelardo," Graciela said. "Mi amor. She's here."

His eyes opened.

They took a long time to find her. They went to the ceiling, and the window, and the lemon tree, and then they came around, slow, and found her face, and stayed.

She took the letter out of her back pocket.

She unfolded it. Once. Twice. Three times. It was still warm from the printer, almost. From her body. She held it up where he could see.

She didn't say anything. She didn't need to.

He looked at the letter. He couldn't read it. His eyes weren't doing that anymore. But he could see the shape of it, the school's name at the top, the paragraphs, and he could see her face behind it.

He smiled.

Not a big smile. He didn't have the strength. Just a little one, at the corner of his mouth, the same one from the first night in the church when she was nine years old and said her name was Lish and he said *Felicia, from felicitas*.

"Of course she did," he said.

That's all. Three words. Very quiet. Not to her. To the room. To Graciela. To the lemon tree. To his mother and Teodoro and whoever else was in there with him by then.

Of course she did.

Then he closed his eyes.

* * *

He lived seven more weeks.

Lish came every day. After school, because she was still going, every day, because Ms. Haney said if she missed one day between now and June she'd personally drive to New York and tell them to take it back. After school she drove the Ranger to East Truxtun and sat by the bed until ten, when she went to the Valley Star for her shift. On weekends she came in the morning.

She brought the Paracho.

Graciela set a kitchen chair next to the bed. Lish sat in it with her left foot on a phone book, because there was no footstool, and played.

Everything. The Bach. The Sor. The Tárrega, "Recuerdos," the first thing she ever heard him play. The Villa-Lobos preludes, all five. The Britten, once, all eighteen minutes, on a Sunday in April with the window open and the lemon tree going, and at the end, when it found the Dowland, *Come, heavy sleep*, he made a sound. Not a word. A sound. Graciela, in the kitchen, put down the dish she was holding.

He didn't talk much. When he did, it was usually to someone else.

But some days he came up.

One afternoon in the last week of April he opened his eyes in the middle of the Sor and said, clearly, "Too fast."

She stopped.

"The second section," he said. "You rush it. You always rush it. You want to get to the end." He closed his eyes. "Don't want to get to the end."

She played it again. Slower.

"Better," he said. And went back down.

Another time, in May, he said, "The garage."

"What about the garage?"

"Graciela knows." He was looking at the ceiling. "When I'm gone. The garage. There's something for you."

She thought he meant the truck. He kept it in there. She didn't ask Graciela. She didn't want to know yet.

* * *

On May 9, a Monday, he came all the way up.

It happens sometimes. The hospice nurse told Graciela it might. A last good day. People come back for a few hours, clear, like a radio station coming in on a night drive, and then they go.

Lish came in at four and he was sitting up. Graciela had cranked the bed. He had color in his face. He'd eaten half a cup of Jell-O.

"Felicia," he said, when she came in.

She stopped in the doorway.

"Come sit," he said. "I want to tell you some things."

She sat in the kitchen chair. He looked at her.

"Graciela is going to give you the guitar," he said. "The Paracho. It's yours. It's been yours since Fresno. I just didn't say."

"Mr. Ruiz—"

"Let me finish. I don't have a long time to talk today." He breathed. "The guitar is yours. The metronome is yours. The music, all of it, the folders, the staff paper, Graciela will put it in boxes. The account at the credit union, the NEW YORK one, there's eleven hundred dollars. It's yours. Graciela's name is on it now with yours. For the bus to New York. For a coat." He almost smiled. "Dolores told me. No coat. In February. *Dios mío.*"

She was crying. She didn't try to stop.

"And one more thing," he said. "And this is the important thing. So listen."

"I'm listening."

"In New York," he said, "they're going to try to make you nice."

She didn't understand.

"They don't mean to," he said. "They're good teachers. The best. The man in the scarf is a good man. But they've been teaching nice children for a long time. And you're going to walk in there, and they're going to hear what you have, and they're going to want to—" He moved his hand on the sheet. A little smoothing motion. "Clean it. Make it correct. Take the edges off. Make it something you can play at Carnegie Hall in a black dress." He looked at her. "Let them teach you everything. Everything they know. Take it all. But don't let them take the edges off."

"What edges?"

"*Oildale,*" he said. "The closet. The candle. The ninety-two days. Your daddy on the gravel. Your mama's bag by the door. All of it. That's what's in your Bach. That's why the man in the scarf took off his glasses. Not because you're correct. A thousand children are correct. Because you play like somebody who has been alone in a house with no lights and decided to play anyway." He breathed. "Don't let anybody make you nice. You hear me? Don't ever be nice. Be *good*. That's different."

"Okay."

"Say it."

"I won't be nice."

He laughed. It hurt him. He laughed anyway.

"No," he said. "You won't."

He looked out the window. At the lemon tree. At the street.

"I stayed," he said, after a while. Quiet. Not to her, maybe. "Everybody else in your life left. Your daddy. Your mama. I know. I watched it. And I

thought, *well, somebody has to stay.*" He closed his eyes. "I'm sorry I can't stay longer. I tried."

"You stayed," she said. "You stayed the whole time."

"I was the one who stayed," he agreed. And smiled. And went back down.

He didn't come up again.

* * *

He died on May 14, 2022, a Saturday, at 5:20 in the morning. Graciela was holding his hand. Lish wasn't there. She was asleep in the house on Roberts Lane, in the bed, not the closet, because he'd told her to sleep in the bed.

Graciela called at six.

"He's gone, mija," she said.

Lish sat up in bed.

She didn't cry. Not then. She'd cry later, at the funeral, and once at graduation, and then not again for a long time. Not on the bus. Not at intake. Not in the hole. Not until a bus bench in Bakersfield, three years later, with a granola bar in her hand. But not for a long time.

That morning she sat up in bed and said, "Okay."

Graciela said, "He said one more thing. At the end. Around four. He woke up for a minute."

"What?"

"He said, *tell her the rest is part of the music.*" Graciela was quiet. "I don't know what it means."

"I do," Lish said.

The funeral was at Our Lady of Guadalupe on East California, a real church, a Catholic one, with stained glass and a choir and a priest in white, and three hundred people came. Lish didn't know there were three hundred people who knew him. Custodians from the district. Teachers. Parishioners. Men from the Mexican neighborhood who'd known him for forty years and called him *el maestro*. Old women who'd heard him play at weddings, once, long ago, before he put the guitar in the case and picked up a broom.

Ms. Haney came, in a black dress instead of the cardigan. Mr. Corliss came. Mr. Hollis came, and stood in the back, and left before the end.

Pastor Gentry came, from the Lighthouse, and sat in a pew by himself, and looked uncomfortable in a church with a real roof.

Graciela asked Lish to play.

She played "Lágrima." On the Paracho. In the choir loft, alone, while they carried him out. Two minutes. E major, then E minor, then E major again. The sweet part, then the sad part, then the sweet part, which you can't hear the same way anymore once you've heard the sad.

She didn't rush the sweet part.

* * *

They buried him at Hillcrest Memorial Park on Niles Street, out by the edge, near an oak. A flat bronze plaque, flush with the grass. Graciela picked the words.

ABELARDO RUIZ MORENO
1951 – 2022
MAESTRO

That was all. Graciela said he'd have wanted less, but she couldn't think of less.

* * *

After the cemetery, Graciela stood at the side door of the garage on East Truxtun with a key from her apron and said, "Mija. He wanted you to see something."

Lish looked at the door. The one-car garage that had never had a car in it, except the Ranger, sometimes, under a tarp. The door had always been shut.

"Not yet," Lish said.

Graciela looked at her for a long time. Then she put the key back in her apron.

"Okay," she said. "When you're ready. It will be here."

Lish said not yet for three years. She'd find out later what was behind the door. A workbench. A guitar in pieces. A neck with no frets. She'd stand there at twenty-one and not be able to breathe right, and think about the truck on the night before Fresno, and a man saying *then I'll make another one*, and understand that he'd already been making it.

* * *

She graduated on June 9, 2022, a Thursday, at seven o'clock in the evening, on the football field at North Kern High, in a cardinal-red gown and a mortarboard that didn't fit over her hair.

Two hundred and twenty credits. Exactly. Not one more. Ms. Haney had checked it eleven times. GPA two point one. The C in Algebra. A D-plus in Chemistry that Ms. Haney personally went and argued up from a D.

They went in alphabetical order. Pruitt was near the end, but not the very end. That was an error in the program. Somebody had put her in the wrong spot, at the bottom, after the Z's, after Zúñiga, probably because she'd been added late, after the credit-recovery courses posted.

So she was the last name called.

She sat in her folding chair on the fifty-yard line in a row of empty folding chairs, everybody else having gone up and come back and sat down in a different row, and waited, alone, with the sun going down behind the bleachers and the lights coming on, while the vice principal read every name in the senior class of North Kern High.

Then he looked at the card and paused.

"Felicia Rae Pruitt."

She stood up.

She walked across the field to the stage. It was a long walk. The bleachers were mostly quiet. People were packing up. Families who'd already seen their kid go. A few people clapped, the polite kind.

And then, from the bleachers, on the left, in the third row, two people stood up.

Ms. Haney, in her cardinal cardigan, with her reading glasses on the beaded chain. And Graciela Ruiz, in black, still, a month after, holding a framed photograph against her chest.

They were the only ones standing. Two women. Sixty-four and sixty-eight. One white, one Mexican, who'd met for the first time at a funeral three weeks earlier.

They were yelling.

Not clapping. Yelling. Ms. Haney had her hands cupped around her mouth. Graciela was holding the photograph up over her head with both hands so Lish could see it from the field. It was him. In the back row of the Lighthouse. Arms crossed. Eyes closed. Somebody had taken it, years ago. Lish didn't know who.

She took the diploma from the vice principal. She shook his hand. She turned and looked at the bleachers.

She didn't count to ten.

She raised the diploma over her head. Toward the third row. Toward the photograph.

That's the second time she cried. On the stage at North Kern High, in a red gown, with a two point one and a scholarship in her back pocket, folded small, and the last name called.

It was June 9, 2022.

Six weeks and two days later, it was July 23.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Ninety-One Degrees

MORNING · SATURDAY, JULY 23, 2022

It was a hundred and nine at four in the afternoon, and it didn't come down.

That was the summer the Central Valley forgot how to cool off at night. The heat would sit on Oildale till dawn like a hand on a mouth. The news said it was a record. Thirty-one days over a hundred. The asphalt in the lot of the Valley Star went soft by noon and stayed soft until morning, and if you stood in one place too long in sneakers you'd leave a print.

Lish was on the milk crate at nine.

Five weeks and four days. That's how long it was until the Greyhound. She'd counted it on the wall of the closet, on Roberts Lane, under the four hundred and the ninety-two. A new set of marks, going the other way. Not days she'd lived. Days she had left. She crossed one off every morning. August twenty-ninth, the bus. The Greyhound from the station on F Street to Los Angeles, and then the long one, three days and two nights across the whole country, because Ms. Haney had tried to buy a plane ticket again and Lish had said no. She wanted to see it. All of it. Every state between here and there. She wanted to watch Oildale get small in the back window, and then California, and then the West, and then everything she'd never seen.

Eleven hundred dollars in the NEW YORK account. Ninety in her pocket. A coat, a real one, a black wool one from the Goodwill on Chester that Graciela had taken in at the shoulders, hanging in the closet on Roberts Lane in a dry-cleaning bag with the tag still on.

The letter in her back pocket. Folded small.

The Paracho on her lap.

* * *

She shouldn't have had it there.

She knew that. Graciela had told her. *Keep it at the house, mija. Play the Yamaha outside. The Paracho is for when it matters.* But the Yamaha's neck had warped in the heat, the third week of July, sitting in the cab of the Ranger with the windows up for six hours, and the action was so high now she could barely press the strings. And the Paracho was hers. He'd said so. *It's been yours since Fresno.* And she was leaving in five weeks and four days and she wanted Oildale to hear it. Just once. Before she went.

That's what she'd tell herself later. In the hole. *I wanted Oildale to hear it.* Like it was a gift.

It wasn't a gift. It was pride. Pastor Gentry was right about that much. She wanted them to hear it so they'd know what she was taking with her when she went.

* * *

She'd been drinking since six.

Not a lot. Not for her, by then. Three of the airplane bottles walking up Chester. Another two on the crate, under her, between songs. Mr. Hollis's nephew was working the register. Mr. Hollis was home with his back. Nobody brought her a bottle of Arrowhead at nine.

There were maybe fifteen people. A Saturday crowd. Men in from the oil fields with their shirts dark at the collar. A couple of women in the beds of their trucks with the tailgates down, drinking. A kid on a bike. She was playing Merle and Buck and Johnny, because it was Saturday, because that's what Saturday wanted. "Silver Wings." "Sing Me Back Home." "Mama Tried." People knew the words. Some of them sang. She let them. On the Paracho, even the Merle sounded like something else. Like it had come from farther away.

At ten she played the Bach, because she wanted to, because nobody had asked, and the men in the lot went quiet, and one of the women in a truck bed put down her can.

At ten-thirty she played the Tárrega.

At ten-forty she played "Lágrima," because it was the last thing she'd played for him, and because she'd had five airplane bottles, and because she was going to New York in five weeks and four days and she wanted to say goodbye to something and he was the only one she had left to say it to.

The sweet part. The sad part. The sweet part.

She didn't rush.

* * *

At ten fifty-eight the Buick pulled in.

She heard it before she saw it. A V6 with a hole in the muffler. It came off Chester fast, too fast for the lot, and the tires made that sound on the soft asphalt, the sticky sound, tape coming off, and it swung around past the pumps in a long wide curve, and its headlights went across her, across the milk crate and the guitar and the case on the sidewalk and her face, and she squinted.

It was new then. Newer. A 2003 LeSabre, Royce had bought it for Wade's twenty-second birthday off a lot on Union. It was the color it's always been. That dark purple, almost black. But the paint was still good then. It shone. Under the red Valley Star sign it looked like something wet.

It pulled into the middle space.

The front tires rolled up and touched the wheel stop and stopped.

The engine didn't cut. The radio was on, loud enough to hear through the closed windows. Something country. A man singing. She couldn't make out the words.

Some of the people in the lot looked over. Then looked away. A Voss car. Everybody in Oildale knew a Voss car.

She kept playing.

That's the first thing. She'd go over it ten thousand times. She kept playing. She didn't get up. She didn't put the guitar in the case. She didn't walk away down the alley toward Roberts Lane with the Paracho on her back. She had a minute. Maybe more. She had the time it took for "Lágrima" to go from the sad part to the sweet part. She could've been gone.

She kept playing because she wasn't afraid of them.

That's the second thing. That was the pride, too. She'd broken four girls in the alley at sixteen with her open hands and nobody had stepped to her since. Two years. People moved over on Chester. She was the most feared kid

on the block and she had a scholarship in her back pocket and five weeks and four days, and she wasn't going to get up off a milk crate for a Buick.

The doors opened.

* * *

Wade got out of the driver's side. He was twenty-two. Big, still. The lineman. He had on a black Voss Tire & Wheel shirt and jeans and boots, and a can in his hand, and he leaned on the roof of the Buick and looked at her.

Cody got out of the back. Twenty-one. Skinny then. Nervous. He stood by the rear door with his hands in his pockets and didn't look at her at all.

And Brandi got out of the passenger side.

She was eighteen. Same as Lish. Six weeks older. She had on a white sundress with little yellow flowers and white sandals and her hair was down, all the way down, past her shoulder blades, blond, the color of the hay bales out on Highway 65. She'd been somewhere. A party. She had that look. Her face was flushed. Her eyes were too bright. She had a red Solo cup in one hand, and she'd been crying, or she was about to, or both.

She walked around the front of the Buick. Through the headlights. Past the wheel stop. Onto the sidewalk.

She stopped in front of the guitar case.

The people in the lot had gone quiet. The women in the truck bed. The oil-field men. The kid on the bike. Lish could feel it. The air in the lot going tight. Like the air in the alley two years ago. Like the air in a hall before the clapping.

Lish finished "Lágrima."

The sweet part, coming home. The last note. E major.

She put her hand flat on the strings.

* * *

"So it's true," Brandi said.

Her voice was wrong. High. Wet.

Lish didn't answer.

"Juilliard," Brandi said. She said it carefully. Like a word in a language she'd only read. "Tasha's cousin works at the district office. She seen it in your file. *Felicia Pruitt. Juilliard. Full scholarship.*" She laughed. It came out broken. "New York City."

"Go home, Brandi."

"*Juilliard,*" Brandi said again. Louder. To the lot. To the women in the truck bed. "Y'all hear that? The Pruitt girl's going to Juilliard. Her mama sold her and her daddy ran and she lives in that house by herself with no lights and she's going to *Juilliard*." She turned back to Lish. "When?"

Lish didn't answer.

"*When*, Lish?"

It was the first time Brandi had said her name since they were twelve.

Not Ugly. Not the Pruitt girl. *Lish.* The way she used to say it at the picnic table, when the picnic table was a kingdom and they were going to get married because there was nobody else good enough.

Lish looked up at her.

And she saw it. In the red light of the Valley Star sign. She saw Brandi Voss's face, flushed and wet and eighteen, and under it, just under, the gap-toothed girl in the choir robe. The girl who'd sat in the back row of the Lighthouse the night Lish played the Villa-Lobos at twelve, and put out her pinky, and said *queen's honor*, and then broke it.

The girl who'd had somebody leave.

"August twenty-ninth," Lish said.

Brandi stood there.

"Five weeks," Brandi said.

"Five weeks and four days."

Brandi's mouth did something. She put the Solo cup down on the sidewalk, very carefully, next to the case. She straightened up. She wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"And you weren't going to tell me," she said.

"Why would I tell you?"

"*Because,*" Brandi said, and her voice cracked straight down the middle, "you were *supposed* to—"

She didn't finish.

Behind her, Wade had come around the Buick. He was standing by the hood. Cody was still by the back door. The radio was still going. The man singing something country. Lish could hear the steel guitar now, the pedal steel, crying up high over the chords.

Brandi looked down at the guitar in Lish's lap.

At the Paracho. The spruce top, gone gold with age. The rosette. The dark sides. The tuning pegs he'd turned with his own fingers for fifty years.

She looked at it for a long time.

"That's his," Brandi said.

"It's mine."

"That's the *Mexican's*." She was staring at it. "That's the one from the church. That he used to—" She stopped. "I heard you play on it. When we were twelve. That night. I heard you."

"I know."

"You don't know," Brandi said. Quiet. Almost gentle. "You never knew."

And she reached down.

* * *

That's where I stop.

I can tell you the rest. I will, in a minute. I've told it to myself every night for three years on a concrete bunk with my eyes closed and I can tell you every second of it, every sound, I can tell you what the radio was playing, I can tell you the time on the clock in the window of the Valley Star, I can tell you the temperature.

Ninety-one degrees. At 11:04 p.m.

But I'm going to stop here for a second. Right here. With Brandi Voss bending down over me in her white sundress with the little yellow flowers, in the red light, with her hand reaching out for the neck of his guitar, and her face close to mine, close enough that I could smell the strawberry Suave in her hair.

Because this is the last second.

This is the last second I was the girl going to New York. Five weeks and four days. A coat in a dry-cleaning bag. A letter in my back pocket. *It is my great pleasure.*

I want to stay here a minute.

The sweet part. Before the sad part.

You want to be in the sweet part as long as you can. Because you know it's coming.

TWENTY-NINE

Ask Me Anything but That

NOON · THURSDAY, AUGUST 28, 2025

Marcy Delgado had the brain in her hand before I sat down.

Ten a.m. Thursday. Her office on Truxtun Avenue, the third floor, the window that looks out at the parking structure. Seven hours since Wade Voss stood in the door of Room 14 and screamed it on the walkway. Three and a half hours since I called her and said *I don't know. It was dark.*

She didn't ask about the door.

She squeezed the brain. Once. Twice. Then she put it down on the desk between us, and folded her hands, and looked at me.

"I'm going to ask you something," she said, "and you can tell me no."

"Okay."

"Not as your agent. I'm going to close the file." She closed the file. She pushed it to the side of the desk. "As a person who has been sitting across from you every Thursday for five weeks."

I waited.

"What happened that night," she said.

I looked at the brain.

"It's in the file."

"I've read the file. I've read the police report and the plea agreement and the probation report and the victim impact statements. I've read Officer Pike's narrative six times. I've read Wade Voss's statement and Cody Bratcher's statement and the transcript of the prelim." She shook her head. "And there's nothing from you. Not one word. You didn't make a statement. You

didn't testify. You didn't allocute at sentencing. The judge asked you if you had anything to say and the transcript says, *the defendant: no, Your Honor.*"

"That's right."

"Three words."

"Four."

She almost smiled. "Four."

She leaned back in her chair.

"I've been doing this nineteen years," she said. "I've had a lot of people sit in that chair. Most of them tell me what happened whether I ask or not. They tell me the version where they're the good guy. Some of them tell me the version where they're the bad guy, which is its own kind of lying. You're the first one I've had who doesn't tell me any version at all." She looked at me. "And last night a man came to your door at two in the morning, and you're lying to me about who."

The swamp cooler in the window rattled. Someone was on the phone in the next office, saying *no, sir, I understand, sir.*

"You can ask me anything," I said. "Anything. Ask me about Chowchilla. Ask me about the hole. Ask me about my mother. My father. I'll tell you."

"But not that."

"Anything but that."

She looked at me for a long time.

"Okay," she said.

She opened the file again. She asked me about work. About the motel. About whether I'd been drinking, which I hadn't, which was true. She gave me a drug test, which I passed. She signed the form. She said, *see you next Thursday*.

At the door, I stopped.

She looked up.

"It's not that I can't," I said. "It's that if I tell it to somebody with a pen, it becomes the version. And I'll have to live in that one. Forever."

She put the pen down.

"Then don't tell me," said Marcy Delgado. "Tell somebody without one."

* * *

So I'll tell you.

You don't have a pen.

* * *

Brandi reached down and took the guitar by the neck.

I let her. That's the first thing. I want you to know I let her. I didn't grab. I didn't pull back. I was sitting on the milk crate with the Paracho across my body and my hand flat on the strings and she bent down in her white sundress and took hold of the neck just below the headstock, gently, the way you'd take somebody's hand to help them up, and I felt her fingers close around it, and I let go.

I thought she wanted to hold it.

I really did. I thought she wanted to hold it. I thought—with five airplane bottles in me, and *Lish* in her mouth for the first time since we were twelve—I thought maybe she wanted to hold it. To feel what it was. To see it up close. To touch the thing that was taking me away.

She stood up with it.

She held it by the neck, out in front of her, the body hanging down. She looked at it in the red light. She turned it a little. The top caught the sign and went gold. She looked at the rosette. She looked at the sound hole. She looked inside, maybe. I don't know.

"It's pretty," Brandi said.

"It's his."

"You said it was yours."

"It's both."

She nodded, slowly, like that made sense. She looked at me. Her eyes were wet. Her mouth was trembling.

"I'm sorry," Brandi said.

And she turned around and swung it at the curb.

* * *

I've heard a lot of sounds.

I've heard a gate at Chowchilla roll back on its track. I've heard a woman's nose break against a sink in the shower. I've heard my own name read out loud in a courtroom by a judge who couldn't look at me. I've heard Bunny hit the bottom of a dumpster. I've heard the clank of the door in the hole, nine-by-four, shutting, at two in the afternoon, for the first time.

None of them are that sound.

A guitar that's fifty years old, handmade, spruce and rosewood and cedar, held by the neck and swung overhand into a concrete curb. It doesn't crack. It explodes. The top caves in first, with a sound like a bone going, and then the sides go, and the back splits along the seam, and all six strings let go at once with a noise I don't have a word for. Not a chord. Not a note. Every note. At the same time. Every note that guitar had ever played, all at once, for one second, and then nothing.

The neck was still in her hand. The headstock. The pegs. The strings hanging off it loose like hair.

The rest was on the sidewalk.

The lot was silent. The women in the truck bed. The oil-field men. The kid on the bike, who rode away fast. The radio in the Buick still going, the man singing something country. The steel guitar crying up high.

I got off the milk crate.

I didn't stand up. I want to tell this right. I got down. I went down onto my knees on the sidewalk, in front of the case, in front of what was left. I didn't look at Brandi. I didn't look at Wade or Cody. I looked at the pieces. The top, in three pieces, with the rosette still mostly whole on one of them. A side, curled. The bridge, with two strings still tied on. Splinters of spruce, pale gold, all over the concrete, in the red light, like something had been dropped from a height.

I started picking them up.

That's what I did. I knelt on the sidewalk in front of the Valley Star at 11:03 p.m. on July 23, 2022, and I started picking up the pieces of Abelardo Ruiz Moreno's guitar, one at a time, and putting them in the case. Carefully. Like he'd taught me to handle it. Neck up. Away from the heater. The big pieces first. Then the small ones.

I don't know what I thought I was going to do with them. I think I thought he could fix it. I think, for a second, on my knees on that sidewalk, I forgot that he was dead. I thought, *I'll take it to the garage on East Truxtun, and he'll fix it, and he'll look at me over his glasses and say* Felicia, *and he'll fix it.*

I had my hand on the piece with the rosette.

"Now the hands," Brandi said.

* * *

Wade grabbed me from behind.

Under the arms. He was big. He lifted me off the sidewalk like I was nothing. My knees came off the concrete and the piece with the rosette fell out of my hand and back onto the sidewalk and I heard it crack again.

He walked me backward. Four steps. Five. Across the sidewalk. To the Buick. To the hood. The engine was still running and the hood was hot, hot from the engine, hot from the day, a hundred and nine at four o'clock, and he bent me forward over it and pinned my right arm across it, flat, palm down, on the hot metal, with his whole weight.

I could feel the engine through my hand. The vibration. The idle.

My face was on the hood. Turned to the side. I could see the windshield. I could see the radio's little green light through the glass. I could see the wheel stop, right below, under the front bumper. Concrete. Gray. The size of a loaf of bread.

"*Wade,*" Cody said, from somewhere. "Wade, man, what are you—"

"Shut up."

"Wade—"

"*Get the thing,*" Wade said. Not to Cody. Past me. Over my head. "Brandi. It's in the trunk. Get the thing."

I heard the trunk open.

I heard her heels on the asphalt. The white sandals. Going around the back of the Buick. I heard her rooting in the trunk. Metal on metal. Something heavy being pulled out from under something else.

I heard her heels come back.

I turned my head. As much as I could. Wade's hand was on the back of my neck. I turned it enough to see.

Brandi was standing at the front corner of the Buick. Between the headlight and the wheel stop. In her white sundress with the little yellow flowers. With a tire iron in both hands. A long one. L-shaped. The kind with the lug wrench on one end and the flat pry end on the other. From Voss Tire & Wheel. Her daddy's shop.

She was holding it up. Over her shoulder. Like a bat.

She was crying.

I saw it. Wade was right about that. I want to say that, for him. She was crying. Her whole face was wet and her mouth was open and she was making

a sound, a little high sound, over and over, and the tire iron was shaking over her shoulder.

She was looking at my hand.

My right hand. Flat on the hood. Palm down. The fingers spread. The nails cut short, the way you keep them for the right hand, for the flesh and the nail together on the string.

"Brandi," I said. "Don't."

She looked at my face.

"You were supposed to *stay*," she said.

And the tire iron went up higher.

* * *

I don't know if she was going to do it.

Wade says she wasn't. Wade says she was going to stand there with it over her head until somebody stopped her. Maybe. I think about it. I think about it every day. Maybe she was going to stand there, and cry, and then drop it, and get back in the car, and they'd drive away, and I'd pick up the pieces of the guitar, and in five weeks and four days I'd get on the Greyhound.

Maybe.

But here's what I knew. Then. With my face on the hot hood and the engine in my hand.

I knew that my hand was my life.

Not like a metaphor. Not like a song. Like a fact. Like a noun, according to a woman in a video. My right hand, at that second, was my entire life. It was Mr. Ruiz in the back row for nine years. It was the closet and the candle and the ninety-two days. It was Ms. Haney at station six and the legal pad and *D.H.* in a box. It was the man in the scarf with his glasses off. It was *it is my great pleasure.* It was the coat in the dry-cleaning bag and the Greyhound and every state between here and there.

It was the only thing anybody ever gave me that nobody could take.

And she was about to take it.

So I tore loose.

I don't know how. Wade outweighed me by a hundred pounds. But I'd done this in my closet with a pillow duct-taped to the door for a year, and in the alley, and you don't think about it, the body does it. I dropped. All the way. Straight down, out from under his weight, out of his hands, my arm slid-

ing off the hot hood, and I came up on the other side of him, on my feet, between him and the front of the car.

Between him and her.

She was right there. Two feet away. With the tire iron up. Her eyes went wide.

And I swung.

Once.

One time. With my right hand. A fist.

The first fist I'd made in four years. Since Tasha Holt. Since Mr. Ruiz held my split knuckle in both his hands in the church and said *never again*. I'd kept my hands open through four girls in an alley. I'd kept them open for four years. And I made a fist, the one I'd promised him I'd never make, with the hand I was trying to save, and I hit Brandi Voss in the face with it as hard as I have ever hit anything in my life.

That's the irony, I guess. If you want one. I saved my hand by using it.

* * *

She went backward.

The tire iron flew out of her hands. I heard it hit the asphalt somewhere behind her and skid.

She went backward, and her heels caught on the edge of the parking space, on the soft asphalt, in the white sandals, and she went down. Not forward. Not sideways. Straight back. Like a tree.

The back of her head hit the wheel stop.

The middle one. Concrete. Gray. The size of a loaf of bread.

* * *

That's the sound.

That's what I remember. Not the punch. I don't remember my hand hitting her at all. I don't remember how it felt. I remember the sound of the back of her head on the concrete. It wasn't loud. That's the thing nobody tells you. It wasn't loud at all. It was a small sound. A short, flat, wooden sound. Like somebody knocking once on a door.

Then nothing.

Then the radio. The man singing something country. The steel guitar.

* * *

She didn't move.

She was lying on her back with her head on the wheel stop and her hair spread out across it, blond, across the gray concrete, and one sandal off, and her eyes open, looking up at the red Valley Star sign. The little yellow flowers on her dress.

Nobody in the lot moved.

Then Cody made a sound. A long sound. Not a word.

Wade stood there by the hood of the Buick with his hands still out in front of him, where I'd been. He looked at his hands. He looked at his sister. He looked at me.

Then he did the thing I'll never forgive him for. Not the holding. Not the lie. This.

He walked over and picked up the tire iron off the asphalt.

He walked to the back of the Buick, and put it in the trunk, and closed the trunk.

Then he went and knelt down by his sister.

* * *

I don't remember a lot of the next fifteen minutes. I remember Cody on his knees by the back tire, throwing up. I remember one of the women from the truck bed on her phone, saying *the Valley Star, on Chester, a girl's hurt, a girl's hurt bad*. I remember the nephew coming out of the store and standing in the door and saying *oh my God oh my God* until somebody told him to go back inside. I remember Wade with his sister's head in his lap, off the wheel stop now, saying *Brandi, Brandi, Brandi*, rocking her.

I remember the radio. Still going. Nobody turned it off. The song ended and another song came on, and it was country too, and I couldn't tell you what it was. I've tried. I've lain on the bunk and tried to remember what song was playing on the radio in the Buick when Brandi Voss was dying with her head in her brother's lap, and I can't. It was just country. Something with a steel guitar.

I remember the pieces.

I went back to them. I don't know when. At some point I was on my knees on the sidewalk again by the case, picking up the pieces of the Paracho,

putting them in the case. The rosette, cracked twice now. A tuning peg. The bridge.

My right hand was bleeding. I hadn't noticed. Split across two knuckles, from her teeth.

* * *

Officer Daniel Pike arrived at 11:19 p.m.

I know because it's in his report. I've read it. My public defender gave me a copy. *R/O arrived on scene 2319 hrs.* He was the first one. Before the ambulance. Before the sheriff's deputies. A Bakersfield PD rookie, it turned out, who'd been on patrol a half mile away on a call that cleared, and heard it, and came, even though Oildale isn't Bakersfield, isn't his jurisdiction. Twenty-four years old. Eleven months on the job. Pink-faced, freckled, with a voice that hadn't finished changing.

He knelt by Brandi first. He put his fingers on her neck. Then he got on his radio. Then he stood up and looked around the lot.

He looked at Wade, with blood on his shirt from his sister's hair. He looked at Cody, by the tire. He looked at the women in the truck bed. He looked at me, on my knees on the sidewalk, with a piece of spruce in one hand and blood on the other.

He came over.

"Ma'am," he said. "Ma'am, I need you to put that down."

I put the piece of spruce in the case.

"Ma'am. Are you hurt?"

I didn't say anything.

"Ma'am, I need you to stand up for me. Slowly. And show me your hands."

My hands.

I stood up. Slowly. I showed him my hands. The left one, clean. The right one, split across the knuckles, bleeding down my wrist.

He looked at the right one. He looked at it for a long time.

"Ma'am," he said, very quietly, "did you do this?"

He kept saying ma'am. The whole time. When he put the cuffs on. When he put his hand on my head to get me in the back of the car. When he asked if I wanted water. *Ma'am. Ma'am. Ma'am.* Like I was somebody's mother. Like I was a person. I was eighteen years old and nobody had ever called me

ma'am in my life and he said it, I don't know, forty times, and every single time it sounded like he was sorry.

Wade talked to him. Not then. Later. At the station. Wade said she was just teasing. Wade said Brandi was just playing around with the guitar and she dropped it, by accident, and the Pruitt girl went crazy and attacked her. Wade said he tried to stop it. Cody said the same thing, at the station, and later, at the prelim, under oath.

Nobody mentioned the tire iron.

It was in the trunk. Nobody looked in the trunk. Why would they? A tire iron in the trunk of a Voss car. Royce Voss owns a tire shop.

The camera over the register got the inside of the store.

* * *

Brandi Voss died at Kern Medical on Monday, July 25, 2022, at 4:10 in the afternoon. Two days later. She never woke up. Royce and Charlene were with her. And Wade. I've been told. I wasn't there. I was in the Kern County jail on Lerdo Highway, in a cell, in an orange jumpsuit, in the clothes property bag they'd given me with my belt and my shoelaces and a letter folded so small it was coming apart.

That's when it went from assault to something else.

* * *

The public defender's name was Ms. Barrientos. She was good. She was tired. She had a hundred and forty cases. She came to see me at Lerdo on August third and sat across a steel table from me and laid it out.

The DA was charging murder. Second degree. Fifteen to life.

"They'll say malice," Ms. Barrientos said. "They'll say you had a history. They'll pull the alley video. They'll pull the Tasha Holt nose from ninth grade. They'll put the Voss boy and the Bratcher boy on the stand and they'll say she was teasing and you snapped. And the jury will be from Kern County." She looked at me. "You know what a jury from Kern County is going to see. A Pruitt. From Roberts Lane. Against Royce Voss's dead little girl."

I didn't say anything.

"Or," said Ms. Barrientos.

The or was voluntary manslaughter. Penal Code 193(a). A killing in the heat of passion, without malice. Three, six, or eleven years. The DA would take the low term. Three years. If I pled.

"Three years," Ms. Barrientos said. "With credits, maybe less. You're out at twenty-one. You're still young." She paused. "Or you roll the dice for fifteen to life. And the dice are loaded."

"What if I tell them about the tire iron?"

She looked at me.

"Tell me about the tire iron," she said.

So I told her. The one person I ever told, before you.

She listened. She wrote it down. Then she put her pen down.

"Who else saw it?"

"Wade. Cody."

"Who'll say it wasn't there."

"The women in the truck."

"Who've given statements that they saw a scuffle at the car and a girl fall, and didn't see what was in anybody's hands, because it was dark and they were drunk and they'd like to keep living in Oildale." Ms. Barrientos folded her hands. "Is it in the trunk?"

"It was."

"It's not now," she said. "I promise you it's not now. It's been three weeks. It's been in Royce Voss's shop with two hundred other tire irons." She looked at me. "I believe you. For what it's worth. I believe you. I've been doing this twelve years and I believe you. And it's worth nothing. You understand? My believing you is worth nothing in a courtroom in Kern County. It's your word. It's a Pruitt's word."

I sat there.

"If we go to trial," she said, "and you tell it, and they don't believe you, the DA will stand up in closing and say you invented a weapon to excuse a murder. And the jury will hate you for it. And you'll get the full fifteen. Maybe more." She shook her head. "Self-defense against a tire iron nobody can find, held by a crying girl in a sundress, after you'd already broken four girls in an alley. I can't win that, honey. I'm sorry. I can't."

* * *

So I said nothing.

I took the plea. October 2022. Kern County Superior Court. I stood up in an orange jumpsuit next to Ms. Barrientos in front of a judge who didn't look at me and said *guilty* when he asked me how I pled, and *no, Your Honor*, when he asked if I had anything to say.

Royce sat in the back. Every hearing. He didn't look at me either. Charlene sat next to him, with her hands in her lap. She looked at me once. Only once. At the very end. When they were taking me out the side door.

I don't know what that look was. I've thought about it. I think it was the look of a woman who'd delivered both of us.

Three years. The low term. November 9, 2022, the bus. Officer Ames. *Keep your head down. Look 'em in the eye.*

* * *

That's it. That's all of it.

I want to say one more thing and then I'm done.

People ask, or they would if they could, if I'm sorry.

I'm sorry she's dead. I'm sorry every day. I'm sorry for Charlene, who pulled us both out with her own two hands. I'm sorry for Royce, even, a little, with his pictures face down. I'm sorry for the girl at the picnic table, with the gap tooth, who said *there's nobody else good enough*, and who had somebody leave, and couldn't stand it, and decided if she couldn't come with me then I couldn't go. I'm sorry I made a fist. I'm sorry for that sound. I'll be sorry for that sound until I die.

But I'm not sorry I tore loose.

I can't be. Because if I'm sorry I tore loose, then I'm sorry I have hands. I'm sorry I'm the thing he made. I'm sorry for nine years in the back row and the candle and the ninety-two days. And I can't be sorry for that. That's the only thing I am.

How can I be sorry and dead at the same time?

That's what it'd be. If I was sorry for that. I'd be dead too. Same as her. Just still walking around.

So I'm sorry, and I'm not.

Both. At the same time.

You can't fix that. I've tried. There's no chord for it.

* * *

Graciela burned the pieces.

I found that out from her letter. The first one. Mr. Hollis gave her the case, the night after, the case with the pieces in it, the top and the sides and the bridge and the rosette cracked twice and the splinters of spruce, everything I'd picked up off the sidewalk. He drove it to East Truxtun himself.

She burned them in the backyard. In the fire pit. On the night of July 25, the night Brandi died, though Graciela didn't know that yet. She burned them with a little copal from the botánica and a candle with the Virgin on it and she said a rosary over the smoke.

It was his, she wrote. *It was yours. Now it is God's. He'll know what to do with it.*

Your hands are still yours. Take care of them. — G.R.

THIRTY

Somebody's Dying Here Tonight

NOON · SATURDAY, AUGUST 30, 2025

I went because it was the end of the month.

That's the simple answer. Royce gave me till the end of the month, and Tiny said Royce was a fair man, and I knew that if I didn't go to Royce, Royce would come to me. At the Valley Star. At the Sundowner. On the milk crate in front of thirty people with their phones up. And I didn't want Mr. Hollis's store to be where it happened. Not again. That lot had had enough.

The other answer is longer. The other answer is that I'd spent my whole life answering doors, and for once I wanted to be the one who knocked.

* * *

I didn't tell Marcy Delgado. I didn't tell Mr. Hollis. I didn't tell Adrian, who'd have followed me on his skateboard.

I called Graciela.

"Don't go, mija," she said.

"I have to."

"Then take him with you."

"Who?"

She was quiet. "You know who."

I took the pawn guitar. The thirty-two-dollar Yamaha from Golden Empire Pawn & Gun, with the cracked pickguard and the strings I'd changed

twice. I put it in the soft case and put it on the passenger seat of the Ranger like a person.

I drove up Chester at nine-forty at night. Past the Valley Star with the red sign buzzing. Past the bail bonds place and the Dairy Queen. Left on Roberts Lane. Past the library, dark. Past the old house, with Kern Valley Renovation's dumpster still in the yard and the windows covered in plastic. Past the gravel where my father's bike used to sit.

Voss Tire & Wheel was closed. The bay doors down. The sign off. But behind it, down the gravel drive, past the stacks of old tires going to rot, the clubhouse was lit.

* * *

I'd been born there.

I'd been told that my whole life, but I'd never been inside it that I could remember. Not after. My mother wouldn't take me. When I was little I'd see it from the road, from the back seat, the cinderblock building with the plywood over half the windows and the skull painted on the side, the skull with the crown of oil derricks, and the bikes out front in a row, and I'd think: *that's where I'm from.* Like it was a country.

There were maybe forty bikes out front that night. Harleys, mostly. Some from out of town. Plates from Fresno, Visalia, San Bernardino. Trucks parked along the gravel drive. The doors open. Music coming out. Loud. Southern rock. Somebody yelling. Somebody laughing. The smell of a grill going and beer and gasoline.

I parked the Ranger at the end of the gravel drive, facing out. Mr. Ruiz used to say, *always park facing the way you're going to leave*. He meant church parking lots. I think he meant everything.

I sat there for a minute with my hands on the wheel.

Then I got out and took the guitar off the seat and walked down the gravel toward the door.

* * *

The music stopped before I got there.

Not all at once. Somebody saw me. Then somebody else. A man smoking by the door, a big man in a cut I didn't know, from out of town, looked at me and dropped his cigarette and went inside, and then the music went down,

and then it stopped, and by the time I got to the door, the whole room was looking at it.

I stood in the doorway.

Here's what it was.

A long room. Cinderblock walls painted black. A concrete floor with a drain in the middle. A bar along the left wall, plywood with a sheet of steel on top, and behind it, shelves of bottles and a cooler and a mirror with DUST KINGS MC OILDALE CA painted on it in gold. Pool table in the middle. Neon signs. Coors. Bud. A Confederate flag on one wall and an American flag on another and between them a big framed photograph of a man I didn't know, a dead brother probably, with a candle in front of it.

And a door, at the back, with a sign on it that said PRIVATE.

The back room.

Sixty people, maybe. Men in cuts. Women in tank tops. Old ladies, some of them, the wives, in their sixties, sitting at a table by the bar. Everybody holding a drink. Everybody looking at me.

Charlene was behind the bar.

She was older. Gray all the way now, cut short. She had on a black T-shirt and reading glasses on top of her head and she was holding a bottle of Jack Daniel's she'd been about to pour, and she stopped, the bottle tipped over a glass, and stayed there.

Wade was by the pool table. A cue in his hand. He went white.

Cody was at the end of the bar, by himself, with a beer he wasn't drinking. He stood up.

Tiny was by the back door. The PRIVATE door. Like he always was. Like he'd been standing there for twenty years.

And my father was at a table in the corner, in his cut, with the DEACON patch over his heart, with two men from out of town, and he looked up and saw me and his face went through three things at once. Surprised. Then scared. Then the smile.

"*Baby girl,*" he said. And stood up.

I didn't look at him.

I looked at the table in the middle of the back wall. The one under the dead brother's photograph. A round table with one chair at it, a big chair, a wooden one with arms, and in it, Royce Voss.

* * *

He didn't stand up.

He was sixty-one. He looked it. The gray eyes were the same. Still a number. Still looking at you like a ledger. But his face had gone down, around the mouth, like something had been pulling on it from underneath for three years. His beard was white. He had on a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled, and the cut over it, PRESIDENT on a patch over the heart, and a glass of something brown in front of him that he hadn't touched.

He looked at me in the doorway for a long time.

Then he lifted one hand. Two fingers. *Come here.*

I walked across the room.

Sixty people moved. Not much. Just enough. Like on Chester. Like in the hall at North Kern. They moved over. I walked through them with the guitar on my back to the table under the dead brother, and I stopped on the other side of it from Royce Voss, and I didn't sit down, because there wasn't a chair.

"There's a court order," Royce said. "You're not supposed to be here."

"You're not supposed to send Tiny to my work."

"I didn't send Tiny to do anything. Tiny went for a walk." He looked past me. "Didn't you, Tiny?"

"I like to walk," said Tiny, from the door.

Royce looked back at me.

"Dale tells me you didn't take the vest," he said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a receipt."

The room went very quiet. Quieter than it was. I heard someone set a bottle down.

Royce didn't look at Cody. He didn't have to. He'd figure it out later. Or he wouldn't care. Cody stood at the end of the bar with his beer and didn't move.

"It's a gift," Royce said.

"It's got my name on it."

"It's got the name they gave you." Royce lifted his glass, finally. He drank. He put it down. "*Felony.* I liked that. I'll be honest with you. When I seen it on the phone, I thought, *that's a Dust Kings name.* That's a name you earn." He looked at my arms. At the bones. "You earned it."

"I didn't earn it. A woman doing fifteen to life gave it to me on the first day so the guards would leave me alone."

"Same thing," said Royce.

* * *

He held out his hand.

Not to shake. Palm up. Open. Toward the guitar on my back.

"Let me see it," he said.

I didn't move.

"I'm not going to break it," Royce said. "I'm not my daughter."

The room did something. A sound. Sixty people breathing in at once.

I looked at his hand. Open. Palm up. Steady.

I took the guitar off my back. I unzipped the case. I took it out. The pawn guitar. Thirty-two dollars. The cracked pickguard. The plywood top that sounded like a garden hose on the Tárrega.

I held it out across the table.

He took it by the neck. Same as she did. Below the headstock. I watched his fingers close on it and something in my chest went small and hard.

He didn't swing it.

He turned it over in his hands. He looked at it. He looked at the cracked pickguard and the cheap tuners and the Golden Empire sticker still on the back of the headstock, $32 in black marker. He looked at it like a man looking at a used tire.

"This is it?" he said. "This is what you play? On the phone, with three hundred thousand people? This?"

"Six hundred thousand."

He almost smiled.

"Your daddy took eleven thousand four hundred dollars of this club's money," Royce said. "And your mama paid it down to four. And then she quit. And then you killed my little girl in a parking lot over a guitar." He held up the pawn guitar. "Over a better guitar than this, I'm told. A Mexican one. Handmade." He set it down on the table, on its back, between us. "So that's the debt. You know what it is. Everybody in this room knows what it is."

"I paid it. Three years."

"You paid the State of California. You didn't pay me." He leaned forward. "You think three years in Chowchilla is a debt paid? To me? I lost my girl. I

lost her *forever*. She don't get to come out at twenty-one with tattoos on her arms and play guitar on the phone." His voice didn't go up. It went down. Quieter and quieter. "So here's what's going to happen. Here's how you pay it."

He picked up the guitar.

He held it out to me across the table. Not by the neck this time. By the body. The way you'd hand somebody a baby.

I took it.

"Play for us," said Royce Voss. "Here. Every Saturday. Forever."

* * *

I stood there with the guitar in my hands.

Sixty people. Charlene behind the bar with the bottle still tipped. Wade by the pool table with the cue. Cody at the end of the bar. Tiny at the back door. My father in the corner, standing, with his hands at his sides, and his smile gone, and his face doing nothing at all.

Every Saturday. Forever.

I thought about it. I want to be honest. I thought about it for maybe five seconds, which is a long time when sixty people are watching you.

I thought about a house on Woodrow with two bedrooms. I thought about nobody ever touching me in Kern County again. I thought about the people moving over on Chester. I thought about playing every Saturday night in this room, under the dead brother, for Royce Voss, with my prison name on my back, until I was old. Until I was Mrs. Albright. Until my hands shook.

I thought about how easy it would be. To stay. Like Brandi wanted. Like everybody wanted. *You were supposed to stay.*

Then I pulled a chair from the next table, and turned it around, and sat down in it, in the middle of the Dust Kings clubhouse, in front of Royce Voss's table.

I put my left foot up on the rung of the next chair. I put the guitar on my left leg, in the middle of me, not on the right, because the right is for cowboys.

I tuned. Low E first. Every string from slightly wrong to exactly right.

The room was silent.

And I played.

* * *

Not Merle. Not Johnny Cash. Not "Folsom Prison Blues," which half the room probably wanted, which I'll never play again.

I played the Bach.

The first prelude from the Lute Suite in E minor. BWV 996. The one he taught me to play like there was a candle. Like it was night. Like the only person listening was the one person you wanted to listen.

I played it on a thirty-two-dollar pawn guitar in a cinderblock room with a drain in the floor and a Confederate flag on the wall and sixty bikers holding beers, and I played it slower than anybody has ever played it, and so quiet that the people in the back had to lean forward. Like Fresno. Like the room was listening.

And the room listened.

I don't know how to describe it except like that. Sixty people who'd come to drink and yell and play pool, who'd heard about me on the phone, who'd come to see the Pruitt girl get what was coming to her. And they stood there. And nobody moved. A man by the pool table set his cue down on the felt so slow it didn't make a sound. One of the old wives at the table by the bar put her hand over her mouth.

Charlene put down the bottle.

I didn't look at Royce. I looked at the back of the room. The corner. By the PRIVATE door. Where Tiny was standing.

That's where I'll be.

I played it like there was a candle.

I played it for one person.

* * *

I played it all the way through. Then I played the waltz.

Vals para Lish. Sixteen bars. E minor. Three-four time. Written for a girl on her tenth birthday by a man who swept floors.

The clubhouse had never heard anything like it. I knew that. These people had heard me as a baby screaming in the back room. They'd heard me, some of them, at six, standing on the bar singing Hank Williams for quarters. They'd never heard this.

I played it clean.

I went home. All sixteen bars. Back to the first note.

I put my hand flat on the strings.

Nobody clapped.

I counted to ten.

* * *

My father was crying.

I saw it when I looked up. He was standing in the corner with his hands at his sides and his DEACON patch over his heart, and his face was wet, and he wasn't wiping it. He was looking at my hands.

Not like on Chester, under the streetlight. Not like a man looking at a fire he started and left. Different. Like a man looking at a fire he'd never started at all. That had nothing to do with him. That he'd just been standing next to, his whole life, without knowing what it was.

Like he'd finally heard what I was.

Not his. Not the club's. Not Royce's. Not a payment. Not a receipt.

"Dale," said Royce Voss. "Sit down."

My father didn't sit down.

He walked across the room. Through the people. They moved. He came and stood next to my chair. He didn't touch me. He stood there next to me in front of Royce's table and looked at Royce.

"Deal's off," my father said.

* * *

The room went very still.

Royce looked up at him. The gray eyes. The number.

"Deal's not off," Royce said.

"It's off, Royce. I'm calling it off."

"You don't get to call it off, Dale. You don't get to call anything. You came crawling in that door three weeks ago owing money to people in Tucson who'd have put you in the desert. I squared you. I gave you your cut back. I gave you a *name* again." He didn't raise his voice. "You don't call nothing off. You're not the one who decides."

"Then I'm out," my father said.

"You're not out either."

"Then take it." My father took his cut off. Right there. In the middle of the clubhouse. He pulled it off his shoulders and held it out across the table, the skull with the crown of oil derricks, DUST KINGS, OILDALE, DEACON over the heart, the same cut I was born in. The same leather Charlene Voss wrapped me in at 12:38 in the morning on March 14, 2004, in the room behind the PRIVATE door. "Take it back. Take it all back. I don't want it."

Royce didn't take it.

My father dropped it on the table. On top of the pawn guitar's empty case.

"Go, baby," he said. To me. Without looking at me. "Walk out. Right now. Don't run. Just walk."

I looked up at him.

"*Go,*" he said.

* * *

I stood up.

I had the guitar in my hands. I didn't put it in the case. The case was under his cut. I walked toward the door with it in my hands, by the neck, the way you'd carry anything you were afraid of losing.

The people moved.

Behind me I heard a chair scrape. Royce's chair. The big wooden one.

I kept walking.

"*Tiny,*" Royce said.

I didn't look back. I heard Tiny's boots. I heard my father's boots. I heard something hit something. A table going over. Glass.

I walked out the door into the night and the gravel and the forty bikes in a row, and the air was ninety-four degrees and smelled like gasoline and the grill, and I walked across the gravel toward the Ranger at the end of the drive, facing out, and I didn't run.

Behind me, the door banged open.

* * *

I turned around.

That's the one time I looked back. I'm telling you. The one time.

My father was in the doorway of the clubhouse.

He was standing in it. Filling it. His back to me. His arms out, his hands on either side of the door frame, the way you'd hold a door shut from the outside, except he was holding it from the outside, from my side, so nobody could come through. Not in his cut. In a black T-shirt. His gray ponytail. His thin shoulders.

Behind him, in the light, Tiny. Six-four. And behind Tiny, Royce Voss.

"Move, Dale," Royce said.

"No."

"*Move.*"

"I left her once," my father said. "On the gravel. Right down the road. She was thirteen and twelve days and she was screaming and I didn't look back." His arms were shaking. "I'm not gonna move, Royce."

And I saw Royce's hand.

It was at his back. At his waistband. Under the cut. And then it wasn't at his back.

"Daddy—"

It was loud.

That's the thing. The wheel stop was quiet. Like a knock. This was loud. It came off the cinderblock and off the gravel and off the tin roof of Voss Tire & Wheel and back again, and the bikes in their row shook, and somewhere a car alarm went off.

My father didn't fall right away.

He stood in the door. His hands still on the frame. He looked down at himself, at the front of his black T-shirt, and he looked surprised, the way he always looked surprised when the bill came. Then he turned around. Slowly. Off the doorframe. Toward me. Toward the gravel.

He took two steps.

Then he went down on his knees in the gravel, the same gravel, the gravel I screamed on, and then he went down the rest of the way.

* * *

I didn't swing.

I want to say that. I want to say it a hundred times. I didn't swing.

Royce Voss was standing in the doorway of the clubhouse with a pistol in his hand, and I was twenty feet away on the gravel with a thirty-two-dollar guitar, and every single thing I'd ever been taught by Inez and the man in

Bangkok and the alley said *go*. Go now. Twenty feet. He's sixty-one. He's looking at Dale. You've got two seconds.

I didn't go.

I stood there with my open hand on the neck of the guitar.

And Wade Voss came through the door behind his father and took the gun out of his hand.

He just took it. He reached around from behind and closed his big hand over his father's hand on the pistol and took it, the way you'd take car keys from a drunk. Royce didn't fight him. Royce let go. Royce stood there in the doorway with his hand still out in front of him, empty, open, the way Wade's had been at the Sundowner. Like *see*.

Wade stood there holding the gun, pointed at the ground.

He looked at me.

Then he put it on the gravel, and backed away from it, and sat down on the step of the clubhouse, and put his head in his hands.

* * *

I went to my father.

I knelt down in the gravel. I put the guitar down next to me. He was on his side. His face was in the gravel and there was gravel stuck to his cheek and his beard.

I turned him over.

He was still there. Just. His eyes were open. Brown. Wet at the edges. They found me.

"Hey, baby girl," he said.

"Daddy."

"Told you." He was smiling. The smile. "Daddy promises."

I didn't understand. And then I did.

Daddy promises. At three-forty in the morning, in my doorway, with his bag on his shoulder. *Daddy promises.* He never said what. I was thirteen. I thought it meant *I'll come back*.

He came back.

"Strong little hands," my father said, very quiet, looking at them. My hands. On his chest. On the black T-shirt. Holding it. Like I could hold it shut.

Then he stopped looking at anything.

* * *

Somebody's dying here tonight.

That's what I thought, when I walked down the gravel toward the door with the guitar on my back. I didn't think it in words. I thought it in my stomach. Somebody's dying here tonight. I thought it was going to be me. I think I'd made my peace with that, a little, on the drive up Chester.

It was him.

It was the one I never thought would be standing in a door for me.

* * *

Charlene came out. She knelt next to me in the gravel and put her hand on my back. The same hand. The hands that pulled me out, in that room, behind the PRIVATE door, twenty-one years ago. She didn't say anything. She just kept it there.

Cody came out with his phone already up, already talking. *Roberts Lane. Behind Voss Tire. A man's been shot. Yes. Yes, he's—I don't—please hurry.*

Tiny came out and stood over Royce. He didn't touch him. He just stood there. And Royce Voss, president, sixty-one, looked at the gun on the gravel and at his son on the step and at Dale Pruitt on his back in the gravel with his daughter's hands on his chest, and he went back inside the clubhouse, and through the people, and through the PRIVATE door, and shut it.

They found him in there when the deputies came. Sitting on the cot. Holding a photograph in a frame, face up. A baby wrapped in a leather vest.

He didn't say anything when they cuffed him. Charlene said later he didn't say anything for three days.

* * *

Sixty people saw it that time.

Sixty people, and a man from Visalia who'd been filming the party on his phone and kept filming, and the camera on the corner of Voss Tire & Wheel that Royce had put up himself to watch the bikes, which pointed straight at the clubhouse door.

Nobody said I was teasing.

* * *

I sat in the gravel till the deputies came. A long time. Sirens on Roberts Lane, coming. The car alarm still going. The bikes. The grill smoking.

I didn't pick up the guitar.

It lay in the gravel next to me, on its back, with the strings up to the sky, the stars, the oil-field flares out past the bluffs that burn all night and never go out.

I didn't swing.

I'll say it till I die.

I didn't swing.

THIRTY-ONE

The Rain

NOON · SEPTEMBER 2025

It rained the day they buried him.

It doesn't rain in Bakersfield in September. It doesn't rain in Bakersfield in anything, hardly. Six inches a year, if it's a good year. Most of it in January. In September the sky is white and the hills are the color of a paper bag and the dust gets into everything, and you forget what rain smells like. You forget there is such a thing.

It rained on Saturday, September 13. Out of nowhere. The weatherman on Channel 23 said it was the tail of a hurricane off Baja that had come up the Gulf of California and over the mountains, and he said it like he was apologizing. It started at six in the morning and it didn't stop.

I woke up in Room 14 and heard it on the walkway, on the railing, on the roof of the Ranger in the lot, and I didn't know what it was.

I lay there in the dark for a long time listening to it.

Then I remembered.

* * *

The Lighthouse Holiness Tabernacle isn't on North Chester anymore.

The storefront between the laundromat and the payday loan place is a phone repair shop now. CELL DOCTOR, in red letters, with a picture of a phone with a stethoscope around it. I'd driven by it my second week out and

stopped the truck in the middle of the road and somebody behind me laid on the horn.

The church meets in a metal building on Airport Drive now, out past the freeway, next to a place that sells pool supplies. A prefab steel building the color of a filing cabinet with a cross on the front made of two pieces of square aluminum tubing. Pastor Lyle Gentry had died in 2023. His son preached now. Pastor Wayne Gentry. Fifty-something, heavy, with his father's voice and none of his father's fire, who wore a sport coat with a lapel pin of a lighthouse and shook my hand at the door with both of his and said, "Felicia. I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Lish."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's Lish," I said.

He looked at me, at my arms, at the bones, the hair, and something in his face said he'd been briefed. He nodded. "Of course," he said. And didn't use it.

I don't know who arranged it. Not me. I found out later it was Charlene. Charlene called Pastor Gentry and Charlene paid the funeral home, Greenlawn on Niles Street, out of her own money, not the club's, and Charlene picked out the casket, a plain gray one, and Charlene told Pastor Gentry that Dale Pruitt had been baptized at the Lighthouse Holiness Tabernacle in 1991 when he was eighteen, in a horse trough behind the old storefront, which was true, which I never knew.

The club didn't come. There wasn't a club anymore, exactly. Royce was in the Lerdo jail, held without bail on a murder charge, and the Feds had come in with a warrant the week after for something about the run money and the tire shop's books, and half the Dust Kings had gone quiet and the other half had gone to Fresno. The clubhouse was dark. There was yellow tape across the gravel drive.

Tiny came. By himself. In a suit that didn't fit, a brown one, with no cut. He sat in the back row and didn't talk to anybody. When it was over he walked out into the rain on foot.

Charlene came. Wade didn't. Cody did, and sat in the back, near Tiny, with his ball cap in his hands.

Mr. Hollis came. Graciela came. Marcy Delgado came, which I didn't expect, in a black blazer, and stood in the back by the door and nodded at me once and left before the hymn.

Fourteen people. Counting me. Counting Pastor Gentry. In folding chairs in a metal building, with the rain on the roof so loud you could barely hear him preach.

And my mother.

* * *

She came in late.

The service had started. Pastor Gentry was reading the Twenty-Third Psalm, *the valley of the shadow*, in his father's voice without his father's fire, and the door at the back opened and let the sound of the rain in, loud, for a second, and then shut.

I turned around.

A woman was standing at the back. Wet. Small. In a long tan skirt and a pale blue cardigan buttoned all the way to the top, and flat brown shoes, and a plastic rain bonnet over her hair, the kind old women wear, the kind they sell at the drugstore folded up in a little packet. She took the bonnet off. She shook it. She folded it, carefully, along its lines, and put it in her purse.

Her hair was gray. Short. Permed.

She was forty years old. She looked sixty.

I didn't know her.

I want to tell you that. I looked right at her and I didn't know who she was. I thought she was one of the old women from the church. From the new church. Somebody who came to every funeral because she didn't have anywhere else to be on a Saturday.

Then she looked at me.

And I knew the eyes. Not the color. Mine come from nowhere. The look. The thing in them. I'd seen it on the other side of a screen door five years ago, at six in the morning, with a truck horn tapping in the yard.

I've seen your eyes. You are too.

She sat down in the back row. By herself. Three chairs from Tiny.

* * *

She didn't come up to the front.

Not during the hymn, which was "I'll Fly Away," which Pastor Gentry led and nobody sang loud, because in this church you still didn't sing loud. Not during the part where Pastor Gentry asked if anybody wanted to say a few words, and nobody did, and he stood there at the pulpit in the long silence with the rain on the roof, and finally said, "Well. Dale was a complicated man," and Tiny, in the back, laughed once, very short, and then put his hand over his face.

Not when they opened the casket for people to walk past.

I walked past. I looked at him. They'd cut his hair. Somebody had cut off the gray ponytail and combed his hair back and put him in a white shirt and a blue tie he'd never have worn, and his hands were folded on his chest. They'd done something to his face. It wasn't him. It was a man who looked like a picture of him. Smooth. Like somebody had sanded him.

I looked at his hands.

I don't know what I wanted to see. I think I wanted to see the spiderweb. The faded blue one on his elbow. *Tucson. Pima County. Ninety days.* But his sleeves were down. White shirt. Cuffs buttoned.

I stood there too long. Pastor Gentry touched my elbow.

My mother didn't walk past. She sat in the back row with her purse in her lap and her hands folded on top of it and watched me do it.

* * *

We didn't bury him there. It was too wet. Greenlawn called Pastor Gentry during the service and said the ground was too soft for the equipment and they'd do it Monday, and we could come Monday if we wanted. Nobody said they'd come Monday.

So it was just over. The service. Pastor Gentry said a prayer and then everybody stood up and stood around in the metal building with the rain on the roof, not knowing where to go. Mr. Hollis hugged me. Graciela held my face in both her hands and said *mija* and nothing else. Cody tried to say something and I shook my head and he went out. Charlene said she'd call me.

My mother stood by the back door.

She was waiting. I knew she was. She was standing there with her purse over her arm and the rain bonnet back on, half-tied, and she was waiting for me to come to her.

So I did.

I walked down the aisle between the folding chairs in my one black thing, the black dress from Ross that Graciela bought me for Fresno five years ago, too big in the shoulders, pinned. I stopped in front of her.

We looked at each other.

She was shorter than I remembered. Or I was taller. Up close she smelled like Jergens, still. And something else. Something sweet and powdery. A new church's smell.

"Hi, baby," she said.

"Hi, Mama."

It was the first time I'd said it in five years and five months.

* * *

We went outside. Under the overhang of the metal building. There was a little concrete porch with a railing and an ashtray full of rain. The rain came off the edge of the roof in a sheet a foot in front of us, so heavy you couldn't see the parking lot through it. Just the white of it. And the sound.

We stood next to each other and looked at the rain.

"Gene sends his condolences," she said.

I didn't say anything.

"He wanted to come. His back's bad. He can't do the drive no more." She folded her hands on her purse. "We're in Muskogee still. On his brother's land. It's real pretty. There's a creek. I told you about the creek."

"You did."

"Gene's brother passed last year. So it's just us now. On the land. Gene's got his garden. I've got my church." She was quiet. "I go every day. There's always something. I do the flowers."

"That's nice."

"It is," she said. "It's real nice."

The rain came down.

"I heard about it," she said. "About you. On the news. Back when." She didn't look at me. "Gene's niece showed me on the computer. In Tulsa. I seen your picture. The one they took at the jail." She swallowed. "I almost didn't know you."

"I know."

"I wrote you a letter," she said. "At the prison. I wrote it a bunch of times."

"I never got a letter."

"I never sent it."

I looked at her.

"I didn't know what to say," my mother said. "Every time I wrote it, it said the wrong thing. It said *I'm sorry*, and that was wrong, because what's sorry going to do for you in a place like that. It said *I love you*, and that was wrong too, because if I loved you, I'd have stayed. I wrote it nine times. Gene said, Lorna, just send one. Any one. And I couldn't." She was twisting the strap of the purse. "I've still got them. All nine. In a shoebox. I brought them. If you want them."

"No."

She nodded like she'd known I'd say that.

* * *

We stood there a long time.

The rain didn't let up. A car pulled out of the lot. Mr. Hollis's Buick, the old blue one. His headlights came through the rain and went over us and turned out onto Airport Drive.

"I still have your bag," my mother said.

I didn't understand.

"Your bag," she said. "From the truck. That day. The one I packed for you. Gene put it in the trailer and you didn't come and I took it to Oklahoma. It's still packed." Her voice was very small. "I never unpacked it. It's in the closet in the back bedroom. Your clothes. Your little shoes. That green sweatshirt you used to wear. Five years. I never opened it." She looked at me for the first time since we'd come outside. "I could mail it. If you want it. I can mail it anywhere."

And there it was.

The answer. Five years late. To the question I asked behind a screen door at six in the morning.

Don't leave me behind.

She hadn't. Not all the way. She'd carried a piece of me, packed in a bag, to Oklahoma, and put it in a closet in a back bedroom, and left it there. Five years. Never opened it. Kept it the way you'd keep a room for somebody who might come home.

She'd left me behind. And taken me with her. At the same time.

Both.

There's no chord for that either.

"No, Mama," I said. "Keep it."

She looked at me.

"It doesn't fit anymore," I said.

* * *

She left at four. She was driving back. She'd driven out by herself, two days, in Gene's Buick, a gold one. She didn't like to drive on the freeway but she'd done it. She said she'd stop in Kingman tonight and Amarillo tomorrow.

She stood at the edge of the overhang with her rain bonnet tied and her keys in her fist. Her hand closed around them so tight I could see her knuckles.

Same as that day.

"Go as far as you can," she said.

"I know, Mama."

"Don't look back."

"I know."

She looked at me a long time.

Then she went out into the rain. She didn't run. She walked. Across the lot to the gold Buick. She got in. She sat there in the driver's seat with the wipers going for a long time.

I watched her.

She didn't look back. She'd always told me not to, and she never did. Not once. Not at the gravel. Not at the screen door. Not now. She sat with her face forward and her hands on the wheel at ten and two, and then she backed out, and the headlights went across the metal building, across me, and she turned onto Airport Drive, toward the freeway, toward Oklahoma.

That's the last time I saw my mother.

I don't know if it's the last time I'll ever see her. I'm telling you it's the last time so far.

* * *

Pastor Gentry was locking up.

I was still on the porch. Everybody else was gone. Graciela had offered to wait and I'd sent her home. He came out the door with a ring of keys and

turned and locked it behind him, the glass door of the metal building, with a key he picked out from all the others without looking.

He saw me.

"Oh," he said. "I didn't know anyone was still—do you need—" He held up the keys. "I can open it back up. If you want to sit. Inside. Out of the rain."

I looked at the keys.

A big ring. Twenty of them. Like Mr. Ruiz's. The one that opened the glass door at the Lighthouse on North Chester, the only key except the pastor's. *The church is locked at night. And I come at nine-thirty to clean, and I unlock it.*

I looked at the door. The glass door. Locked.

I didn't have a key.

I'd never had one. Mr. Ruiz had one. I had him. And then I didn't have him, and the door stayed locked, and then the storefront became CELL DOCTOR, and the door went somewhere else, and I didn't have a key to that one either.

And I didn't want one.

That's what I found out, on the porch, in the rain. I didn't want one. I'd spent my whole life on the wrong side of locked doors, waiting for somebody with a key. Waiting for a man with twenty keys on a ring to come at nine-thirty and let me in. And I loved him for it. I'll love him for it till I die. But I didn't want to wait anymore. Not for a key. Not for a door. Not for anybody to let me in.

"No, thank you," I said.

Pastor Gentry looked at me. Then he put the keys in his pocket.

"God bless you, Felicia," he said, and went out into the rain to his car.

* * *

I stood on the porch till it got dark.

The rain didn't stop. It rained all night. It rained on Royce Voss in Lerdo and on Wade on the step of a dark clubhouse and on the gravel drive where my father's blood had already washed away. It rained on the Valley Star lot and the middle wheel stop. It rained on the plastic over the windows of the old house on Roberts Lane. It rained on Hillcrest Memorial Park, on a flat bronze plaque near an oak, MAESTRO, filling up the letters.

It rained on Greenlawn, on a hole they hadn't dug yet.

I stood on the concrete porch of a metal church on Airport Drive with my hands open at my sides, and I watched the water come off the roof in a sheet, and I smelled it. The rain on the dust. The thing you forget is a thing.

It smelled like the first day of something.

I didn't know what yet.

THIRTY-TWO

The Patch

NOON · SEPTEMBER 14 – NOVEMBER 4, 2025

Charlene brought them on Sunday.

It was still raining. Less. A gray steady drizzle that had been going for thirty hours and that the weatherman on Channel 23 said would end by evening. The gutters on Union were running. Somebody's lawn chair had blown into the Sundowner pool and was floating in the green water upside down.

She knocked on Room 14. Three times. Soft. I opened it without the chain.

She had a black trash bag in her arms. Folded over. Held against her chest like laundry.

"Sheriff gave it back," she said. "Yesterday. After the service. They took pictures of it and they said they didn't need it." She held it out. "It's yours. I don't know who else's it would be."

I took it.

I knew what it was before I opened it. The weight. The smell coming out of the top of the bag. Old leather and cigarettes and motor oil and sweat and something under all of it that was just him.

"There's two," Charlene said. "His. And the other one."

* * *

She didn't come in. She stood on the walkway in a green rain jacket with the hood down and her short gray hair getting wet, and she looked at me.

"I'm going to tell you something," she said, "and then I'm going to go, and I don't think I'll see you again. I'm going to my sister's in Prescott. I'm done with Oildale."

"Okay."

"I delivered you. You know that."

"I know."

"And I delivered her. Six weeks later. Same room. Same cot." She looked out at the parking lot. At the rain. "Royce was at a run in Barstow the night you came. Your daddy was there. Your daddy wrapped you in his cut and walked you around the clubhouse showing everybody. Showing you off. *Look at her. Look at her eyes.*" She almost smiled. "Six weeks later Brandi came and Royce was there. And he held her and he cried. Royce Voss. He cried so hard he had to sit down. And then he looked at me and he said, *Charlene, they're gonna be sisters.*"

The rain on the railing.

"He meant it," Charlene said. "I want you to know that. Whatever else. He meant it. He put that picture of you up behind the bar the week she was born. Because he said, *they're both ours now.*" I didn't say anything.

"She used to talk about you," Charlene said. "Brandi. After you stopped coming around. Every night, for a while, when she was twelve, thirteen. *Lish this. Lish that. Lish plays the guitar now, Mama. In the church. With the janitor.*" Charlene's mouth went tight. "And then she stopped talking about you. All at once. And she started—" She stopped. "You know what she started."

"I know."

"I never once heard her say *Ugly*," said Charlene. "Not in the house. Not once. Out in the world, she said it. To other people. But at home, it was always Lish." She shook her head. "Right up to the end. The night before. She was at a party at the Hamms' and she came home at one in the morning to change her clothes and she was standing in the kitchen and she said, *Mama, Lish is going to New York.* And I said, *I know, baby, I heard.* And she said, *She's not coming back.*" Charlene's voice cracked. "And I said, *no, baby, I don't guess she is.* And Brandi looked at me like I'd hit her. And she went to her room. And the next night she got in the car with Wade and Cody."

I stood in the doorway of Room 14 with the trash bag in my arms.

"I'm not telling you so you'll feel bad," Charlene said. "You already feel bad. I can see it. I'm telling you so somebody knows. So it's not just me." She put her hood up. "That's all."

"Charlene."

She stopped.

"Is the picture still on the cot?"

She looked at me a long time.

"No," she said. "The deputies took it. When they took him out. It's in an evidence bag at the sheriff's office on Norris Road." She almost smiled. "It's face up, at least."

She went down the stairs in the rain.

* * *

I drove to Roberts Lane at four in the afternoon.

The house was empty. Kern Valley Renovation was gone for the weekend. Their dumpster was in the yard, half full of drywall and old carpet and the kitchen cabinets, soaked through. The plastic on the windows was snapping in the wind. Somebody had put a lockbox on the front door and a sign in the yard, FOR SALE, with a realtor's face on it, a smiling woman with white teeth.

I didn't go in. I didn't have a key. I didn't want one.

I parked the Ranger on the gravel, where Brother Gene's Silverado had idled with a U-Haul behind it, where my father's Shovelhead used to sit with oil dripping out of the primary. I got out. I took the trash bag out of the passenger seat. I took the other thing out of the bed, a steel trash can I'd bought at the Home Depot on Rosedale that morning for nineteen ninety-nine, and a can of Kingsford lighter fluid, and a box of kitchen matches.

I set the trash can on the gravel. In the middle. Where I'd screamed.

I opened the bag.

* * *

His cut was on top.

The black leather. Worn soft. Cracked at the shoulders where it bent. The skull with the crown of oil derricks on the back, the paint faded to almost nothing on the crown. DUST KINGS. OILDALE. And on the front, over the heart, the patch. White letters on black. Curved, in a little arc.

DEACON.

There was a hole in the back of it. Small. Neat. Just below the left shoulder blade. And a stain around the hole that had gone dark and stiff.

He hadn't been wearing it. He'd taken it off. He'd dropped it on the table. Royce's table. On top of the guitar case. *Take it back. I don't want it.* The hole was in his T-shirt, not this.

So I didn't understand the hole.

Then I did. The sheriff had found it on the table, but someone had moved it. After. Someone had picked it up off the table and carried it outside and laid it over him on the gravel. Over his chest. Before the ambulance. While I was sitting there with my hands still on him and didn't see.

Charlene. Or Tiny. Or Wade. I'll never know.

Somebody laid it on him so he'd go out in it. And the blood came through.

I held it in my hands in the drizzle for a long time.

This was the vest I was born in. Charlene Voss wrapped me in it at 12:38 in the morning on March 14, 2004, in the back room behind the PRIVATE door. My first clothes. Before a diaper. Before a name. I came into the world wet and screaming and they wrapped me in this, and it was warm, Charlene said, it was warm from his body, and I stopped screaming.

And he went out of the world in it. Or under it. On the same gravel. On his back. Same as I came in.

I put it in the trash can.

* * *

The other one was under it.

The small one. The woman's size. Still stiff. Still new. Still smelling like the store. He'd had it folded in the back pocket of his jeans. The sheriff must have found it there.

I unfolded it.

The skull and the derricks. DUST KINGS. OILDALE.

And over the heart, in white thread, in a little arc:

FELONY.

* * *

I stood on the gravel with it in my hands.

I thought about cutting the patch off. I'll be honest. I thought about it. I had the pocketknife on my keychain, the little one from the Valley Star, and I thought about cutting the patch off, the white letters, and keeping them. Putting them in the Ziploc with the letters and the five-dollar bill from the man in the straw hat.

It was my name. It's still my name. It's the name I'll play under in a city I've never seen. The name a woman doing fifteen to life gave me on the first day, reading over a guard's shoulder, so they'd leave me alone.

But Inez gave me the name. Royce made the patch.

There's a difference. Mr. Ruiz would have said there's a difference between a name and a receipt. A name is something somebody gives you. A receipt is something somebody keeps.

The name's mine.

The patch was his.

I put it in the trash can on top of my father's.

* * *

The lighter fluid took a long time in the rain. I used half the can. The first four matches went out. The fifth one caught, and the fluid went up in a soft blue whoosh that I felt on my face, and then the leather started, slow, and the smoke came up black and thick and smelling like a tire fire, like the oil fields, like Oildale.

I stood there and watched it.

The rain came down on it. It hissed. It didn't put it out. Leather burns slow and hot and once it's going the rain can't do much.

The FELONY patch went first. It was on top. The white thread went brown, then black, and the letters curled up and folded into each other and were gone.

Then the derricks. The crown.

Then the DEACON patch. It was underneath. It took longer. I watched it the whole time. The white letters in a little arc, in the fire, in the drizzle, on the gravel where he left at three-forty in the morning and where he came back.

Daddy promises.

It went.

* * *

Somebody was standing at the end of the gravel.

I didn't know how long. I'd been looking at the fire. When I looked up, there was a gray Tacoma parked on Roberts Lane, on the shoulder, with its wipers going, and Cody Bratcher was standing at the edge of the gravel in the rain, in a hoodie, with his hands in the pocket.

He didn't come closer.

I looked at him. Then I looked back at the fire.

After a while he came anyway. He stopped on the other side of the trash can. The smoke went up between us.

"I'm going to the DA," Cody said.

I didn't say anything.

"Tomorrow. Monday morning. I already called. I got an appointment with a deputy DA. A woman. Nine-thirty." His voice was steady. Steadier than I'd ever heard it. "I'm going to tell her about the tire iron. And about Wade telling me what to say. And about what I said at the prelim. All of it. Under oath. Whatever happens to me."

The rain hissed on the fire.

"It's perjury, Cody."

"I know."

"They'll charge you."

"I know." He looked at me through the smoke. "I don't care. I've been thinking about it since the Sundowner. Since Wade. And then your dad—" He stopped. "Sixty people saw it this time, Lish. Sixty people. And the camera. And Royce is sitting in Lerdo. And nobody's lying for him anymore. Wade gave a statement. Did you know that? Wednesday. To the sheriff. About your dad. And about the lot. About Brandi. The tire iron. He told them everything." Cody wiped his face. "If I go too, and Wade's already told it—that's two. That's both of us. They'd have to reopen it. Ms. Barrientos said—I called her, your old PD, I found her—she said they'd have to look at it. A habeas. Or something. They could vacate it. The plea. Your record. It could—" He was talking fast now. "You could be clean, Lish. It could be like it never—"

"No."

He stopped.

I looked at him over the fire.

"I already paid," I said.

"But you didn't *do*—"

"I did. I did it, Cody. I made a fist and I hit her and she died. That happened. The tire iron happened too. Both. They both happened." The smoke was in my eyes. "You go to the DA and they reopen it, and what happens? I sit in a courtroom for two years. With the Vosses in the back. With my name in the paper again. With some lawyer standing up and saying *she was defending her hands*, and some other lawyer saying *she broke four girls in an alley*, and everybody in Kern County picking a side. Again. For two years. And at the end, maybe they say, *you didn't have to do three years*. And then what?"

He didn't answer.

"Do I get them back?"

"Lish—"

"Do they give me back the three years? The hundred and four days in the hole? The hundred and fifty-six Sundays? Mr. Ruiz's guitar? New York?" I shook my head. "No. They give me a piece of paper that says I didn't have to. That's all a retrial is, Cody. A piece of paper that says it should have gone different."

I looked at the fire.

"I don't want a retrial," I said. "I want a refund. And nobody's got one."

* * *

He stood there a long time.

Then he said, "I'm still going."

"I know."

"Not for you." He looked at the fire. "For me. I have to put it down. I said that. At the Sundowner. I can't carry it anymore." He was quiet. "You don't have to want it. I'm still going to do it."

I thought about that.

"Okay," I said.

He looked surprised.

"It's yours to carry," I said. "So it's yours to put down. I can't stop you." I looked at him. "Just don't do it for me. And don't call me after. Whatever happens. Don't write. Don't tell me how it went."

He nodded.

He stood there a minute more, with the rain on his hoodie and the smoke going up. Then he took his hands out of his pocket. Held them out over the fire. Open. Palms down. Warming them. The way you'd do on a cold night.

He looked at his hands.

"I cut your strings," he said. "On the canal path. With a box cutter. When I was fifteen."

"I know."

"I never said sorry for that. Out of everything. I never said it."

"No."

"I'm sorry I cut your strings, Lish."

I looked at him.

And I thought: that's the one. Out of everything. Out of the prelim and the lie and three years. The one I'd take. A boy on a canal path with a box cutter, cutting six strings, because a girl told him to, and hating himself for it, and coming back nine years later to stand in the rain and say it.

"Okay," I said.

He went back to his truck.

* * *

The fire burned down by six. The rain stopped at six-fifteen, like the weatherman said. The sky went from gray to white to a strange washed blue, and the sun came out low over the bluffs, under the clouds, and lit up everything orange and gold and wet. The gravel. The dumpster. The FOR SALE sign. The plastic on the windows. The oil derricks out past the bluffs, nodding, nodding, nodding, the way they've done my whole life.

I turned the trash can over with my foot. Ash and black leather and some buckles, the snaps off the front, melted together in a lump. Nothing you could tell was anything.

I left it there. On the gravel.

Let the realtor figure it out.

* * *

It took seven weeks to get out of California.

That's the part they don't put in movies. You can't just go. You're on parole. You've got a parole agent and conditions and a Thursday at ten. If you want to leave the state, there's a thing called the Interstate Compact, and

there's paperwork, and the other state has to say yes, and you have to have a place to live and a job and somebody who'll vouch, and it takes forty-five days if you're lucky.

Marcy Delgado did it.

I went in the next Thursday and put Inez's letter on her desk. The one from the bag at Chowchilla. *For when you're out and stupid.* Tomas Calderón. The Static Room. Joseph Campau Avenue. Hamtramck, Michigan.

She read it twice. She squeezed the brain.

"You know anybody in Michigan?"

"No."

"You ever been to Michigan?"

"I've been to New York. Once. For three days."

She looked at me for a long time.

"I'll need a letter from him," she said. "Tomas. On letterhead. A job offer. And a lease. Or a letter from a landlord. And a phone number I can call." She was already typing. "And Ms. Pruitt. Michigan is cold."

"I have a scarf."

She almost smiled.

Tomas sent the letter in eleven days. On letterhead. THE STATIC ROOM — LIVE MUSIC — EST. 1998. A job offer, bartender and "house musician, Tuesdays," fourteen dollars an hour. A lease, for a room upstairs from a bakery on Caniff Street, from a woman named Mrs. Wiśniewski, two hundred and fifty a month. And a note at the bottom of the job offer, handwritten, in blue ink, that Marcy Delgado read and then turned around and showed me:

My sister says you're the real thing. My sister has never once in her life been wrong about anybody. —T.C.

Michigan said yes on October 30.

* * *

I went to say goodbye to three people.

Mr. Hollis gave me a bottle of Arrowhead out of the cooler and wouldn't look at me and said, "Don't come back here, you hear me? Don't you ever come back to this store." And then he hugged me so hard my back cracked. Adrian cried. He gave me his skateboard. I told him I couldn't take it. He said

you have to, it's like a tradition. I don't know what tradition. I took it. It's in the truck.

Graciela gave me a box.

She'd packed it herself. A cardboard box from the Food 4 Less, taped shut, with my name on it in marker. FELICIA. I knew what was in it before she said. I could feel the shape through the cardboard. A back without a top. Sides bent in a mold. A neck with no frets.

"I don't know if you'll finish it," she said. "I don't know if anybody can. But it's yours. It shouldn't be in my garage. It should be with you." She held my face in her hands. "Your hands are still yours, mija."

"I know."

"Take care of them."

"I know."

And I went to Hillcrest Memorial Park, out on Niles Street, by the oak. I sat on the grass next to the flat bronze plaque. MAESTRO. The rain had left the letters clean. I didn't say anything for a long time.

Then I played the waltz. On the pawn guitar. Thirty-two dollars. Charlene had picked it up off the gravel that night and given it to a deputy and the deputy had given it back. It has a scratch on the top now from the gravel. Right across, under the sound hole.

I played it for him. Sixteen bars. E minor. Three-four time.

I didn't go home.

I stopped at bar fifteen. On the chord that leans. The one that wants to go somewhere and can't. I left it ringing out over the cemetery, over the oak, over all the flat plaques in the grass.

He'd know why.

* * *

I left on Tuesday, November 4, 2025, at five in the morning.

The Ranger. RUIZ JANITORIAL SERVICES on the door. The Virgin of Guadalupe on the keychain, swinging. Half a tank. I'd fill it up in Barstow.

On the passenger seat, like a person, the pawn guitar, in the soft case.

In the bed, under a tarp, a cardboard box from Food 4 Less with my name on it. And Adrian's skateboard.

On the dashboard, propped against the windshield, Bunny. Gray. One eye. One torn ear. A dirty string where the blue ribbon used to be. Looking out at the road.

In the glove box, the Ziploc. Thirty-four letters from Graciela. A five-dollar bill from a man in a straw hat. A Juilliard letter folded so small it's coming apart. Inez's letter, with the Hamtramck address. *KEEP YOUR HANDS CLEAN.*

I drove down Chester in the dark. Past the Valley Star. The red sign was off. Mr. Hollis was home asleep. I didn't stop. I didn't look at the lot.

I got on 99. Then 58, east, over Tehachapi, and the sun came up in front of me over the desert at the top of the pass, and I looked at it coming across the Joshua trees and the wind turbines, all of them turning, thousands of them, white, on the ridges, and I said, "Oh."

That's all. Just *oh*.

I didn't look back.

Not because she told me not to.

Because there wasn't anything back there I hadn't already carried out.

EPILOGUE

Tuesday in June

NOON · HAMTRAMCK, MICHIGAN — JUNE 2026

I fired my first band at four-fifteen on a Tuesday afternoon, in the middle of the second chorus.

I'd had them three weeks. A drummer named Kaz who worked at a Polish deli on Joseph Campau and played like he was mad at the drums personally, which I liked. A bass player named Dominique, from Detroit, from the east side, who played with her eyes closed and never once missed. And a second guitar, a boy from Ferndale named Evan, twenty-three, with good hair and a Telecaster that cost more than the Ranger, who'd answered the flyer Tomas put up at the record store.

Evan was the problem.

He was good. That was the problem. He was very good. He'd gone to a music school in Boston for two years before he dropped out. He knew all the modes. He could play anything you asked him to, perfectly, with a tone so clean and warm you could've put it in a commercial for a bank.

He was nice.

We were in the back room of the Static Room, the stage room, with the chairs up on the tables and the light coming in gray through the glass-block window. Tuesday afternoon. Rehearsing for my first night. My first real night. Tonight.

We were running one of mine. "Scales in the Dark." It's slow and it's heavy and it's mean, and there's a part in the second chorus where everything's supposed to fall apart. On purpose. The drums drop out. The

bass holds one note. And my guitar, the nylon-string, run through a fuzz pedal Tomas found in a box in his basement, plays the scale. The Segovia scale. E minor. Two octaves. The way I played it in the closet in the summer of 2020 with a candle on the floor. And it's supposed to be wrong. Out of time. Too slow. Dragging. Like somebody trying to remember something in the dark.

And Evan came in under it.

He played a lovely little counter-line. Under my scale. In harmony. Perfect thirds. Clean, warm, in time. Holding my scale up. Fixing it.

I stopped.

I put my hand flat on the strings.

Kaz stopped. Dominique opened her eyes.

"What," Evan said.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Fix it."

He looked confused. He really did. He was a nice boy from Ferndale and he didn't understand. "I wasn't fixing it. I was just—it was kind of falling apart there, so I was just giving it a little—"

"It's supposed to fall apart."

"Right, but, like, it was getting kind of—"

"Evan," I said. "Thank you. You're fired."

He took it pretty well. He packed up his Telecaster. He said *no hard feelings* in the voice of somebody with hard feelings. He shook Kaz's hand and Dominique's. He looked at me at the door.

"You know you're going to have a hard time," he said. "Finding people. If you don't want anybody to play it right."

"I want them to play it true," I said. "That's different."

He didn't get it. He left.

Kaz laughed so hard he had to put his sticks down.

"Finally," said Dominique.

"You didn't like him?"

"I liked him fine," Dominique said. "He just kept trying to make you sound like somebody else."

She plugged back in.

"From the second chorus," she said. "Let it fall apart."

* * *

It's a nine-minute walk from the Static Room to the luthier's.

His shop is on Joseph Campau, too, farther south, past the Polish bakeries and the Yemeni coffee place and the Bangladeshi grocery with the fruit out front in crates. Hamtramck is two square miles in the middle of Detroit. It's got more languages than Oildale has people. I walk it every day. In November I walked it in a black wool coat from the Goodwill on Chester that Graciela took in at the shoulders, and the gray scarf a woman gave me on a bus in New York, and I was still so cold the first week that I cried on the sidewalk outside the bakery and Mrs. Wiśniewski came out and took me inside and gave me a pączek and told me in Polish that I'd get used to it.

I got used to it.

The luthier's name is Mr. Aleksander Nowak. He's seventy-seven. He came from Kraków in 1981 with a set of chisels and a wife, and the wife is dead now, and he still has the chisels. He builds guitars and violins and mandolins in a storefront with no sign, and he has no website, and you find him because somebody tells you. Tomas told me.

I brought him the box in December.

He opened it on his bench. He took everything out. The back without a top. The sides bent in a mold. The neck with no frets. He laid them out under the lamp. He looked at them for a long time with his glasses down on his nose. He turned the back over and looked at the bracing. He held the neck up to the light and sighted down it, one eye closed.

"Who made this?"

"A man named Abelardo Ruiz Moreno."

He nodded slowly.

"He knew what he was doing," said Mr. Nowak. "Very good wood. Very careful. This bracing, this is Torres, this is the old Spanish way. Nobody does it like this anymore." He put the neck down. "You want me to finish it?"

I thought about it.

"No," I said.

He looked at me over his glasses.

"Not yet," I said. "Maybe not ever. I don't know. I just want it here. With somebody who knows what it is."

He thought about that. Then he nodded, and carried the pieces, one at a time, to a shelf on the back wall, above his bench, where he could see them while he worked. He laid them there side by side.

They're still there.

* * *

What he's making for me is something else.

Two guitars. Two at once. He said he'd never done that, built two at once for one person, but I told him what I wanted and he scratched his head and said *okay, why not, I'm seventy-seven, what else am I going to do*.

One nylon-string. A classical. Spruce top, cedar neck, the old Spanish bracing. For the Bach. For the waltz.

One steel-string. Heavier. Built to take a beating. Built to go through a fuzz pedal and an amp turned up so loud the glass block in the Static Room's window buzzes.

Both of them cobalt.

I asked for that. He looked at me like I'd asked him to paint the Pope. *Blue? You want blue? On a classical?* But he did it. A deep blue stain, almost black in the low light, that comes up bright when you turn it, like the bottom of a swimming pool at night.

I told him it was the color of my eyes. That my father used to wake me up at two in the morning to show them to strangers. That nobody in either family had them. That they came from nowhere.

He didn't say anything. He just mixed the stain.

They'll be done in August.

* * *

I'm going to tell you where I am, and then I'm going to stop.

It's Tuesday, June 9, 2026. Four years to the day since a vice principal read my name last on a football field in Oildale and two women stood up in the third row. I'm twenty-two. I've been out of Chowchilla ten months and eighteen days. I've been in Michigan seven months.

My parole transferred. My agent here is a man named Mr. Oduya who has a picture of his grandkids on his desk and doesn't have a stress ball. I see him the first Monday of the month. He calls me Ms. Pruitt. I let him.

I live upstairs from Mrs. Wiśniewski's bakery on Caniff. One room. A bed and a window and a radiator that bangs all winter like somebody's at the door. I don't answer it.

I work behind the bar at the Static Room five nights a week. I make good drinks. I don't drink them. Not since the clubhouse. That's a brick. One brick. I'm not telling you it's a wall.

I still count. Four a.m. Six. Noon. Four. Nine. I wake up and stand by the bed. Nobody comes to write me down.

I still look at clocks.

I still put my hand flat on the strings at the end of every song and count to ten.

I don't sleep much. I have the dream about the sound. The small one. The knock. Maybe twice a week. Less than in Chowchilla. Not none. I don't think it's ever going to be none.

I didn't get better. I want to be clear about that. If you came here for that part, I'm sorry. There's no part where I heal. There's no part where I forgive myself, or my mother, or Royce, or Brandi, or the girl at the picnic table, and everybody stands up and claps. I've read those books. In the library at Chowchilla, on the cart, every Wednesday. Every one of them ends with somebody being fixed.

I'm not fixed.

I'm free. That's different.

Fixed is when it doesn't hurt anymore. Free is when it hurts and you go anyway.

* * *

Inez wrote last month. She's got a parole hearing in March. Her fourth. She says she's not going to get it, and she says it the way she said everything, like a fact about the weather. She says Tomas told her about me. She says *keep your hands clean*. Same as always. Underlined twice.

Graciela calls on Sundays. She's seventy-two. She tells me about her grandson and the lemon tree and the new priest at Our Lady of Guadalupe who is too young and too handsome and the old women are scandalized. She doesn't ask about the guitar on Mr. Nowak's shelf. She knows.

Ms. Haney sent a postcard from Lake Havasu City. A picture of the London Bridge, which somebody bought and moved to the Arizona desert brick by brick, which she says reminded her of me. On the back she wrote *12*, and drew a box around it, and initialed it.

D.H.

I never heard from Cody. Like I asked. Mr. Hollis told me, on the phone, that the DA charged him with perjury in January and he pled and got probation and community service, and that he's working at a tire shop in Taft. Mr. Hollis said there's talk about my case. A lawyer from a law school in San Francisco called the Valley Star asking questions. Mr. Hollis said no comment. Royce Voss pled guilty to second-degree murder in April. Fifteen to life. He's at Corcoran. Same sentence as Inez. I don't know what to do with that. I don't do anything with it.

Wade sends a card at Christmas, through Mr. Hollis. No return address. It's a store-bought card with a picture of a snowman, and inside, every time, just his name. *Wade.* Nothing else. I keep them. I don't know why.

My mother hasn't called. I don't call her.

The bag is still in her closet in Muskogee, I guess. Still packed. I think about it sometimes. My little shoes. The green sweatshirt. A girl who never got in the truck.

I think she's still sixteen. In there. In the bag.

I think she's the only one of us who got out clean.

* * *

It's eleven-forty at night.

The Static Room holds a hundred and twenty people if you don't care about the fire marshal. Tomas doesn't. There's maybe ninety. Tuesday night in Hamtramck. Some regulars. Some Polish guys from the deli with Kaz. Dominique's whole family from the east side, her mother in the front with her arms crossed like she's going to be the judge of this. Some kids who saw the old TikTok, the one from the Valley Star, which is at four million now, Adrian tells me, and who drove in from Ann Arbor and Lansing to see if it was real.

A woman in the back, alone, at the corner table, with her hair in a claw clip. I don't know if it's the girl from the gas pump. It can't be. It's been a year. It's eight hundred miles. But I look at her and she looks at me and she raises her glass about an inch.

Tomas is behind the bar. He's sixty-four. He looks like Inez. Same jaw. Same eyes that have seen everything twice. He nods at me.

I walk out on the stage.

It's a foot off the floor. Plywood, painted black. One stool. One mic. A Fender amp Tomas bought in 1998 that he says has played every band in Detroit you've heard of. Dominique and Kaz behind me, set up, waiting.

I sit down on the stool.

I put my left foot up on the rung. I put the pawn guitar on my left leg, in the middle of me. Not on the right. Thirty-two dollars. A scratch across the top from the gravel on Roberts Lane. The Golden Empire sticker still on the back of the headstock. I could've played something better tonight. Tomas offered. Mr. Nowak offered. I said no. The cobalt ones aren't done. And this one's the one that came out with me.

I tune. Low E first. Every string from slightly wrong to exactly right.

The room goes quiet. Not all at once. In pieces. Like a hall in Fresno. Like a clubhouse in Oildale.

I don't look at them.

I look at the back of the room. The corner. By the bathroom door, under the exit sign.

That's where I'll be.

* * *

I play the waltz.

Vals para Lish. Sixteen bars. E minor. Three-four time. Written for a girl on her tenth birthday by a man who swept floors.

I play it clean.

I play it the way he wrote it. The way he taught me. Slow. Like there's a candle. Like the only person listening is the one person I want to listen. Eight bars. Every note exactly where it goes. The bass on one, the chord on two and three. The melody walking down and walking back up like somebody looking for their keys.

The room doesn't breathe.

Eight bars, clean. The way it was before. The way it was in the church on North Chester with the one light on and a man in the back row with his arms crossed and his eyes closed. The way it was for the girl with the scholarship in her pocket.

And then I stop.

At the end of bar eight. On the chord. I let it ring.

And I reach down with my right foot and step on Tomas's fuzz pedal from 1998.

And I nod at Kaz.

And I ruin it.

* * *

On purpose. I want to be clear. On purpose.

Bar nine comes in at a volume the Static Room's glass-block window wasn't built for. Kaz hits the drums like they owe him money. Dominique drops the bass in an octave lower than the waltz goes, so low you feel it in the floor, in your back teeth, like a gate rolling on a track. And the waltz keeps going. Same notes. Same melody. Same sixteen bars he wrote in his small careful hand on staff paper in 2014. But it's not a waltz anymore. It's in the wrong time. It's dragging and then it's rushing. It's distorted so bad the nylon strings sound like something tearing. It's loud. It's the loudest thing I've ever played.

It's what happened.

Bars one through eight are what he gave me. Bars nine through sixteen are what I did with it. Both. The same song.

You can't play the first eight anymore without the second eight coming. You know they're coming. That's what makes the first eight beautiful. That's what makes them hurt.

The sweet part. Then the rest.

Dominique's mother in the front row has uncrossed her arms.

* * *

I don't go home.

At the end of bar fifteen, I stop. Everybody stops. Kaz with his sticks in the air. Dominique with her hand flat on the bass strings. The amp humming. Feedback, just a little, up high, like a steel guitar crying on a radio in a car I'll never stop hearing.

I leave it on the chord that leans.

The one that wants to go home to the first note, and can't. Doesn't. Won't.

I let it ring all the way out.

Then I put my hand flat on the strings.

* * *

Nobody claps.

I count to ten.

One. Two. Three. I'm on a bus to Chowchilla with my hands cuffed to a chain around my waist. Four. Five. I'm in the back row of a church with a rabbit in my lap. Six. I'm on the gravel. Seven. I'm on my knees on a sidewalk picking up pieces of spruce. Eight. I'm on the gravel again, with my hands on his chest. Nine. I'm on a stool on a plywood stage in Hamtramck, Michigan, on a Tuesday in June, with a thirty-two-dollar guitar and my prison name, and nobody I came from is in the room.

Ten.

They clap.

It comes up at me from the room like heat off asphalt. Like ninety-one degrees at 11:04 at night. Dominique's mother is standing up. The kids from Ann Arbor are standing up. The woman in the corner with the claw clip isn't clapping, she's just sitting there with her hand over her mouth. Tomas, behind the bar, has stopped drying the glass in his hand.

I don't bow.

I sit there on the stool with my hand flat on the strings and I look at the corner of the room. Under the exit sign.

There's nobody there. There's never anybody there. I know that.

I look anyway.

* * *

People ask me sometimes, the ones who saw the TikTok, the ones who read about the lot, what time it is in my head. Like it's a joke. Like it's something you put on a T-shirt. *What time is it, Felony?*

I tell them.

The morning's gone. All of it. The picnic table and the church and the closet and the candle and the man in the scarf and *it is my great pleasure*. A coat in a dry-cleaning bag. A girl with a scholarship in her pocket, five weeks and four days from a Greyhound. That was morning. Everything before 11:04.

I don't get it back. Nobody gets the morning back.

And I don't get night either. That's the other part. Night is when it's over. When you get to rest. When the rest is part of the music, and somebody puts their hand flat on the strings for the last time, and it stops.

It doesn't stop.

It's noon. It's always noon. The sun straight up. No shadow anywhere. Nowhere to hide and nothing to hide behind. Every single thing I did, right out in the open, under the light, forever.

That's the time.

That's where I live.

All I got is noon.

And it don't move.

* * *

END

FELONY IS FREE

Felony is the virtuoso-guitarist artist behind *Felony Is Free*, a fourteen-song album of raw, loud, classically trained grunge.

Hear the music and follow the story at **felonyisfree.com** and **@felonyisfree**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig Sobolewski is a writer, music creator, and the founder of CS Sobo Group, LLC. He created Felony.

BEFORE YOU GO

IF LISH STAYED WITH YOU

This book is free, and it always will be.
Pass it on to anyone who needs it.

If it hit you and you want to say thanks,
a tip keeps Felony loud.

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